

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

KATHERINE ACEY

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

July 19, 20 and 29, 2007
Brooklyn, New York

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Narrator

Katherine Acey (b. 1950) is a highly respected activist, best known for her expertise and commitment to lesbian and women's philanthropy. Her creative and inclusive vision of funding has been instrumental in setting a standard for a more progressive, diverse and community-based definition of philanthropy.

In 1987, after serving on Astraea's Board of Directors for four years, Katherine was hired as its Executive Director—the organization's first paid staff person. Under her stewardship, Astraea has enjoyed tremendous growth. The Foundation's Grants program has been expanded to fund local, regional and international organizations as well as cultural and media work. In 1990, Astraea established the nation's first Lesbian Writers Fund; and in 1996, Astraea created The International Fund for Sexual Minorities—the only fund of its kind in the U.S.

From 1982 to 1987, Katherine served as the Associate Director of the North Star Fund in New York City. She has been involved in the Women's Funding Network since its inception, serving as both board member and chair. She is also a founding member and past chair of the Funders for Lesbian and Gay Issues and has served as a board or advisory member to countless organizations including: Women in the Arts, the Center for Anti-Violence Education, New York Women Against Rape, MADRE and Women Make Movies. Katherine is past chair of the National Executive Committee of the Palestine Solidarity Committee, and a member of the Arab Women's Gathering Organizing Committee.

Katherine has traveled extensively in the U.S. speaking on issues of philanthropy, sexual orientation, race and class. Internationally, she has participated in numerous women's and LGBTI delegations and gatherings in Africa, Asia, Central America and Europe.

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 Katherine Acey talks about her family history, their migration from Lebanon, and the Arab American community in Utica, New York where she grew up. She reflects on her activist roots in the civil rights movement and her introduction to feminist organizing through anti-violence and reproductive rights work. The last third of the interview focuses on Katherine's work in progressive philanthropy and her twenty year tenure at the Astraea Foundation.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Sheila Flaherty-Jones.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Acey, Katherine. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, July 19 and 20, 2007. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Katherine Acey, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, July 19, 2007, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Acey, Katherine. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, July 19 and 20, 2007. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Katherine Acey, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, July 19, 2007, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23-24.

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Transcript of interview conducted July 19, 20 and 29, 2007, with:

KATHERINE ACEY
Brooklyn, New York

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Katherine Acey, at her home in Brooklyn, on July 19th, doing an oral history for the Voices of Feminism project of the Sophia Smith Collection. So, you ready?

ACEY: I'm ready.

ANDERSON: Good, okay. So let's start by talking about your family. I know you were raised in Utica, born in '50. Tell me what you know about the generations that came before your parents. How did both sides of your family get to the United States and upstate New York?

ACEY: Okay. Well, on my paternal side, both of my grandparents are from Lebanon, they were born there. Their clan began to migrate in the early 1900s. Both my grandparents came from very large families in Lebanon. Most of their immediate family came over, not all. Some ended up coming over in, I think, the late '50s and '60s. So some were left behind. My mother's father was also from Lebanon, and her mother was American born, was an only child of an Irish mother, and we really don't know anything about my grandfather.

ANDERSON: Why is that?

ACEY: It's just been this kind of mystery and speculation in the family. Some of us speculated that perhaps my great-grandmother was a single mother and never married. But we don't know that for certain. No one ever has been able to verify it either way.

Both my parents — my mother came from a family of seven, and my father a family of nine. A very close extended family I grew up in, with both sides. Both my parents came from working-poor families. My father's family was a bit more advantaged economically. My dad had a high school education and a little bit of college, a couple of courses. My mom never graduated from high school, and she and her siblings, as I said, they grew up very poor. My grandfather was not in the house from when they were young. He was also an alcoholic, so it was a big hardship. But my great-grandmother lived with them, and so I

think that's how they made it. Growing up, I was very close to my aunts and uncles. People in Utica — shall I tell my dog to be quiet now?

ANDERSON: Yes.

ACEY: My dog is actually named Isa, which is Arabic for Acey, because Acey is Americanized.

ANDERSON: Did both your parents' families grow up in Utica too? I mean, is that where they'd been for —

ACEY: Yeah. All of my aunts and uncles grew up in Utica, and a majority of my cousins. Some of my dad's family — a couple of my dad's sisters moved to California when they married, and so I have some cousins that grew up there, but the rest of the family grew up in Utica.

ANDERSON: Do you know why they went to Utica when they immigrated here?

ACEY: There were already some Syrian and Lebanese folks there, and so it was one of those things, I believe, where, you know, there's some people from your town or your village, and so you start to go there. They're Christian, so there's a big community of Syrian — and more Lebanese than Syrian — but that grew up there, and then community developed.

What was interesting about Utica — my experience growing up in the '50s and '60s — is that, like many other cities, neighborhoods were very ethnically and racially defined, but the Arabs — the Lebanese and the Syrians — did not have a neighborhood. Many of my family lived on a periphery of Italian neighborhoods, and I've always had this speculation that that's who they looked most like. You know, the Mediterranean, the olive skin, dark hair. How community developed in Utica, with the Lebanese community, was around church. That's where people really saw each other, congregated, and went from there. So I always felt it as both a religious and a cultural experience growing up.

5:00

ANDERSON: So that's what you know about your grandparents, and how your families got to Utica. And how did your parents meet there? Were they in the same community?

ACEY: My father was five years older than my mom. My mom was friends with some of my father's sisters, who were more her age. So my father was in the service — this was during World War II. He never saw action but he went into service as a teenager. When he came back, my mom was hanging around the house, but he didn't pay much attention. He would tease and flirt with all the girls. He was quite charming, my father, but didn't pay much attention seriously, and I think my mom had a big crush on him. So that's how they first met. He promised to take her to the movies and then he forgot, and he went on a date with

someone his own age, and she felt very bad. So they went back and forth. They were married in '49, when she was 20 and he was 25, and they were together until her death in '83.

ANDERSON: So that's 30 years?

ACEY: They were together — I think it was about 33 years.

ANDERSON: Wow.

ACEY: I believe it would have been their 33rd anniversary, or their 34th.

ANDERSON: And how would you describe their marriage?

ACEY: I think they were very much in love, and they were also very fun loving. My mom worked from when my sister and I were toddlers, but because all the relatives lived in close proximity as I was growing up, my grandmother and my mother's unmarried sisters lived across the street. So they really helped, because my mother had two babies, one right after [the other]. My sister and I are, like, a year and five days apart, and there's only two of us.

And so when I was still a toddler, and my sister, my mother went to work, and she went to work out of necessity. My grandmother — my maternal grandmother — took care of my sister and me, and we spent a lot of time, until she became ill when we were about seven and eight years old, or maybe eight and nine. She died when I was 11. It was the first big, traumatic loss that I experienced. I was very close to her. She spoiled us shamelessly, but she disciplined us too, so she was like my second mother.

But my mom and dad, you know, they loved to dance, they were very social. My mother was a coordinator. You know, they struggled all in their early years, and so it wasn't tension free and there were economic challenges, but because they both came from very large families and we were close, there was a lot of family support, taking care of the kids. You know, I probably, growing up, probably saw most of my family on a weekly [basis], if not every other week. There was a lot of group dinners, group picnics, people in and out of the houses. Sometimes — you know, as you get older, sometimes it's a little suffocating, but I always appreciated it, and I think as I've aged, I've appreciated it even more. Shall we stop and shall I get her to —

ANDERSON: Yeah, let's pause. Describe the home that you grew up in with your family.

ACEY: Like, physically?

ANDERSON: Yeah. What kind of neighborhood, what kind of block, what kind of house did you live in, or apartment?

ACEY: Well, we always lived in a section of the city called Corn Hill, but we lived in several different places. The first place was — I don't think I was born in that house, but the place that I remember as a toddler and then where I went to school from was called Blandina Street. You know, it was modest, but upstate New York, compared to — You know, I probably had lived in bigger apartments my whole childhood than I have in the thirty-some years I've been in New York. There were always at least two or three bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room, a living room, one bath. My parents never owned a home, they always rented.

10:00

It was a big deal, in my early thirties, actually just before my mom died, that I bought a house with a friend here in Brooklyn. It's interesting too, because the first thing my mother said — because my sister, by then, was living in Brooklyn too. We lived in the same place, in the same city, most of our lives, except for a couple of years when she was off in graduate school in Texas and Arizona.

So the house, I remember it so vividly. It had these bushes out front and it had a fence, you know, an iron fence, and we would twirl around the fence. I remember the kitchen table, and I still have the kitchen table in my basement, this old maple table with those leafs that pull out and slide in. I also remember vividly there were French doors that went from the kitchen into the living room. When I was very young, I loved to close those doors and then, you know, swing them open, and my father would say, "You cannot do that," and he would reprimand me. There was one day, one morning, and my mom was in the bathroom washing clothes and my sister was there, and there was some TV show, I can't remember what it was, but you would fly. So I wanted to fly, so I got up –

ANDERSON: Oh, "The Flying Nun"?

ACEY: I don't know, not "The Flying Nun." That was later on. I'm not that old. "The Flying Nun" came later. So it was some kind of cartoon or something.

ANDERSON: Ah, huh.

ACEY: And so I got up — I remember this distinctly, I was not quite three — and I closed those doors, and I got to the other end of the living room and I said, "I'm going to just push those doors open and fly through." Well, that was my plan. Instead, my arm went through one of the panes, and I was so panicked. Glass shattered, I was so panicked. I just yanked my arm back, and that's how I got this scar.

ANDERSON: That's a pretty good scar. Oh my goodness.

ACEY: I think it's 26 [stitches] — It just missed my vein, it curved.

ANDERSON: Wow.

ACEY: My mother — the neighbor was — That was winter, my neighbor was shoveling, and my mother's screaming in a panic. He came, put me in the car, tied my arm with his handkerchief, and off my mother and I went to the hospital. The hospital they took me to is now a shopping mall, but — What I remember most is, I was being held down by all these adults on this table, and the thing I said is, "Don't tell my daddy, don't tell my daddy. Just put a band-aid on, just fix it."

And I remember coming home from the hospital and sitting — they had these maple chairs, and they had these big arms on them, and they had me sitting on pillows and resting my arm. So I don't believe I ever got punished for that, but the story goes that my mother was in such a panic that she left her two-year-old in the house, with the coffee pot on to perk.

ANDERSON: And shattered glass all over the floor.

ACEY: She passed out at the hospital, and so the neighbor had to go rush back to the house, break in through a window, and get my baby sister.

So it was a great house, and my grandmother lived across the street and my aunts. That house is no longer there but my grandmother's house is there. It's kind of an empty lot. I always drive by it. You can drive around Utica in ten minutes, so often when we're up there, we'll be zigzagging through the different streets. Sometimes I just drive by just to remember and other times it's, you know, just the way we're going.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: And we lived in a number of different places, but mostly kind of the same setups and — (phone rings). Do you want to shut that off?

ANDERSON: All right. Let's talk about some of the values that you grew up with. What did your parents care about and what kind of people did they want you to be? What kind of values did they instill in you and your sister?

ACEY: Well, you know, my parents, I think, were very smart and very caring, and simple, but simple in a very (inaudible) and a very positive way. Family was very important to them. Church was very important to them. They were not formally educated, but very smart people and worked very hard. I feel what I got from them was a lot of caring and a lot of modeling about caring, a lot of modeling about being good to people. You know, to their family but to other people. A sense of fairness. I feel some of my early activism was, you know, based on my upbringing and just seeing how caring they were.

I remember being in grade school. We went to the parish Catholic grade school and then to the all-girls Catholic high school, but

15:00

it was all, like, in the neighborhood. Even though where we went to school, most of the kids were working class — anywhere from poor to lower-middle class — there was always someone in our classrooms that didn't have as much as we had, and I remember my mother always putting together packages of clothes and sometimes even food. So I just learned that, you know, you really try to help people, and I also experienced — Like with both my grandmothers. You know, when they had many children, and they both worked their whole lives — cleaning ladies, factories, and as they got older, how much — You know, my maternal grandmother, as I said earlier, got ill, and there was no question that she would live with us — and then my aunt. And that, even when she had an apartment, I remember both parents, the families would contribute five, ten dollars a week, and bring it to their mothers. And sometimes if a brother or sister didn't have, they'd make it up for the other one. So I just — you know, it was never talked about, you just did it.

I remember one time, my mother — we went over to see my grandmother, and she opened up the refrigerator, and she was just — she started to cry, and she realized her mother didn't have any food in the refrigerator. It was like, How could this happen, since they were in and out of each others' lives? She immediately went out, filled up the refrigerator, and it never happened again.

My father was the disciplinarian, and my mother was the one you could get over on differently. My sister and I both had a very, very close relationship. We adored my mother. She had us when she was young. I remember when we were in high school, we would walk around, go shopping together, and it used to be like, Oh, your sister. So she kind of loved that. So I felt like I grew up in this family that really was caring. You know, I didn't always like them when they made me do things I didn't want to do, or wouldn't let me do certain things, which was more the case with my dad.

ANDERSON: Was he strict with you guys?

ACEY: Yeah, my father — he was very loving but very strict. So, you know, I had curfews that were earlier than my friends'. We had many political fights, and many fights around religion. We just pushed each other's buttons. I was, you know, a difficult teenager, and I was always challenging something, and my sister was similar but in a different way.

But they always gave us what they didn't have. My father always wanted to be a musician, so from early on, first the nuns taught us piano — group lessons — and then we went and got private piano lessons. And I know that he worked extra so we could have those piano lessons, even though they were only two dollars a lesson in those days. We took dance class. So it was like they were trying to give us things that they didn't —

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: You know, there was always food on the table. My mother loved to shop, even if she couldn't afford it. We always had really nice clothes, but it wasn't extravagant. You know, we had simple family vacations. We'd go to upstate New York, like Lake George or to these other places closer by. So we never went on big, extravagant vacations, but there was a lot of togetherness.

20:00

ANDERSON: What were their politics?

ACEY: They were both registered Democrats and, I would say, in many ways very liberal, in other ways more conservative. You know, you didn't get divorced, even though, you know, some of their brothers and sisters were divorced. You didn't have sex before marriage; you didn't have an abortion. So in those ways, they were very —

We were Maronite because of our Arab heritage — our Lebanese heritage. We were actually Maronite Catholics. In those days, growing up, Maronite Catholics were part of the Catholic Church, but you also had to go by other rules.

ANDERSON: Okay.

ACEY: So there was that adherence. At certain points we went to the parish church too, which was more Americanized and more multi, but mostly we went to the Maronite St. Louis Gonzaga Church and, you know, the Mass was in Arabic and Latin. So they — Church and religion, faith. So they weren't like fundamentalists in that sense, but faith and church and those laws.

I mean, my father, to the day he died, even though the pope said it was okay to eat fish on Friday, my father never did. It took us a long time to convince him that he could go to communion without going to confession. So even as some of the church rules changed, he stuck to you know, certain —

But he was also very loving. I'm very grateful. You know, my mom died when she was 54 — I was in my early thirties — but my father lived to be 82. My mom was really the buffer.

ANDERSON: So your dad was strict and your mom was the buffer between you girls and him.

ACEY: She was a buffer between him, particularly when I was a teenager and went off to college. I mean, as I became very radicalized. It started before I left home, and it continued. So in many ways, my father was very proud. You know, his daughter is going off to college. I was a student leader in grade school, high school, college. He was very proud of that. But I think in some ways, as my politics became more and more defined, and more radical in his eyes — and they were radical — I really came to believe that he saw it as somewhat a rejection of him.

His feelings could get hurt very easily, but it came out as anger, and I think I'm that way too, and so we just would, you know, lock horns. It just kind of would manifest itself.

You know, like he tried to teach me how to drive when I was 16, but he really didn't want me to get my license, but he would teach me how to drive. I would come home after every driving lesson just sobbing, "I'm never going out with him again, never, ever, ever!" And my mother was like, Okay. She'd calm me down, she'd calm him down. I remember one time we were having a fight about confession — you know, did I have to go to confession? — and it was like, No, I don't have to go to confession. It would just be these — you know, we'd just set each other off.

But as I aged, after my mom died and he had this massive heart attack a month after — and we thought we were going to lose him too, and my sister and I were just walking around in a daze — there was a shift, and the buffer wasn't there. We were all so heartbroken. I really think that, you know, we really thought my father would just — and my mother's death was so sudden — that he would just give up. You know, the doctors felt that part of his heart attack — he'd already had angina. He had angina, but that this was brought on by the stress and the sudden death of my mother. My sister and I were very frightened, and we stuck close by him, and my sister lived with him for a couple of months, through his whole kind of — in the hospital and then home, and then a whole rehabilitation.

25:00

You know, he really adored us. I mean, I began to appreciate that more. I always felt loved. I didn't feel understood. I think as he got older and I got older, we found ways to be with each other that were different, and then the buffer wasn't there. There was no one — my mom wasn't negotiating that relationship. We had to do it ourselves.

So I think it was interesting, because in some ways, when my mom died — and I loved both my parents, but I was attached to my mother in a very deep, visceral way, because I felt she was the only person in my whole life that understood me. And in some ways she did, even without talking. You know, it was also a deep, deep connection that wasn't — always had to be articulated. In fact, I wear this camel that I gave to her, that I brought back from Mexico, because a lot of Arab women wear either gold or silver. She had given me this chain, and the week after she died, I put this camel on the chain, and I rarely take it off. My father and sister gave me this other, that is the cedar tree, the symbol of Lebanon.

So I think with my dad and I, we really evolved into a very different kind of relationship, less provocative. We listened more to each other. We learned how to say we were sorry to each other. Even like, about a year before he died — he died last year — we had a big fight, which was rare.

ANDERSON: What was it about?

ACEY: You know, I don't even remember, something so silly. I walked out of the house. I was sure I was going to get in that car and drive right back to New York. I was crying and then I was upset because I got upset and I came upstairs. He lived in public housing at that time. Public housing is very different in Utica than it is — you know, mostly seniors, people with limited incomes, very nice. I went down to the parking lot and sat on the bench. He was on the eighth floor. I calmed myself down, and I felt so bad. So I went back upstairs, and before I could say I was sorry, he said it, and we just both cried. You know, it was a whole different —

ANDERSON: You had such a tender relationship with him.

ACEY: Very tender. As strict as he was, he was a very tender man, and very huggable. A lot of hugs, kisses, always, "I love you," at least once a day, and definitely before going to bed.

ANDERSON: It's amazing that your mother's early death created a space for you to have that relationship with your father, because you could see that it could go the other way, that you hadn't been as close.

ACEY: Right. We were close but not as — You know, it was like, I loved him, although there were times as a teenager and in my early twenties when I was like, No, I will not speak to him. I'm mad at him, and I'm not telling him I love him. Because it would be like, Here, your father wants to talk to you, tell him you love him. It would be like this forced thing. But it never felt forced.

He was also a very generous man. He always had modest means, but whatever he had was shared. He had a quality of life, he had what he needed, but if somebody in the family needed something — You know, he didn't have a pension or anything. He was living on social security and a little bit of savings. It would always be done in a way that was very discrete. So I kind of learned that — kind of just to be there for people in many different ways.

My sister and I, we live in the same building, and now we're moving into another building. We're living in the same building, and we certainly have our moments. We move through the world differently, in different personalities, but I just feel like, you know, it's such a gift to have a sister who I'm so close to, and that we're able to share parts of our lives that are very real and supportive. So.

30:00

ANDERSON: How did you understand your family's immigration experience and race and your ethnic background as a child? How did you talk about that as a family, and what language did you speak at home?

ACEY: Yeah. Well, I'm very sad I do not know how to speak Arabic. My mother grew up in a mixed family, so they didn't know how to speak Arabic, but my father's family — So I was around Arabic with my father's family, with that extended family and church. You know, I can

understand a certain amount of it, but I'm not at all fluent. It's a sadness.

You know, I've thought a lot about this over the years, because I was very aware that we were different.

ANDERSON: From who?

ACEY: There was just — you know, I'm not always certain, because it was a mixture. You were different, but you're not that different, and I'll kind of talk a little bit about it. It's very tied to church, religion, Catholic school.

The way I've been able to kind of figure it out — and some of it in discussion with my father and some with aunts and uncles, but also with friends and others — is that my parents, their parents, and then some of their siblings and them lived through the Depression, and then came World War II. When you think about what the '50s and the '60s were, when my parents were kind of maturing themselves, they were young people. In the '40s they were teenagers.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: Everything was very pro-American. Everything was anticommunist. Everything was, you know, It's great to be an American, freedom.

From what I can gather, both reading and talking to people, and then just observing and listening to my family's oral histories, it was a big, big assimilation. You came from Lebanon, you came from Syria, you came from Italy. There weren't big migrations of communities of color per se. There were certainly — You know, [where] I grew up, there was a very big African American population, and also Puerto Rican population. Very few — I mean, I think it was my whole life growing up — Asian in Utica. Now it's different, very different. There are big migrations now of Asian, more Latina and eastern European, and also Bosnia. So Utica looks very different today than when I was growing up.

I think in terms of ethnic and racial identity, clearly we knew we were Lebanese. You know, what my grandmother cooked, where we went to church, the clan — you were Lebanese. But also, my parents and their siblings married many different nationalities, and mostly Europeans, with the next generation a little different, and now, the [next] generation — my first cousins' children — it's like, it's, you know, they're African American, they're Puerto Rican, Native American. So it's a very — the family's really very diverse.

It was not as diverse for my parents' generation. They either married Europeans — a lot of Italians. My father used to say, and it kind of goes back to what I was saying, it's like, I think they were most closely ethnically identical. You know, I don't think it was like they said it. This is my theory, because all of my father's sisters, all six of them, and one brother, married Italians.

ANDERSON: Wow. Well, that's who you were in close proximity with in the neighborhood.

ACEY: Right. And my father married someone who was part Lebanese and Irish, and then his other brother married a woman who is German and English. On my mother's side they married — there's a lot of Italians and also other Lebanese. So I feel there was a very big assimilation, push. So it was not important to teach your children to speak Arabic. You were an American. Also I learned very young in the '50s — as an adolescent, I started to get more politically active in different ways — is, you know, very anticommunist. And then, of course, the civil rights movement.

35:00

So there was all of that together, and so I had a sense that I was different, and it came from different places. I think partly the family. At school I wasn't made fun of, but, you know, people would comment that — both families — that, You have olive skin. It's funny, the first time I heard it — and I don't even remember how old I was — but I thought of olives as green. You know, they have those green olives with the red inside, and I would look and say, "Green?" You know, I couldn't figure it out. I had very curly, bushy hair that was a little different.

It was really clear that there was a black and a white. So I had this thing growing up where, Am I black or white? And clearly the message was, You're white; you're different but you're white. It wasn't until I actually went off to college that I began to — Because when people would ask me, I would say, well, "I'm Lebanese" or "I'm Arab." I didn't identify as much with the Irish. Irish meant Catholic to me, in a certain way, so it was all kind of mixed up. I either wouldn't identify or I would say I was universal, or I would say I was white, of which I have, you know, some shame. But I have an understanding — because I do identify as nonwhite, as a person of color, but I kind of came into that through a certain political — not even through feminism, but somewhat through feminism, and that shifted for me.

ANDERSON: Did they share stories or culture or any other piece of the Arab heritage that was important growing up? Even though to the outside world you were assimilating, was there a strong sense of pride about where they came from in the home?

ACEY: There was a really strong sense of pride and, again, it got very connected to traditions of family, it got connected to church, it got connected to food. I mean, the food was a big thing. My grandmother — my father's mother — was a great cook, and some of her daughters had followed in her footsteps. So there was always Lebanese food being cooked, and bread, homemade breads, thick, thin. She always lived in a small apartment, but she always cooked mostly for the (inaudible). So sometimes, you know, families would go and you

would have dinner with her, but then your cousins would be coming up the stairs and they'd have pots. They would come and they'd get their meals and they'd go. It was kind of a weekly — I mean, she didn't do it every day, but she cooked a lot after she stopped working, and the kids — my aunts and uncles — were helping to support her and take care of her.

Also, I was very fortunate because a lot of my grandmother's — *Sito* in Arabic — brothers and sisters lived nearby, so I got to meet my aunt Selma, my uncle Sarkis. We were a lot with that generation growing up, because my father's family — my mother's a Zogby and my father's an Acey, and in Arabic it would be *Isa*. But my mother, they didn't have a large extended. There were a lot of Zogbys, but they were much more insular, and a lot of my mother's side of the family had, you know, one or two children on that side, and there weren't as many Zogbys in terms of aunts, uncles. There's a lot of Zogbys in Utica, and some of those Zogbys are head of these big national Arab organizations or this big Zogby international pollster. Those are all distant relatives.

40:00

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: My father's family — there were five families, all different last names — that their parents immigrated from Lebanon, and they were close. They were really like a clan. Like my godfather was, you know, a *sagir*, and they were like brothers and sisters. So I was very used to this kind of clan, big family kind of thing, which made it — You know, as you get older, sneaking around town to do things you might not supposed to be doing was very difficult.

ANDERSON: What did you learn about being female in that family and community? What were the messages about gender?

ACEY: Yeah. Well, you know, it was a mixture of messages and double messages. Many of my aunts worked, and some of them had been working — My mother started working when she was 16, and they were all still living at home. They were helping to support the mother, the household, the younger ones coming up. So working was — Women worked. They might not make as much as the men, but they worked.

Actually, my mother — even though I mostly grew up with my cousins but also, you know, [I was] in school with other kids who were anywhere, as I said earlier, from poor to lower-middle class. A lot of the mothers didn't work, and they owned houses, modest houses. So I was very aware that some of my friends' mothers didn't work. You know, like their father was a cop or they owned a little grocery store, but my mother worked, and I remember feeling resentful. Why isn't my mother home when I get home from school? Why do I have to go home and wash the dishes? So I kind of felt bad sometimes, but then, you

know, as I got older and my mother helped me get a job and I saw how loved she was. She was a head cashier at a grocery store, in a big chain. She kind of moved up as clerk.

But also, I saw that, well, some of the women and my aunts were under the thumb of their husbands, and some I liked and some I — There also were very loving relationships, and the women were strong, they were the organizers. My mother organized everything. My mother, she was kind of the middle child in the family but she was also kind of the matriarch. And I saw that my grandmothers, both my grandmothers, I never —

You know, my father's mother — here she was ruling the roost. Her husband had been dead. My [maternal] grandfather was still alive but estranged, so I didn't see much of him. As I said, he was an alcoholic, but my grandmother never talked bad about him. I was taken by her sometimes, but also by my parents, to see him if he was sober. His children, even though he was not a very good father to them, they always made sure he was okay and where he was. But it was, you know, it's like, these women, who were running households, organizing, going to work, raising kids.

ANDERSON: So you saw women as strong and resourceful.

ACEY: I saw them as strong, but I also knew, like in my own — that my father, the firm one, my father, you know, my mother would go round about him. I saw how she would get around him, not only in relationship to us but in relationship to other things. She wasn't a very good money manager, but he let her manage the money. (chuckles)

ANDERSON: Did they value education for girls?

ACEY: Well, absolutely. As I said, it was very important to go to school. It was very important to do well in school. It was important to have these other things like dance classes and piano, so to have everything they didn't have. I always assumed I was going to college. I don't remember any big discussions, You're going to college. I have to check with my sister, because I don't feel like I was ever discouraged, but I can't remember being encouraged. It just was, like — happened. It was, like, not a question.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: Now the interesting thing — because we both went to an all-girls high school, which happened to be in the same parish school. You had to pay a small tuition, and if you couldn't afford to they would help you. So when we were in high school, the recruiters mainly came from Catholic girls' colleges. So that's the thing. Some of my classmates — there were seventy-some of us — did go to some of the state colleges, but the majority of us, we went to, pretty much, Catholic women's

45:00

colleges throughout New York State. There was Saint Rose College. What's that Catholic girls' college up in Poughkeepsie? I ended up going to Rosary Hill in Buffalo, where my sister followed me a year later. So that was the other thing you didn't talk about, but that's who came and recruited us, and you just went to this all Catholic girls' college.

ANDERSON: That sounds like you were already being a little rebellious around religion by the time you went to college. So did you consider rebelling in terms of that?

ACEY: I was actually somewhat religious, and thought I was going to be a nun, which is a fairly normal thing for a girl, a young woman, that's gone to Catholic schools and then an all-girl Catholic high school, because the nuns were feminist role models. Now some of them were mean as hell, but others were just —

You know, I was very heterosexually identified, but I was in *love* with some of them. I would be like, you know, so smitten, and very involved in grade school and high school. So the nuns were another role — Here are these women, and plus, look, they're wearing those great habits. That was just so cool, those habits, and then they would go off into that convent, and what was going on in there, you know? It was like all this mystery, and a lot of them were very young. There were some old, and I had some big run-ins. My mother did have to go to both my grade school and my high school on a number of occasions.

ANDERSON: Did you see it as erotically charged? Because you talk about as if it was a little bit.

ACEY: What?

ANDERSON: The convent or the life of women.

ACEY: You know, it was like — there was something about that, you know? They're all together, and the habits were — You know, when they went to those street clothes, I tell you.

Many of the girls were smitten with them. And so in grade school, and then when I first — Because I was very smitten with my seventh- and eighth-grade teachers too — nuns. When I was in seventh and eighth grade, I just really, totally loved these two nuns. The rules were very harsh, and so they couldn't really associate with the students, you know, within the school setting, in front of the church on Sunday mornings. But they were allowed, I think, something like an hour or two every Thursday to go for a walk. So my mother — and this was after school — she would fix cookies, sometimes sandwiches, and they would sneak, these two nuns would sneak over to our house, and some of my school friends, and we'd have this time with them. But then they

had to sneak back, because they would get in big trouble, that they had done that. Now, of course, it's so changed, but pretty much through high school that was the case.

ANDERSON: So you really thought you were on this path.

ACEY: There was a period — and I think it might have been eighth grade, maybe seventh, eighth grade, first year in high school — where I went to church every day, I went to Mass every day, and I was going to be a nun. But I had kind of this devilish streak to me too, and I was friends with these different nuns, and I think some of them thought I was going to be a nun too. And then as I got older, I think a senior in high school, I was seeing somebody. So I said, I think I'll go to college first, then I'll be a nun.

50:00

ANDERSON: You mean seeing a man, a boy.

ACEY: I was seeing a guy. So then my plan was, Well, let me just — I'll do this. There was an older gal, who was actually a lesbian, who was four years ahead of me. She was in high school and I was in eighth grade, and we became friends, because the high school was right there. So I was friends with some of the older girls, and some of them were friends with some of these same nuns, and it was kind of like this little cabal, so. She went away to be a nun, and she was a smoker, and by then I was smoking, and I thought, Well, you know, if Georgina can smoke and give it up and go be a nun and give up boys, well, I can do that too. But I said, I think I'll delay it, because I don't think my parents were that keen on it either. My parents — It's interesting. They didn't encourage it or discourage it. So then by the time I was in my first year in college I was like —

ANDERSON: You're done.

ACEY: Done. But we had this wonderful priest on campus, and so I still went to church. We had this Mass now, you know, guitars. The liturgy was different. It was still the civil rights movement — a different period of it — and the antiwar movement, and he was out there in front on all of that, and I became a student leader.

So then it was like, well, the going to Mass became this community thing, and then eventually, I just drifted completely away. I wanted to sleep in on Sunday morning, you know, and I completely drifted from church, which caused a huge, huge rift with my father and I, when I stopped going to church. I stopped going to church, and then when he would come to visit me when I was in college, I would have all this antiwar literature, all this socialist and communist literature. I didn't join any of the left parties, but I was involved in all of that. I never wanted to join, it never seemed to fit, but I would go to all those different meetings, be organizing the antiwar demonstrations, the

student strikes. We would be going, you know, in defense of the Black Panthers. So he just thought I was lost. That I had a good heart and I was susceptible to these kinds of things and I was going to get in trouble and get hurt. And then not going to church — it was like he could never grasp that.

ANDERSON: And I think they must have been surprised that that could have happened at a Catholic college, right?

ACEY: (laughs) Well, the other very sad thing that happened when we were in college — Rosary Hill's campus was a mile outside the city limits, and there was very limited transportation, and so when the buses stopped running, we would all hitchhike to go out and do whatever. My sister and her roommate were hitchhiking one night and they were kidnapped. They were taken to a remote spot, and they let the roommate out and they kept driving. So my sister was brutally beaten and raped.

ANDERSON: That's horrible.

ACEY: It was quite horrible. It still is horrible.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: So I think they — after that, they suffered no illusions about the safety of a Catholic girls' — It was — yeah, it was —

ANDERSON: Let's pause there, would that be okay?

ACEY: Yeah.

55:00

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

ANDERSON: Okay, next day of taping.

ACEY: Can I drink coffee?

ANDERSON: Yeah, of course you can, you can do whatever you want. You can have a cigarette if you want. It doesn't bother me.

You and I talked a lot yesterday after we turned off the tape, and I want to go back and talk a little bit about that, whatever you want to share about it. But I think, whether you want to go back to your dating patterns in high school and start there, if you want to pick up with the incident with your sister and start with that, and let that lead us into your activism in college.

ACEY: Okay. You know, I became active. I was kind of an activist in terms of school politics from junior high and high school. There was a lot happening in the '60s. You had the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement.

ANDERSON: How were you made aware of all those? Did your family talk about it? Was your high school student body engaged with those issues? Did you watch the news?

ACEY: You know, we were a small town, so there wasn't a lot of organizing that I was aware of. Television was a big factor in terms of the war and civil rights. It was talked about at home, but it wasn't — you know, I have a dim memory of it. I think I was already inclined to just be involved in changing things. So it might have been the dress code at school or, you know, if you could roll up your uniform or have it above your knees. It was kind of very situational and close-to-home things.

But I remember when I was in eighth grade — and I remembered years later. I feel like I came to my feminist consciousness very late. I think my politics growing up were most guided by race and class, and not from a deep analytical place, [but] from a lived experience, particularly the class stuff. I was very aware of having enough but having less.

Even the schools I went to. The Catholic girls' high school I went to was the working-class Catholic girls' high school. Where all the what we thought of as the rich kids went — but when I look back, you know, some weren't that rich either — was up the main street, up on a hill, surrounded by beautiful homes and lots of grass and trees and lawns, and ours was down in the city, and there were those distinctions.

But there was only one boys' high school, so there was always competition for the boys. Again, religion was big, the Catholicism, and for me, then, layered with the Eastern Maronite and the Arab and Syrian and Lebanese communities. But I remembered long after — in

probably one of my feminist study groups, of which there were many — that in eighth grade I was nominated in the class to be the class president. Right away the teacher said, “No, Katherine can’t be the president, it has to be a boy.” I ended up being elected to vice president, but the boy, who was very nice, was very shy, and so I had to do all the speeches. I had a friend who was a good writer. She was going to be a writer when she grew up, and so she would write my speeches and I’d edit them and then I’d say them, and Patrick would never have to speak in public, which worked for everybody. Long after that, I remember feeling badly that I couldn’t be president, but I didn’t connect it to, well, he’s a boy. You know, I didn’t have that kind of consciousness, because I also felt like I could do what I wanted to do.

That changed a bit in high school, because I was with all girls, so you didn’t have that. So I was a student leader throughout high school: president of the class, president of the student body, which got me to think that, Well, some day I’m going to be — I never thought I was going to be president of the United States, but I thought I would be a senator, because I started to get into that electoral politic mind — that that’s where you could make change, that’s where you could have some power. I began to make those connections. I was never elected to office. I gave that up, rejected that concept in college. But in high school, being a student leader was about bringing people together, organizing, but mostly about our lives in the school, less about what was happening in the world.

5:00

I also feel that some of my politics come from my parents and my Catholic upbringing. Let me explain that because it’s complicated. I feel what I learned — Well, you know, the three tenets of Catholicism are faith, hope, and charity, and I really believed those things and in a way I still do. Also, it was about taking care of people. You know, it was certainly loving God and being a good person, but it was also very much about caring about other people. And I do feel I got that from the priests and the nuns and my family. So I got a very, very strong value that was about, you just don’t think about yourself. So a sense of family, a sense of community that was even bigger. So I’m grateful for that, because I rejected Catholicism and the church. I came back around in later years to feeling like that’s what gave me this core sense of values about people.

While I was in high school, there was a lot of disruption that played out around race and racism.

ANDERSON: And this is the late ’60s right, when you’re in high school?

ACEY: Yeah. We’re talking mid-1960s. You know, ’65 to ’68. I left in ’68 to go to college.

The Catholic girls’ school I went to was one block down the street from the public school. The public school was very racially mixed and our school wasn’t. However, we had this wonderful priest — amazing, kind, generous — he was part of the community. By then,

the community was still segregated, but block by block this neighborhood I grew up in was becoming more and more integrated in terms of black folks, who had mostly lived way downtown. We had a Catholic youth organization, and Father O'Neil organized all the kids — not just the kids who went to the Catholic school — into these groups. You know, we had athletics. I was part of a choir, where we went to hospitals and nursing homes. You had fun and you did charity work. And so we started, in high school, to mix with the black folks, because in high school and grade school, most of the exposure I was given to other races was mostly Latina or Native American, no Asian or African American, even though there were many African Americans.

So being together socially and in close proximity brought on different relationships, and there were several of us in high school who began to date African American guys, which was a big no-no, except to Father O'Neil, of course. At the same time, there was a lot of unrest in big cities still, and it got to Utica, New York. I remember I was with a guy, and I got a call from one of his friends that he'd been arrested. What would happen in Utica in those days, if you were a black guy and you were walking down the street and there were more than two of you, you were stopped. If you gave them any kind of lip, you were in jail. That was real and traumatic and unfair and all those things. So I came to this consciousness about racism just by seeing it, you know, just observing and seeing.

ANDERSON: Would you spend time with those African American men on the street in public places or was it always clandestine? How did you negotiate that?

ACEY: It would depend. You know, in parks. As a thing, it wasn't like, Okay, you go here or you go — So you were in situations where it was, like, you could just be there.

10:00

ANDERSON: Right. You were in big groups it sounds like.

ACEY: Yeah, in big groups. So there were different ways in which you could be together, and we lived in the same neighborhood. The guy I fell in love with and was dating in my senior year in high school, you know, lived, I think, ten blocks away from me.

ANDERSON: Did you bring him home?

ACEY: No, I didn't. It was just not accepted, which was also very painful. Prior to me getting involved with him, some friends of mine had gotten involved. You know, one of my friends was badly beaten by her father. I mean, I didn't think my father would do that, but — Others were thrown out of the house, others were just put on complete restriction. I mean it was very intense and scary. And we were all very attached to

our families. Very troublesome. So a lot of things began to get stirred up in me. I did talk to my mother and it was like, You can't do this.

ANDERSON: You told her about the guy you were seeing?

ACEY: Yeah, and she knew him. I'm pretty transparent with — I'm not a very good liar and I'm not very good with hiding my feelings. The nuns were — I think I said earlier — a very special part of my life too, and I was very close to some of them. When a number of us were leaving for college that were in these relationships with black men, instead of bringing the guys to meet our parents, we brought them to the convent. The nuns had refreshments for us and met these fellows, and basically were like our surrogate parents. I mean, they were kind of in this conspiracy with us.

ANDERSON: Because they didn't have any judgment about that.

ACEY: They didn't have a judgment. I remember also, Father O'Neil was also close to my boyfriend at the time, who was putting a lot of pressure on me to have sex. And being a good Catholic girl, I was going to wait until we got married. I was just, you know, was afraid I was going to lose him, but how could I lose my virginity? So Curtis agreed, because he really liked Father O'Neil. He agreed for us to go and talk to Father O'Neil together, to see if he could help us resolve this issue of sex or no sex. Again, I remember sitting there with Father O'Neil. I don't remember all of the content, but I remember feeling better. I don't think he actually gave us an answer, which is probably incredible in, like, we're talking 1968. But I remember leaving feeling like, Well, I can make this decision, and it doesn't have to be one way or another. We ended up having sex about six months later.

So those were really kind of expansive times for me, and troubled times because I was in conflict. The world was in conflict and I was in conflict, my friends were in conflict.

And then I went off to college. Again, to an all-girls Catholic college in Buffalo. It was a good experience. It was a small college. We were about a mile from the university [SUNY Buffalo]. So I became a student leader right away. I remember my first year at Rosary Hill — it's called Daemen now — we had to wear skirts to dinner. The tables were set for us. This was not like a big, fancy school, but there were these standards.

ANDERSON: A lot of women's colleges were like that still then.

ACEY: So right away we got on that, and by the end of my freshman year, we were no longer having to wear skirts to dinner, nor were the tables set for us. But I got very involved. I became close friends. There were very few African American students at Rosary Hill. I and a few of the women became fast friends, and we started the group called Black

15:00

Awareness on campus, and that was to bring some consciousness around race to the campus, but also to start recruiting more students, particularly — You know, at that time it was the inner city. They were all from the inner city. They called it the inner city, you know, that terminology that —

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: Probably about two years later, when we did get more students, there was more recruitment, and then the black students decided that it should be just a black organization. So I had to step aside from being involved in it, but being supportive.

ANDERSON: Did you form something else, another student of color organization?

ACEY: No, there were no other — that was the one group.

In my junior and senior year, I was president of the student body, and how we took and used that was, again, not so much external. A lot of us were more politicized at that time, and what we did is really organize around not only things in the school but the war. We organized strikes and demonstrations in coalition with the other universities. I often went to meetings of all the different socialist groups and antiwar groups, sometimes on my own as just me, trying to learn as much — and sometimes representing our coalitions. We had another great chaplain, who was right there with us, demonstrating and picketing. I was still going to Mass, but less and less. He actually left the priesthood and got married years later.

So I got really in the thick of much deeper politics. I also had the benefit of having two professors who were socialists, so I started to read, you know, Marx. I was a sociology major and a philosophy minor, so I was getting the experience and the analysis. We did a lot of solidarity work and organizing in support of things that were happening in Buffalo around racist attacks. So it was kind of an inside, outside in terms of my activism in the school, and I kind of got coined as a radical.

But still, feminism was not in my consciousness as such. I think some of that may have been what I was exposed to, what I experienced first, you know, in terms of any lived experience, and some of it was maybe being around so many strong women — the nuns and other women students — in high school and college.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: It was a different experience in the world. In fact, I remember thinking when I was in college — I remember hearing about these women burning their bras, and I thought, That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of. Who would burn their bra? What is the point? I wouldn't even think of going anywhere without a bra. I was not at all connected to the women's movement. I didn't get it, I wasn't exposed

to it. What I did know about it was not something that resonated with me.

ANDERSON: It doesn't sound like there was a presence on campus of any feminist groups really.

ACEY: Not that I remember, and I was fairly involved. As I said, it was around racism and it was around the war, and then just how we were treated as young women in college. It was like, We want to make up our own minds. We didn't want to be told when we had to wear a skirt and when we could wear pants, and have to run back to your room and put on your jeans, but then when you went to class or to dinner you had to put on your skirt. So we were resisting, at that point, this authority putting on us these rules. So I suppose you could call that feminism, but that's not what we called it.

ANDERSON: I'm surprised by the level of radicalism and activism on a campus of all Catholic girls.

ACEY: Oh yeah, we were right there.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: I remember Buffalo used to get harsh winters and icy. I remember one day when we called a strike. Buffalo was in the suburbs and, you know, a lot of us lived on campus. I moved off campus my second year, or maybe it was my third year, but I definitely moved off campus. My sister was there now behind me. She was a year behind me, and she was an art major. I remember standing at the driveway, out in the streets just stopping cars. They were sliding all over the place.

20:00

And by that time, I was wearing my hair in an Afro, because all those years I'd been straightening my hair — going to bed with those big rollers, brushing out my hair and putting these caps on. So that was very liberating when I got to college and I was like — washed my hair one day and I just let it go wild, and I was like, I think I like this. You know, it was definitely influenced by the black power movement and black is beautiful. I wasn't black, but it was, like, I had this really curly, frizzy hair, and so that's when I started wearing my — I mean, I used to wear very big, bushy Afros. I wanted to be Angela Davis in those days. Who didn't?

ANDERSON: How did your parents respond to all these changes and your new Afro?

ACEY: I think they were a little taken aback. On the one hand they were supportive. On the other hand, I think especially for my dad, less for my mother — you know, they were very protective parents. My dad, especially when I came home with that big Afro, he was like, That's got

to go. And I get my curly hair from him too. So that was, like, one of our fights for many years, my hair.

Another fight was about, you know, socialism and communism. You know, like, You've got a big heart but these people are using you. He was proud that I was fighting for justice, but also very scared. It was like, Do the right thing, but this whole kind of activism was not part of his own framework. Their acts of kindness and justice were more, you know, everyday, more of the charity nature, out of a sincere place and not just charity in the sense of (inaudible). He was, I think, trying hard to understand me, but at the same time I think he almost saw it as a rejection of him, although I saw it as an extension of him — later on. I wasn't thinking it in those days when we were having many fights.

ANDERSON: Any lesbian inklings or community or relationships on that campus that you were aware of? Where did that come in?

ACEY: Yes. Well, you know, if you hadn't asked me that question —

So in my first year in college I had a roommate. Very different, very tall, white, blondish girl from a very affluent family in Maine, but we got along. And then there was this other person on campus. She was kind of like one of those, What is she about? I was radical but she was like, Screw the system, screw authority. She was like, I can do anything I want: drink hard, play hard. Basically, fuck authority, if you will, so.

And she and my roommate became very good friends, and they started hanging out a lot together. Over time, my roommate would be missing in action, then it was clear they were also doing some drugs, but that they were also in a relationship. I loved them both, and I would hang out with them sometimes or just try to see where was my —

They were having this relationship, but they were getting really strung out. There came one period where my friend's father showed up, and I was called to the Student Affairs Office by the vice president of the college, and they wanted to know where she was. And I knew where she was. I said, "Well, you know, I will try to find her, but I can't talk to you about this." So I went and looked for her and I found that they were together, and she was really strung out on drugs. And by this time, the other woman was really scared. I said, "We've got — Her father's here, she's got to get help." I know she was trying to reject her family too, and they didn't get her at all, but it was, like, she was really sick.

So they took her away, and she came back eventually, and they were supposedly not allowed to see each other, but they did, and they ended up running away together eventually. We stayed in contact for a while and then we just kind of — even when I was gone from college, and then we kind of drifted. I often think about them. Not often, but every once in a while I'm like, Where are they and what happened to them?

25:00

So that was my first introduction, and I didn't think it was unusual. Then — I forget what year it was, we were probably juniors in college by then — but through this certain VA [United States Department of Veterans Affairs] policy, they started to have more men. Not a lot, but more men coming in through this — guys coming back from Vietnam. So all of a sudden there were more men on campus from the community but from — They kind of swaggered and most of us didn't pay attention to them. A couple of them ended up dating some of the women, but we weren't that happy with it, but it was like, Eh, no big deal, until they tried to take over the student politics, and then we said, No way. There were some of them — not all of them, because they had already been a few there, like in theater arts and in some sciences, and they were like, you know, nice guys pretty much, not that visible.

So we had some tensions there for a while. And then some of the guys started asking some of my crowd out, and we said we didn't want to go out with them. So then it became a rumor on campus — There was this really good friend of mine, and we're still very close, Debra. She was from the community in Buffalo, was still there after (inaudible). So we started to be called bulldaggers, and of course I had no idea what bulldagger meant. It didn't sound very good. So then — I forget how we found out what bulldagger meant — and we would laugh. We just thought wasn't it the funniest thing you ever heard of, and so we kind of played with it. We'd lock arms when this one guy would go by and just kind of play with him.

And then another thing that I forgot, again, until much later. I guess my memory is not so great. I, with some of the other student leaders — because we would bring different people on the campus to talk on different political issues. We brought — What's that older gay organization?

ANDERSON: Daughters of Bilitis?

ACEY: No, no, this was men.

ANDERSON: Oh, the Matachines?

ACEY: The Matachines. So we brought a group of the Matachines on campus. I remember sitting in the student union. We had, like, this one room that was kind of like a big living room, having this discussion and again it was like, Eh?

ANDERSON: It's still not clicking for you.

ACEY: It's not clicking for me at all. Mind you, I've had crushes on the nuns, I've gravitated towards some of these older girls in high school and college. I'd been followed around by younger girls. So it was all of this.

I had a very close friend who went away to college before I did. She was a year ahead of me. We wrote to each other every day, and when I look back at those letters — I saved a lot of them — they're like love letters. But it was a very emotional — never felt, like, sexual. Sometimes physical in an affectionate way — you know, very cuddly — but it never even dawned on me. Sex with a woman never even — it was like, Absolutely not.

ANDERSON: Were you still dating Curtis at this point?

ACEY: Oh Curtis, no. Curtis — he really did me in, that Curtis, I'll tell you. I've never had good luck with men — or with women either for that matter. (laughs) Actually, that's why I've got to stay involved in politics. Curtis and I, um — I went off to college and we were together that first year, back and forth. I think we broke up in my sophomore year. He was a year behind me, the same age but a year behind me. So he started college but he stayed in Utica. In Utica, there was, like — A lot of New Yorkers came to go to college at Utica College in Mohawk Valley, and by then he'd become very involved in the black power movement, which meant — for him, it translated to only being with black people. And then he really liked to have sex, and so here he was, he had a new girlfriend.

30:00

ANDERSON: All right, so back to the lesbian piece at college. So there's some relationships you're aware of, you bring Matachines, but none of this is clicking for you as to your sexual identity.

ACEY: Nothing's clicking, you know. I know some gay people, and by then I was in another serious relationship with a man, also an African American man. A lot of my social group was from the community because we went to college, and then we got those gals introduced. That's how I met the guy I was with, through them. There were four of us that went to high school together that were in college together, and we were very close. And so we had this great social life, which involved playing bid whist, dancing, and politics.

ANDERSON: Do you want to talk a little bit more about the enormous rupture that happens in your life after your sister's attack, because it seems so central to — What year were you in college when that happened?

ACEY: I'm trying to think. I think that I was a senior and she was a junior. I think I mentioned, my sister and I have lived in the same city, in very close proximity, for all of our lives, except for about two years when she was in graduate school out in Texas and Arizona.

Rosary Hill was, as I said, in the suburbs, and there was no transportation. The buses ran, but they stopped at a certain hour. Buses didn't even run, I don't think, on the weekends. So the college culture in Buffalo — not just at Rosary Hill, and probably in the United States,

I would imagine — was you hitchhiked. I remember hitchhiking from Buffalo to Albany to go see somebody. You know, we were hitchhiking together. My first years, before I moved off campus, I had a job off campus, and I would hitchhike to that job, and once a guy exposed himself. I used to carry a knife actually, but I don't know what I thought I was going to do with it.

ANDERSON: But you still didn't think you were gay? (laughter)

ACEY: It had a nice little leather holder.

ANDERSON: Yes, I was going to say.

ACEY: I forgot about that too. God, you know, the things that come back to you are amazing. So it was a culture of hitchhiking, and people were careful. I eventually stopped hitchhiking by myself. I didn't think it was such a cool, you know — But sometimes you just got desperate though, you had to get someplace. Nobody had the money to have cabs, and it wasn't like New York where you just, you know, put your hand out.

My sister and her roommate were going out for the evening to a bar, and they left campus and they hitchhiked. They got picked up by two guys, who drove them near where they were going, but pulled into the driveway at the state hospital, which is this big — massive acres and trees and deserted and dark — you know, long driveway. My sister and her roommate were in the back seat of a two-door car, and when they went to let them out, her roommate got out, they pushed her, and they drove off. Her roommate got hysterical and called the police when she got somewhere — I can't remember — and got some help.

I worked my way through college. I mean, I had some scholarships and my parents helped me, but I always held down a job. I don't know how I did that. I used to take a lot of classes, be involved in politics, and work. I just don't know how that all happened but it did. I was probably a crazy person then too.

35:00

ANDERSON: Yeah, it was the pace that you set a long time ago that you still have.

ACEY: I was running the student union that night and there was a dance. I got a call to come to the police station. I was with these close women friends, and I didn't have a jacket, it was chilly. My friend gave me her leather jacket and said, "Wear this." And I went off, and I got to the police station and found out what had happened to my sister. She'd been beaten and raped. She'd been found in a park. There was an alert out, that she was in a park that was closed, with these guys, and the police were just doing a routine run-by of the park, and they saw this car and they investigated.

So my sister was traumatized. There was a woman police officer talking to her and then to me. The guys who had done this were

African American, and the police were saying some really outrageous — So it was this, really, another one of those conflict-ridden, contradictory situations where both she, who is, like, bruised and beaten — She was a virgin. She might have been a sophomore or a freshman. I don't know, (inaudible) personal history, anyway. So we got into an argument with the police officer, who had begun to make some racist statements, and I made the comment that, "How can you say this? I was with friends, this jacket belongs to my friend." So I just said to them, "Let's just leave this, let's just get out," because she had to get to the hospital, get all these tests. We're talking late '60s, maybe 1970s.

I can't remember if I was of legal age, because I am a year older, but we basically didn't want my parents to know what happened to my sister, because we felt it would kill them, knowing that she'd been raped and brutally beaten. To this day we don't know. There were all kinds of knives and axes in the car, so we don't know if they intended to kill —

ANDERSON: So you were trying to protect your parents from the pain of that.

ACEY: We were trying to protect my parents, which was, you know, probably the very wrong thing to do. And then within days, my mother and my aunt were coming to visit, and now this became a big thing. There was a big newspaper article that someone had been raped from campus. Nobody knew, so there was all this buzz on the campus. My sister is not in a great shape, we're trying to keep this from our parents. My aunt and mother arrive, and we go out and do something and we come back to my sister's room, and she's on the phone sobbing. What the police had done is to call my father and told him that his daughter was brutally beaten and raped, and his other daughter — they made up some kind of story, and I can't remember. Again, I'd have to ask my sister exactly how it went, but they got in that his other daughter — they got in the leather jacket and all that, but they kind of made it something else.

ANDERSON: And African American friends too.

ACEY: Yeah, they kind of made it an ugly story rather than how it was. So then here we are, my mother and Anna want to know what's happened and why was my sister crying. So that was like completely —

And Joanne, well, she had to go through three trials. She already had left Buffalo and gone off to graduate school, and they were flying her back. I think the first trial was a hung jury, and the second trial they were convicted, but then they got off on a technicality, an appeal. And then there was a third trial, at which they were, in fact, convicted. One, I think, ended up serving a few months, the other a year. So, ah, it was, you know, a big thing. I think I went through a lot of denial, you know?

40:00

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: A number of years later, I began to be more in touch with the feelings about it. Now I — you know, fast forward — I have become involved in the women's movement, through reproductive rights and sterilization abuse work, and then anti-sterilization abuse, and also antiviolence, women's antiviolence work, mostly around sexual assault and rape, but also somewhat around battered women. They were different organizations at that time, but the women who were doing the antiviolence work were very connected. Some are involved in both. So it was years later that I got more connected to what had happened, because I think I went into a very — denial: [it] happened, [it's] over.

You know, I felt like my sister needed to get some help. Initially she did a little counseling, but she really never, I don't feel — The resources weren't there. She was treated terribly by the defense attorneys, treated terribly by the medical folks. There was no one place that I feel she got what she needed, and I think even from me. My parents were devastated, but again, there wasn't a lot of discussion about it. So years later I got more in touch with what had happened, kind of the hugeness of it.

ANDERSON: Through the movement or through other personal work or therapy?

ACEY: In working within the women's antiviolence movement. By the time I got involved with it, there were many lesbians, women of color. It was about organizing and advocacy but also services, but it was also about personal. So the more exposed I got to people working, but also women who had experienced some violence, the closer it got me to, like, begin to get better in touch and to begin to take in that experience in a whole different way.

I remember distinctly one conference where there was a session that was women of color only, to talk personally. The opening question was, We're going to go around the room, and I want each person to — if they can — relate an experience of their own or of someone close to them or one they know. I remember there might have been about 40 women in the room. Every single woman had a story, and I was totally overwhelmed by it. Again, this is years later. We're maybe talking at least ten years later, if not more — probably more — since my sister's rape. I just remember just sobbing and sobbing, and then I started to talk a little more to my sister. Well, now we're talking, you know, well over 30 years ago. It still feels like it didn't get completely processed, if you will, so.

ANDERSON: Right. And do you think that your politics are rooted in that experience in some ways, the direction that you went with antiviolence work?

ACEY: I don't think so. Not consciously. I came to New York in '74 to go to graduate school, and thought I'd come for a couple of years, get New York out of my system, get my degree, and go back to Buffalo. When I

graduated from college I had connections, so I got a job as a waitress in a museum for the first six months.

ANDERSON: Up in Buffalo, you stayed there?

ACEY: Yeah. And then I got a real — not a real job, but I got a job that was more in line with what I wanted to do, which was setting up a program with six other people within this bigger agency around crisis intervention. We became a mobile unit in Buffalo. It was a very exciting job.

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At that time I thought I'd go to law school, but I wanted to work first. People kept encouraging me to go back to school, because at one point in this program, the first person who had been hired as the director was leaving and recommended that I become the director, and I was younger than most of them. The head of the agency said, you know, I didn't have a master's degree. My colleagues who were older and had master's degrees said, You know, you really need to go back to school, because if you're going to do this work, they're going to want you to have it. So at that time I thought, Okay, I'll go back to school and get the master's in social work and the law degree. There were different schools then, offering the joint degrees.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: So I started to apply and then I just was like, I'm not going to school for four years. So instead of going to law school, I said, "Well, first I'll go to social work school and then I'll go back to law school." Well, that never happened.

So I came to New York in '74 and went to Columbia. Again, I was fortunate to have professors like George Brager and Richard Cloward. And then I got exposed to all these other folks, political activists. I became president of the student body again. (laughs) I was a sucker for that stuff. I was like, Okay, let's get organized.

ANDERSON: What was the climate like on campus in the '70s?

ACEY: In '74 it was, like, after the dawn of all that radicalism that was rampant at Columbia, so you had people like Cloward. Francis Fox Piven wasn't in the social work school but she was around and, you know. So you had a lot of the community organizers, you had a lot of the socialists. In fact, I majored in community organizing and planning, and my class — those of us that went in in '70 — we were the last ones that could major in that at Columbia. So they are already — I mean, it was all at Columbia University, but it was in the school of — they're already moving in another direction.

But I really think coming to New York and becoming friends with different people that I went to school with then exposed me to the women's movement. So it was in New York that I really came into

feminism. At first I got involved in CARASA [Coalition for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse], and then I got involved with New York Women Against Rape.

You know, besides the student politics, there was a group of us that started a journal called *Catalyst: A Socialist Journal of the Social Services*. And I think we changed it to *the Human Services*. So that was one piece of work. I did a lot of other pieces of organizing, kind of in and out — Farm workers. Later on — I was already out of school — but anti-apartheid. I kind of was touching down in different places. Kind of *Catalyst* was an anchor of doing some work. I did a lot of different study groups — feminist study groups, political economy. I loved the study group thing because you kind of, like, read and talk to people, sharpen —

ANDERSON: Did you do more study groups than c.r. [consciousness-raising] groups?

ACEY: There were more study groups than c.r. groups, but I did some c.r. groups with different groupings of people. So a couple of c.r. groups, and then there was one c.r. group which was kind of a c.r. group but really, we read, we socialized, we did c.r. It kind of was more of a blend, and that pretty much — you know, into the '70s and right into the '80s, quite a bit of that.

Some of my groups were really small, not the political economy. One group — there was five of us, and we worked with a mentor to really read all of Marx. Another group was a feminist. We looked at the movement, we read articles, books, had discussions, potlucks. Another group was more like a feminist support group, and was the political kind. So there was always at least one going on, if not two, for a number of years, and they kind of stretched out.

50:00

Then I got very involved in New York Women Against Rape. By the late '70s is when I started to come out. So I got involved in feminist organizations. So while I'd been with women in high school and college, I always had a boyfriend. I was always political. I never thought of anything about heterosexuality, even though I was accepting, I never thought for myself. So I think that the combination — it was kind of like an evolution of getting involved with feminist politics from a different way.

Even when I remember being in the *Catalyst* collective, there were strong women in it, but very strong and talkative men, and smart. I remember a couple of meetings where some of the women were saying, There's sexism going on here. And I would be like, What are you talking about? What are you talking about? And they were, like, so pissed at me and, you know, I was — I didn't see it. But through them talking to me and thinking about it more, and then I began to experience it. I think that's the moment when I began to think back, you know, to that eighth grade experience. But then, all the different places. You know, the men coming onto the college campus and like, Okay, we're

here, don't worry. You know, all those things, I began to be able to kind of piece it together.

ANDERSON: You had a new lens.

ACEY: Then I understood. I didn't necessarily know, but I understood those women burning those bras that I heard about in the '60s and that kind of — Then, when I went into CARASA — (dog barking)

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

ANDERSON: Maybe before we talk about CARASA, I just had one question about the study groups and c.r. groups. What was the racial makeup? Were you gravitating towards women of color? Were they part of these groups? Were they mostly white?

ACEY: There were different phases. So in the beginning, like when we started *Catalyst*, it was predominantly white. I would say that some of my political and c.r. groups were predominantly white, and then as time went on, it became more racially mixed, and then eventually I was in women of color groups. So there was a whole evolution for me at that point. And I think in kind of the late '70s, early '80s, I went through huge evolution of identity, both in terms of race and sexuality.

ANDERSON: Okay, say more about that, and then we'll go to CARASA.

ACEY: As I've come to think of it, in graduate school — let me try to kind of talk about the race identity.

ANDERSON: Okay.

ACEY: We've talked earlier, where I knew I was different, but it came up in a period where you were black or white. That's not to say other people of color weren't really clear about they were people of color, but I'm talking about my own personal experience and how I've come to understand it, and even what I experienced in the moment, which was a lot of conflict and confusion. But I also had the privilege, younger, where it was like, you know, you could pick. So I'm very aware of all those dynamics too.

In the '70s, you know, being at Columbia and after, and coming in contact with lots of more different people. Coming to New York opened up a whole world of exposure more politically, but exposure to other people, other races, sexualities. Growing up it was very much white and black, in college it was white and black. Coming to New York, it was everybody. The dynamics of white and black in the United States was still there, and I think still is today, but we had this concept and this language around people of color, and it's very different. We could go on hours about that.

But for me personally in college, there was a black caucus and a Latina caucus, and this happened to me repeatedly throughout my experiences. The Latinas would always come to me and say, Why weren't you at the meeting? So it was this assumption that I was something that I wasn't. But no one ever saw — Once in my entire life did someone come up to me and say, "Are you Arab? Are you Lebanese?" It was a Native American man doing a workshop that I was in at a conference.

I began to get exposed to different people and actually, I knew one Jewish family growing up because my aunt worked for them and was very good friends with this family. He was a Holocaust survivor. So that's what I knew about Jewish people, besides driving by the synagogues. When I got to college, an all-girls Catholic college, there was one Jewish woman from New York. And then I came to New York. I was at graduate school and I was in school with all kinds of people. Immigrants, black people, Latinas — my first broad exposure to Latinas. In fact, one of my closest friends, Elma, we met in graduate school. She was a year behind me. We're the closest of friends to this day. She's still in New York and we're actually going to the beach tomorrow. And so this whole — Jewish friends? Wow! So this whole other world just became — That's one of the reasons I don't think I could leave when it was time for me to go back to Buffalo.

5:00

So then I got involved — again, through friends in graduate school who were feminists and involved in the women's movement. I went to CARASA meetings. I got involved with the New York Women Against Rape. I was still doing *Catalyst* and some other things and, of course, doing radical things within the area of social work. We formed different groups here and there. Farm workers. So there was a lot of different things (inaudible).

CARASA and New York Women Against Rape really got me more exposed to becoming friends with lesbians. Through other friends, I became friends with this couple, who were — they were just in New York recently — and one of them became like my confidant. I began to experience feelings towards women that weren't just, you know, nice and cuddly. I remember I was doing a group summer house with a bunch of friends, and somebody that somebody knew was also sharing the house, who we had met. I remember halfway through the summer, I woke up and all I could think about was this woman's breasts. I was terrified, like, What the hell is going on?

And then I was introduced to women's music. You know, Chris Williamson and Holly Near and Ronnie Gilbert, and I was like, Wow, hmm. For me, I was like, soul music and jazz. I wasn't one of those '60s kids that was into rock and roll. It was like, soul music and jazz, and once in a while a little classical because I took piano lessons and I had to —

ANDERSON: Well, did you like the women's music?

ACEY: Well, I did in the beginning, because I was coming out, I didn't know it. So it was like, you know, Holly Near, "Imagine My Surprise!" Then Diana Ross, "I'm Coming Out," you know, I was lip syncing all the time. So there was CARASA and New York Women Against Rape, and then I developed a crush on somebody, and I finally was able to, kind of, after months and months of discussions with my friend, who was like, If you don't do this I'm going to kill myself. It's like, I'm going to ask her. So we were off and running. I kind of came out and

was going through that process in the late '70s but by '80 I was out, but it was out in a very personal way, it wasn't political.

And so then, being in CARASA and New York Women Against Rape, and then that was my coming out relationship. But then at the time, I was very involved with New York Women Against Rape, and so was the woman who I eventually ended up with for a number of years, Stephanie Roth, who was the co-director with Sandra Camacho eventually. Sandra died a number of years back, in her forties, of ovarian cancer. You know, involved and met many friends. If I start to mention people, I'm going to leave them out, but so many people that are, like, part of my life today.

Within CARASA, within New York Women Against Rape, there was a very strong lesbian presence, a very radical presence. There was a very strong women of color presence, even more so in New York Women Against Rape than CARASA. It was a time when there was a lot of struggle internally in the women's movement, but particularly in grassroots women's groups that were mixed racially and sexually, because the women of color and the lesbians were coming into their own in terms of articulating this, of how to make these organizations more responsive and driven by those things.

So then there were caucuses, and that's where I began to develop a feminist analysis and identity, and in a very — you know, much more articulate. I think in some ways I was probably always a feminist and maybe a lesbian. I could see where it was both the combination of exposure and openness and being able to just be more expansive, that I began to see those things as options, and to be able to act on them. So that's why I always say I came to my feminism late. Really, it came out of more of racial and class identity and experience, and had that analysis.

10:00

I was very fortunate to be grounded in some theory when I went to college, you know, even in a Catholic girls' college. But it was a big struggle then, because here I was, I was dealing with sexual identity, racial politics and identity, and also kind of just figuring out that transition. In a way, I was coming into my own, but I didn't belong anywhere. It was being in that place of confusion and just a lot of turmoil.

And then, I also, you know, in this whole period — late '70s, into the early '80s — a lot of turmoil in my life: political, personal. I bought this house with a friend. I could barely do it. If she hadn't pushed, I wouldn't be here and be in the position I'm in. My mother died suddenly. I was in my first long-term women's relationship. So it was like, Boom! And then I was starting a new job at the North Star Fund. It's kind of when I got into philanthropy, in '82. My mother died in '83. I came out essentially in '80.

ANDERSON: Did you come out to your family?

ACEY: No.

ANDERSON: No.

ACEY: My sister. I came out to my sister, and I kind of came out to my mother. I mean, she knew we were going to have a discussion. Because it was very personal at first, it wasn't political. I needed to kind of move through that. So she knew. I knew that she knew, and I think she knew that I knew that she knew, but we talked around it. We had set a time that she and I were going to just spend some days together, because a lot of times my sister and I would go up there and there would be a lot of family stuff. And we were going to have some time. I said, "Mom, I really want to spend some time with you." We were going to do that in June, and she died in May.

ANDERSON: Oh my God. What did she die from?

ACEY: She went into the hospital to have a gallbladder operation, and they screwed up basically.

ANDERSON: Wow. That must have turned your world upside down.

ACEY: I was pretty turned upside down. My father, my sister, my aunts, my uncles. I just felt like my heart had been ripped out, that life would never be the same again. I didn't even know if I could survive. And I think, you know, my father having the heart attack a month later, and the doctors telling us that he may die, and then telling us, Well, he's going to come through this but don't expect him to live much longer than a couple of years. He's very, very damaged.

So it took me a very long time to move through my mother. I mean, I think in some ways I'm still doing it, but I mean, I'm talking at least ten years for me to kind of come through it in a way that I felt like it wasn't sitting there every moment. (inaudible) For my father and my sister too. Really, my mother was the — I loved people, I was loved, I am loved. I'm very aware of it, I'm very grateful. And my mother — there was something — you know, her mother and then her. I think they were the people, somehow, that I felt got me.

ANDERSON: Go ahead.

ACEY: So I'm going through this whole, like, evolution: internal, external. I'm very active. Once I came out, I knew there was no turning back, and I was like, This is it. But it took me some time to put it together politically, like, how that fit into my political — I mean, it wasn't hard or anything. People are people and any injustice is wrong, but to really have an analysis and a deeper understanding that I could take from the personal and really integrate into my analysis and my work and how I moved in the world.

15:00

ANDERSON: And what tools helped you to do that?

ACEY: You know, I think –

ANDERSON: Was there any literature?

ACEY: Well, when I was coming out, I read every single novel or book that was out there. I mean, I was like a sponge. I love to read anyway, and I am a pretty quick reader. Even when my life is completely turned upside down, I still read. Sometimes I get away from it, but mostly it's one of the things that I've always loved to do. And so there was the reading.

I was very fortunate to be in the different study groups, but also CARASA and New York Women Against Rape. There were many meetings, there were lesbian caucuses, women of color caucuses, and that's where I really was able to come to an understanding around my own racial identity and racial politics that were not framed only in black and white. It also moved me eventually to have more discussions within my family, because, you know, some of my family identified as people of — Everybody identifies with whatever they are — ethnicity — but some see themselves as people of color and some don't. But I began to be able to enter discussions with my family in a different way. Even my dad, you know, I'd say, "Talk to me about being Lebanese. When you grew up, how did that feel, you know?" He was often mistaken as Italian in his era. (dog barking)

ANDERSON: All right, so we were talking about, you were talking with your father and a different understanding of race in your family.

ACEY: Right. I began to be able to have more discussions and to get this kind of — out of myself and my own internal turmoil — to try to figure it out. I think in that period — coming out, coming into feminist politics, understanding racial identity in a different way, with clarity — that was all informed by the groups I was in and the people I was talking with and meeting. Although the internal evolution around it for me was still very personal, but now it was tied to something that made sense, more sense.

I think of everything. It was all exhilarating and just kind of liberating, but particularly the racial politics and identity was very, very painful. I recall in the early '80s, I had already started North Star. I had been asked in an interview, like, how I identified racially, and I was really taken aback. I kind of froze up, and then I said, "Well, white." So I was still working on this white/black, and now I have to choose. Well, I knew I wasn't black, but I knew that more strongly than I knew I wasn't white. I felt like, I've got to give an answer. And I had been living my life, you know, like, in this confused state but also, when push came to shove, I was white.

ANDERSON: Right, if those are the only two categories. Yeah.

ACEY: So while I felt excited about my feminist politics, I was like, Well, hey, what took you so long? Same with the lesbian stuff, but I didn't feel like I had deep shame. I felt some shame and embarrassment — well, look how long it took me — but I was also very proud of what I am. I'd been an activist, I'd been very political, so I had a better understanding of how that built and opened up for me. The racial stuff I felt a lot of shame about, that I came to that clarity much later, and it caused a lot of conflict with some relationships.

ANDERSON: How so?

ACEY: Political relationships. Once I was able to work this out and I understood this concept of people of color and that Arab people fell into that, and that there were other people trying to figure (inaudible).

It was funny because constantly — as I said earlier — there was this assumption that I was a Latina. Now, when I got into the women's movement, into these grassroots community groups, there weren't just black caucuses and Latina caucuses, there were people of color caucuses. It was constantly like, you know, Are you coming to the meeting? Or, Where were you at the meeting? So I started going to these women of color or lesbian of color caucuses, and I was very welcomed, and often the only Arab. But then I began to feel, Well, do they think I'm Latina? And then I began to talk about this stuff in these groups and got a lot of support and understanding, but here in this other life over here, working at the North Star Fund, I had put myself white, even though they were like, What is she talking about?

So as I began to feel, like, more anchored and have a deeper understanding and be able to talk about this a little more in what I felt were safer places with other women of color and sometimes straights. I began to, like, Okay, this is where I belong, this is who I am. Now I have a frame for it in a different way. So then it was about, different people are going to assume I'm white, I'm Latina, I'm this and that, and now I have to take this on for me, that I've lived with this anxiety and this conflict all this time. But there wasn't consensus in my family, there wasn't consensus in political groups, then there was this whole progressive philanthropy.

I'll never forget — I was at a conference — the day I walked into a people of color caucus for the first time with colleagues who I was not necessarily having these discussions with. And two of them were just furious with me, extremely furious, which I understood later. I hadn't engaged with them and I just showed up. So we had to have long talks.

ANDERSON: Why were they furious?

ACEY: Because they felt that I had taken on this identity of a white person and that I had named it myself, you know, going back to that interview, and

20:00

then all of a sudden, here I am. And they weren't aware of all these other places that I was in dialogue, in action, being a part of. So that took time to talk that through and for them to be less angry, and I think eventually not angry and understand — for me to understand how they might feel and to, you know, not be arrogant, and at the same time, I'm trying to stake my ground and be where I felt I needed to be and what I really felt inside of me. And to know that there was, you know, that I had skin privilege and all other kinds of ways of passing, even though in a lot of settings, I don't pass at all. But I was also so very alone, because in the women's movement and in the queer movement, there were not a lot of Arab lesbians.

ANDERSON: Yeah, I was going to say.

ACEY: So I was often in lesbian of color or women of color spaces, but often, then, the only one there. And that began to change and has totally evolved in the last ten years, like from the '90s. Totally. We're still a minority, but it's still much more visible.

ANDERSON: Right.

ACEY: And I think that began to inform my, you know. So here I am this radical, and now I've got the feminism and the lesbian, and so for me — It's like we use this word today, *intersectionality*, but it's like, I feel like myself as a person and politically came together fully in the early '80s, and I've never looked back in terms of how all of that gets integrated not just to me as a person but into my politics, no matter what I'm doing, where I am, what the issue is, what the group is.

It's very satisfying but also filled with a lot of — still — pain and questions. And what I mean by that is, because I feel like, even in 2007, we still have to struggle for this really integrated — the integrated person and the integrated politics. It's like, you've got to be either this or that if you're going to fight for this issue. It's like, how do you take — we're all, I think, still learning how to take the lived experience and the political analysis, whatever you lead with, whatever, and to put it together.

25:00

Working at Astraea for the past 20 years, I'm totally supportive of lesbians, queer women, trans people. It is part of my life, my politics, who I am. Astraea is a place where that's the constituency we work from, but what's allowed me to be — I think one of the many things it's allowed me, but I think the most important thing that's allowed me to stay at Astraea so long, is that Astraea has been a place, an institution with founding mothers, and everyone who's come through — where the highest value is to have this overarching social, racial, economic justice frame, the intersectionality, and to try to work with it — work it, be it. It's not easy, but that's been, I think, the anchor, because I think I could have gone to a women's organization or an Arab organization or a

housing organization. That would have been still something to take and honor, but Astraea has really — is grounded in that.

It's interesting, because I think from the outside, sometimes people see it as narrow, because if you say lesbian, you say queer, it's like, Well, okay, you have a narrow focus, rather than, This is the community you focus with, but your frame, your politics, how you integrate them, how you practice them, is so much bigger than any one group of people.

ANDERSON: We have a lot to talk about with Astraea, but I just want to back up a little bit. Out of that feeling of isolation within women of color groups, did you then start to seek out Arab women? Were there Arab women's organizations at that time? How did you find that kind of a community?

ACEY: I don't know if I found them or they found me. A few things happened. Now we're moving more towards the later '80s. I'm grounded in the women's community, in women of color, lesbian of color friendships and political associations and groups. I think I'm providing some leadership in those areas, with those groups. I had always been involved, at least in thinking if not in practice, with international issues, and had been involved with particularly Central America. I've been part of the board of MADRE and traveled, started to travel internationally in the mid to late '80s. And then I got involved in Palestinian human rights, and I was very involved in the Palestine Solidarity Committee, and eventually got elected to the national executive committee as an out lesbian. That was terrifying. So that kind of brought me to another place. I'm not Palestinian, but there were many Arabs, as well as others, involved in this work. So I began to get exposed, rather than from my family and church, now to a political community that identified as Arab, and all the different ethnicities in that.

ANDERSON: Was that a hard place to be as a lesbian?

ACEY: It was scary. My closest political friends — Palestinians and others — but two of the leaders of the group knew and it was never a question. When I ran for this election, I knew I needed to do it as an out lesbian. I was scared. In fact, I remember sitting in the audience — because it was secret ballot — and there was a delay in the balloting, so I thought for sure that this was about me. Of course, how could it not be about me? I remember perspiration on my lip, and just that anxiety and that, like, where your heart stops and like, They're just going to tell me. And it was, like, totally not about me. I don't even remember.

Was there homophobia? Well, yeah. But was I respected and supported? Yeah. But like many other progressive or left groups, even ones that have a lot of queers in them, I think, still today in 2007 — and I actually said this in a meeting of colleagues recently, a small group, a mix of national leaders. I said, you know, I felt a lot of personal support, and people feel support, straight or queer support, but they

30:00

don't get it in that very visceral gut. So if you don't get it in your gut, when you talk about it and you try to incorporate in your analysis, it doesn't always kind of work, and that I really felt for progressives, heterosexuals, they really needed to take a good look at that. And I, for one, would be supportive, but that I still felt that I'm often, even in very politically conscious organizations — whether it's philanthropy or other groups that are not queer — that I still often, I see where others often have to raise the issue around sexuality and gender expression and identity. It just gets left out of the language or people assume, Well, it's there, but we're still in an era where you have to say it.

ANDERSON: And don't you feel the same way about the Arab stuff too?

ACEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: In terms of people of color caucuses and organizations?

ACEY: Yeah, and even in the women's movement. The women's movement — And I've been part of a group where we held the first, what we believed to be one of the first — there'd been other Palestinian women's organizations — but the first national gathering of Arab and Arab American women who identify either indirectly or directly as feminists. We worked for three years to bring something together in Chicago.

ANDERSON: When was that?

ACEY: A year ago June, and we were all volunteers. And even in the new women's movement, we're very aware that there were two — and then just me — Arab women. And some of that's about, where are Arab women in the U.S., and where is that movement within the women's movement, or separately? Some of it is about where Arab women are organizing and putting their political — and where their voices are and how they have been stifled, either by our communities in some way and/or by the women's movement. I think, in a very ironic way, immigration, as well as 9/11, has kind of raised the consciousness — not obviously in a good way necessarily — of Arab Americans. So that's a story that needs to keep unraveling, and I think we will see, some time in the next five years, a more visible organized presence of Arab and Arab American women.

ANDERSON: What happened at that conference last year?

ACEY: I think there was great enthusiasm. It was very intergenerational, very multiethnic within the Arab communities, very global in perspective, even though we were very clear that this was only for Arab and Arab Americans in the United States. I mean, if somebody came — but we weren't outreaching all over the world. It was a small gathering, probably about 150 people, but it was the beginning of something

different. There are a lot of different listservs — both Arab and lesbian networks, Arab feminists, academics — but there's not a physical ongoing interaction or organizing that's easily identifiable. So what happened there was, I think, a spark was set. I think people felt, Oh my God, I've never been in something like this; I feel like I have come home. You know, that feeling of coming home, when all the pieces of you begin to come together.

ANDERSON: Did you feel that way?

ACEY: Yeah, I did, I did. I did very much. It's hard for me because I'm so overextended and overwhelmed. I would love to put my energies there but I can't right now, and so I've needed to step back from that. You know, just prior to the last push of that gathering, my father died. My father died in April, this gathering was in June. I was kind of shell shocked, and so I experienced deep feelings and deep connection but I was still –

35:00

ANDERSON: You were a little numb.

ACEY: Right.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: At the closing, they asked two of us who had been involved in movement and in politics for many years. One woman — very, very grounded in the Arab and Arab American community — solidarity stuff — for us to kind of talk and kind of do that summary and talk about the opportunities and the challenges in our own experiences. Very different, you know. She wasn't — our political (inaudible), but we'd known each other from the Palestine solidarity work, so.

ANDERSON: Do you see something like a formal organization or something like that growing out of it, or do you think it will be a loose network? What do you think the vision is for it?

ACEY: Well, I think the vision is all over the place. I think, mentally, many of us see some kind of loose network, and there is a very loose, loose network. And for others of us, we felt, you know, some day it would be great if there could be an organization. There seems to be a need for one. What we see is that Arab women need to form an identity together, not around identity politics, because even this gathering was very — you know, a lot of stuff around sexuality, trans people.

I was so proud of my sisters, I have to tell you, because of some of the ways we organized around this. We had starts and stops, we were all volunteers, we were all over the country. The genesis of trying to do this grew out of an insight conference that many of us were at. We had many retreats, you know, with our vision planning. We had a big, big

vision; we had to narrow it down. First we were imagining 500 people. It took us almost three years to get from when we first started to talk about it, plan together. We were a group of lesbians and heterosexual women. We were all feminist. So we had some grounding with each — Many of us knew each other, but there were people who didn't know each other. There was always somebody [who] somebody didn't know. So we had a lot of relationship already, we had some commonalities, but we also had some tensions.

One of the approaches we took is that we went to different communities to talk, where there were more organized Arab women. I remember being in one community in the Midwest, and all these Arab women had come, anywhere from their early twenties into their sixties and seventies. We were talking about what we were trying to do, we wanted to be in dialogue, respect that they had been working in their communities. It might have been social services or the Arab Cultural Center or Palestine Human Rights, and what were we about and why did we want this gathering. We were developing a vision statement that was very feminist, very out there about sexuality, who was in the group, and who was doing this.

But we had to come out again, and it sparked a lot of discussion, and some people ended up not coming to the gathering, but we got much more support. Then we also decided that we had to have a trans policy, and then we had to explain in all our literature what we meant by trans and transgender, and why there will be, you know, gender neutral bathrooms. I mean, it's like, with all of that, we still brought in some of the older people. So I was very proud. We have a program book that —

So my hope is that, over the next months and years, something will evolve into an organization, a dynamic organization. I really feel that Arab women are not integrated into the women's movement. I think there are certain women of color groups that are welcoming, but that it's an invisible population. Some of that has to do with our own dynamics and where we are as a community and all of its diversity, but unless we can develop a place, a core. How should I say it? A power base, of which, then, to be part of but also pushing against, not just the women's movement, but even in our communities.

40:00

ANDERSON: Do you want to talk about North Star? Was that a pivotal experience for you in terms of getting into your work with Astraea? I mean, you tell me. I don't really know much about your tenure at North Star and how important that was to you.

ACEY: I'm celebrating 25 years in progressive feminist public foundation philanthropy. I never thought I would be at Astraea this long, or that I would spend 25 years in the field of philanthropy per se. I kind of came to philanthropy and this work through the back door. I was transitioning from one job, and Michael Seltzer, who is a very good friend — a gay man who thinks of himself as a lesbian — has been involved himself for many more years than I in progressive philanthropy. He'd been part of

the People's Community Foundation in Philadelphia, one of the oldest public foundations within the Funding Exchange. That's not their name anymore. He and I were in the same offices. He was a consultant. I was working at another nonprofit at the time and beginning to look for a job, and he said, "You should check out this North Star thing." And I was like, Yeah, yeah. So I applied. What attracted me to North Star was, I didn't think about it as, Oh, it's a foundation. I thought, Oh, they work with all these grassroots political groups in New York City. And I didn't even know then about the national structure. So it became very appealing. It was like, Wow!

ANDERSON: Was it a program officer job? I can't remember.

ACEY: You know, it was a collective back when they hired me. I forget my initial title, I kind of have to look back, but eventually, we had moved to a more hierarchical structure, in a sense, and I became the associate director. Marsha Bonner, who had been there before me and been doing the work, became the director; I was associate director. Two of the guys that were there and had been there — one of the founders of North Star, Toby D'Oench — I just went to a North Star event recently where he was honored. He's a lawyer now.

ANDERSON: So it was a collective model at the time.

ACEY: It was more of a collective. There were people who had more experience, had been there longer. I was actually hired to take over some of the functions of this other colleague, John, who was still there. We overlapped for a few months, and he ran the grantmaking program. But everybody did fundraising at North Star at that time. So you had different areas of responsibility and coordination, but then you did other things. So I was basically trained to take over the grants program — to coordinate that — but also to do fundraising, which I did. I was there for five years and I had no intentions of leaving. At the same time, I was on the board of Astraea, and we were an all-volunteer organization.

ANDERSON: Were you on the board of Astraea from the beginning, or no?

ACEY: No.

ANDERSON: Not one of the founding mothers, okay.

ACEY: No, no, I was not there from the beginning. They started talking about Astraea and having meetings in the late '70s. I think '77, '78 is when they actually said, Okay, this is the Astraea Foundation, made their first grants — we go by fiscal years — I think '77/'78.

Through a number of things, which we can talk about, Astraea decided it needed to grow, and part of growing would be to hire staff. I became interested in the concept of being the director, and then there

were some board members who, knowing that I had been at North Star, they were like, What about you? So I took a leave of absence from Astraea during this process to think about whether I was going to apply, and then once I applied, to get off the board.

It was a big decision, because I really — I was very into my job at North Star. We were part of a national network. It introduced me to progressive philanthropy, not just the Funding Exchange, and not just the fundraising. I began to learn more and more about the various movements in New York City and the country. I'd known about it, but it wasn't — Like the labor movement. There was a lot of organizing also in Asian American communities around any number of issues. Housing. I knew about the housing because, actually, when I came to New York, my internship was in grassroots organizing in housing way out in Brooklyn. What was the name of it? I'll think of it. I had a great mentor — organizer, very political, you know. We were in a storefront. So it just brought in all this new experience and information and people. I loved the grantmaking, I loved the connecting nationally, the sense of international solidarity work, because that's what it was really then — solidarity work.

So it was a big decision to leave North Star and go to Astraea, but I did it. In Astraea's office, actually we shared space with New York Women Against Rape. We had one office, and actually, in that first year that I left, it was upstairs from North Star and the Funding Exchange, because we were together with the national office, and then eventually we came downstairs and we were on the same floor, until we moved to our space that we've been at for eleven years now. So I've always maintained a connection to North Star and to the Funding Exchange, both a personal one as well as — you know, they're part of our vast network of progressive and feminist foundations.

45:00

ANDERSON: Right. You talked a little bit about the conflict around race at North Star. Was being an out lesbian okay at North Star in that time?

ACEY: It was okay. North Star and the whole Funding Exchange — there were other lesbians and gay people throughout the Funding Exchange network, so it wasn't, you know. At that time, I was the only — in the beginning — the only lesbian on the staff of North Star, but we were also housed with the national office, where there was another lesbian, Lynn Campbell, who, with Michael Seltzer, had been trying to raise the level of consciousness, not only within the Funding Exchange but throughout progressive philanthropy, around LGBT issues. At that time it was lesbian and gay issues.

ANDERSON: Right, right.

ACEY: But I feel there — at North Star and Funding Exchange — all the progressives, though not just them — So while there were people on staff, people on the boards, in the community funding panels — that

lesbian groups or queer groups are being supported, that it was part of an analysis. I didn't feel like it was a deep analysis or a deep acceptance. The North Star part of all those Funding Exchange funds brought in people from all the communities: political communities, racial justice. People came in with all kinds of political, ethnic, racial, sexual orientation identities. So in the early '80s, it wasn't as integrated. It was talked about, it was there on the list. You know, it felt like it was more part of a list. So a group of us — of queers and straight people, very racially mixed — actually took on doing education within the network.

ANDERSON: This is the LGBT Funders Network?

ACEY: No, this the Funding Exchange, within. So we took on — you know, we took it outside, but we took on with our colleagues homophobia, heterosexism. You know, politically people were saying they're supportive, this is something we're taking on, but how was it actually playing out in organizations, in the grantmaking, in the analysis?

ANDERSON: Right.

ACEY: It was one of those things where the dialogue started at a different place, and people were open to the dialogue, but there was also a lot of resistance and difference, and so it became a kind of political education for everybody.

ANDERSON: How did you move from — It sounds like you were, sort of, more a lesbian feminist — and I don't mean that as a capital *L*, capital *F* — but lesbian world and a feminist world. How did you move into more of a queer, LGBT world and into your politics and your identity? What was that process like?

50:00

ACEY: That's a good question, because I really entered the queer world as a lesbian focused on lesbians, and not unconnected to — Again, it was lesbian and gay, but there was always, under the radar, the bi and the trans, and later on the intersex and two spirit, you know, all those things that a number of groups have adopted in terms of their identities.

So early on, being part of Astraea, I got invited to certain things that were LGBT: meetings, national meetings of the executive directors, creating change conferences. Also, as time went on at Astraea, it was like, lesbians and lesbians of color in particular, and now lesbians of color and trans people of color in recent years, are our priorities in terms of funding. But we fund LGBTI groups when there is some kind of feminist analysis and practice, and there are definitely lesbians and women and trans people in leadership. So it kind of got built, and, of course, doing this work, you come in contact, you form relationships, you do groups. You know, it's mixed, and so that's how I became more

involved with the queer movement as a whole, but I entered it really as a lesbian in an organization that was focused on lesbians.

ANDERSON: Did you take on the identity of queer, to use that language, for yourself, or do you still feel more comfortable with lesbian? How has your language changed?

ACEY: That's been changing the last couple of years, I think. I identify as a lesbian. I often use that language. I find myself saying *queer* more. At first, I was not comfortable with it, or completely comfortable with it. I also try to really be sensitive to who's the audience I'm talking to, so that I'm talking a language. You know, it's like, when you talk a language your audience understands — whether it's one-on-one or a room of several hundred people — or you're very purposeful because you want to introduce a new word and a concept. So I kind of go back and forth, but initially I was not comfortable with *queer*. I was more comfortable saying *lesbian* when I meant lesbian, *lesbian and gay* when I meant lesbian and gay, LGBT. You know, it's like, more using the words that I meant and for the purpose. Now it kind of is more blended.

I have to think more about that too, because I realize that my behavior has changed. I think some of my thinking has changed. It's like, When are you being this? Also, within organizations — including Astraea — there's been an evolution about queer identity. There's folks on staff, on board, who may identify as woman or lesbian, or they may identify as a queer woman. There's so many things. So it's also about being expansive.

I felt initially — and I still have some reservations — that lesbian, to me, means something very concrete. I know it means something very different to other people, particularly some of the younger women. I don't buy into, The young women have given up lesbian. I think it's a little more nuanced than that. And at the same time recognizing a younger generation, or generations, are experiencing sexuality different and how they call themselves. I don't want to lose either, I want to try to honor both. So that's in process actually, but I still think of myself as a lesbian.

ANDERSON: I'm going to pause right there.

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4

ACEY: — for my 20th anniversary celebration [at Astraea], October tenth, in case you're in New York.

ANDERSON: Oh, I'll make a point of being there. What are you going to do?

ACEY: Well, they're not telling me too much, but it's like a celebration fundraiser. It's a fundraiser, of course. It's going to be at this lovely space. 1199 [Conference Center] has this penthouse event space on 42nd or 43rd.

ANDERSON: Great. Is that a weekend?

ACEY: No, I think it's during the week.

ANDERSON: Great, okay. Sounds good.

ACEY: I want to say a Thursday, but it could be a Wednesday. Okay, let's go.

ANDERSON: Let's go, yeah. Two very exhausted, stressed out people doing one more hour of taping. Really, we're going just to talk about Astraea for this hour. Just to remind both of us, we got to sort of the end of North Star and how you ended up at Astraea, so we don't need to sort of recap how you got there. Let's talk about what it was like when you were first there — you were the first staff person — how you created a vision and an organization from scratch, and what your goals for it were in the early days, 20 years ago.

ACEY: Okay. Well, you know, I'm not a founding mother. Astraea was started in the late '70s by a wonderful group of lesbian feminists.

ANDERSON: Do you remember who all of them were?

ACEY: I remember many of the names. I'd have to have that in front of me. Certainly Nancy Dean was the catalyst, I believe. There was the first board, but then they were surrounded by other women who were supporting the whole idea of starting a women's foundation that supported the idea — even though it was not publicly articulated, beyond certain circles, that they were all lesbians. I mean, I think they started to talk about the idea in the mid- to late '70s, since Astraea was created in '77, gave its first grants '77/'78. So Nancy Dean, Achebe Powell, formerly known as Betty Powell. Joyce Hunter was on that first board. Leslie — her last name is escaping me, she's an architect. Joan Watts. A number of other people that were on the first board, and then, as I said, many others that they were surrounded by, supporting them.

Astraea was, I think, really the third — actually the fourth women's foundation to be founded. Now there's over 120 all over the

world. At that time Ms. [Foundation for Women] was already established; a foundation in Philadelphia; and a very small fund called the Barbara Deming Fund. And then Astraea started. Then a few years later, into the '80s, more women's foundations started up in other parts of the country.

ANDERSON: Right.

ACEY: There was also one in Europe called Mama Cash, which is still thriving. They're based in the Netherlands.

So I actually was on the Astraea board; I believe in around '83, I went on the board. Then in '87, we began to expand. The Women's Funding Network — it had been formed in the mid '80s — which we were a part of, creating a network of women's funds. So we decided we needed to expand, and part of that expansion and thinking bigger was to hire staff. So I had experience in a public foundation, and I was encouraged to apply for the job; but also, I was very attracted to trying to take Astraea to the next level. I never dreamed it would be 20 years. I just celebrated, this month — July — my 20th anniversary as executive director.

So I was the first staff person hired, and we shared — We had a little office space within the offices of New York Women Against Rape, which is basically in the same building that I had been working in at North Star and the Funding Exchange — so still in the same spot. And we used to joke that the office was so small that when volunteers and, eventually, other staff came — our desks were back to back — we'd have to announce when we were going to stand up because our chairs would bump up against each other.

In those early days, I think we were very ambitious. We were a regional foundation at the time. We funded grassroots women's groups, including cultural projects in film video. The grants were small: they could be five hundred, a thousand, two thousand. We had a newsletter. The board did everything. The board wrote the newsletter, made the grants, did the fundraising. So when I came on, it was to try to grow that and systematize it. So it was exciting.

5:00

ANDERSON: And you didn't have much development experience before that, did you?

ACEY: I had some, because at North Star, while I ran the grantmaking program, everybody on staff at North Star fundraised. We all had major donors and other donors to fundraise from. So I got that experience at North Star, and I thought it was a great model to follow. While you might have an emphasis on your job, everybody did fundraise, and even those that were doing more fundraising were involved in grantmaking. So it was a good integration of the functions, because in the field of progressive feminist queer philanthropy, where you have a public foundation where you're fundraising and grantmaking, one informs the

other, and I've really followed that philosophy now for 25 years. I think it's a very important philosophy, so that you don't get compartmentalized. You have to have an emphasis, and somebody's got to be there managing the grants program and managing all the fundraising activities, and Astraea communications, and then the internal systems. But it's very important to have that integration, so that everybody understands the big picture as best possible and how what they're doing really — if we're trying to make social change — how that informs the other.

So in the early years, there was just me and then some part-time folks, and then we started to expand into more staff. Also, around 1990, we felt we needed to make some leaps. We saw that there was still, even in 1990, a huge gap. Not just a funding gap in terms of the lesbian community, but an invisibility. Lesbians were really leaders in the women's movement, progressive movements, and the queer movements. There were some autonomous lesbian organizations. They were not getting the same kind of support. Then there were emerging, smaller, grassroots, significant groups, and we felt we needed to come out as an organization. It was in 1990 that we said, We need to put lesbian in the name for political reasons — to kind of draw our line in the sand, so to speak, but to take a stand, and not belligerently but boldly, proudly. And also, at that time, we felt a need to go national. Although we didn't have all the resources to do that, we felt it was important to kind of stake that ground, because we were getting requests from all over.

ANDERSON: Was there dissent among the board and staff about those two things?

ACEY: No. It was pretty much consensus. So in 1990 we basically went national and put lesbian in our name. We've always kept Astraea, but the name had been Astraea Foundation, then it was Astraea National Lesbian Action Foundation.

ANDERSON: Right.

ACEY: And now we're the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice. So there was consensus in 1990. We also, by that time, moved to a bigger office but in the same building. We took more space than we needed, so we had some other nonprofit groups with us — a battered women's organization and an African American gay men's organization — and we just started to build.

We also, at that time, separated the functions of a board of directors and established what we call our community funding panels, which is a model used within the Funding Exchange network of funds, and I had been at North Star. It was a model that was not foreign to Astraea, because the board was a group of women who were activists in many different ways and fields — you know, an activist broadly

defined. So it wasn't a stretch for us to establish a community funding panel, so the board could focus on fundraising and strategic direction.

So we did that and then also — because we didn't have the resources to make the board completely a national board. We were, at that time, meeting every month, then we moved to every other month, but then the panels would meet once or twice a year. So there was a way to involve more people in the decision making and in the programs, and, at the same time, have this board.

10:00

And now our board is completely national, and we're about to start another strategic plan. We're going to look at, given that we have an international grants program, where we're funding in the Global South and East, that we would have — the board perhaps needs to reflect. There's no philosophical reason not to do it, it's resources. Again, resources come up all the time, so we're faced with many tough decisions. Many things are important, but we're constantly having to prioritize in terms of how much time we have, but also how much money.

When I went to Astraea in '87, our budget was around \$50,000, and it grew, you know, it kind of doubled for the first few years. Going into this fiscal year, our budget is \$4.5 million, and we'll be giving about half away in grants.

We also work very closely with grantee partners. We've got a lot of new programs. I'm excited about all of them — the ones we still have — but also we initiated, this past year, a movement-building, multi-year grantmaking program, and this is where we can give larger grants to groups in the U.S. We've been doing that through another program internationally, but in the U.S., it was just initiated this past year. So it's groups that we've been working with, and as we get resources, and as this program evolves, it may be also groups we haven't — grantee partners who are themselves emerging, doing incredible organizing and policy work and advocacy work. We now have the capacity, through different funding streams, to give them multi-year grants of \$50,000 a year for three years — at least three years — and we're also initiating this program where we're bringing them together so they can strategize and do skills building among them — and that will happen this fall.

So that's very exciting, because we're looking at that as, How do we impact the queer movement? These groups work, in many instances, across movements, but with a queer identity. I use [the word] *queer* now. I never used to.

ANDERSON: Yeah, we talked about that a little bit last time, the different changes in language.

ACEY: Our focus at Astraea — in terms of our grantmaking programs and constituencies — are lesbians of color and trans people of color. We prioritize and feel those are the least resourced. And the political dynamics and oppression that surround those groups is complicated,

when you look at the intersections of so many — I want to say issues, but it's about people's lived experience — as women, as transgender identity, as people of color, as young people, older. So we have tried to take and prioritize where many of our resources go.

And we also fund LGBTI organizations who have a feminist perspective — whether they use the word or not — and have a gender perspective but also look at issues of race and class and that analysis. Because so many of the groups that we work with are faced with that on the ground, and those groups tend to be invisible, just like in the broader culture, in society, the groups — whatever their sexual orientation or identity — it's the same experience.

ANDERSON: How have you done the capacity building and the education internally, to be able to get to that philosophy about your grantmaking?

ACEY: First of all, Astraea's core values have stayed the same over these 30 years. We're celebrating 30 years. I'm 20, and Astraea is 30, and that, to me, is the bigger anniversary, because it just — That we have survived, that we've grown, is very important. That — in the growth — that we have really stayed committed to the core values. Because sometimes you can grow, and it can slip away from you here and there. We're not perfect, but we do try to do things with some kind of intentionality. So I think, in terms of the evolution, a lot has been influenced by those core values, but also that the people who step into leadership roles — I'm talking about myself, I'm talking about key board members, key staff, who keep helping to push on and kind of influence how we walk the talk.

15:00

So of course there's — When you make a change — and even with the inclusion of trans people, in terms of the inclusion in the grant-making program and elevating trans people as a priority, particularly trans people of color, there was not any big dissent or tension. There was an exploration, a curiosity to understand. I think when you get some of us who are older — and we're used to a certain way of thinking, and also, who have taken on an identity of lesbian — to try to understand this from a broader gender perspective — not gender as female or male.

So there's been more of a curiosity, because I think the instinct of staff and board at Astraea, and also those more intimately involved, and even our donors and our grantees, has been to do the right thing, to think, and to see this in a broader perspective. So the experience of putting some new programs in place has gone rather smoothly. As I said, not without some bumps. There certainly is more education we need to do internally, and to externalize that, not only around trans people but around other constituencies that we feel we could do better where there's invisibility. I think the disabilities communities is one area that I feel we have room for growth. (dog barking) Isa! Isa!

ANDERSON: What do you want to do? Do you want to pause?

ACEY: All right, did you pause? I think we're about to start, this fall, a strategic plan. So we will be looking at key issues. I think they're organizational issues, but they're political issues at the core. So the board composition — you know, the international issue. Also, the board has been pretty much lesbians or queer women. That's kind of evolved.

ANDERSON: Do you have a mandate about filling categories around race or gender or sexual —

ACEY: Yes, and we've always — From the very beginning, Astraea's board — It's part of the bylaws that at least 50 percent of the board must be women of color, and there must be diversity in that. Pretty much, that mandate's always been filled. We've never wavered from that, but the percentage is much higher — 60, 70, 75 percent sometimes, women of color. And on the board we also look for geographic diversity and people with different kinds of experiences.

So when we talk about diversity, it's more all the manifestations of it. It's more about inclusion too. So, for example, if we find ourselves — You know, boards — there could be some attrition and turnover and tenures filled — so there are some times when we find ourselves — For example, the board might be one-third women in their twenties, and then all of a sudden there's no women in their twenties. So you're always having to look and see who's at the table. Is there representation of perspectives there?

ANDERSON: Right.

ACEY: Because no one or few people can represent so many. There is that kind of consciousness and self-awareness.

ANDERSON: How would you say Astraea's evolved around the issue of race over the last 20 years? What are the conflicts and the struggles, the challenges that you've had around race? Even though it's been so central, and even though it's been led by women of color for 20 years, it can't have always been smooth or simple.

ACEY: The issues of race — if you only look at diversity, then you're not really looking at race. So for us, it's been about, not just diversity, but how are we practicing antiracism throughout? What does that look like? What kind of internal education do we need to be doing? How do we talk about race? How do we understand racism? How do we understand the context of the U.S.? And for Astraea it's, how do we understand the context globally? Because cultures are so different, and how race is constructed in different cultures outside of the United States is different — although, personally, I feel there's racism all over the world.

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And then also, when you have diversity and inclusion, race looks different, even within different communities of color here. And what does that look like, and what's the history of that, and how does that impact and influence relationships? And then also, when you have white women together with women of color, all those dynamics come up.

I think at Astraea there's a commitment — and I don't think we always take the time necessary to do the internal education, but we have and we'll continue to do that. But there's also, I think, an accountability among people in meetings and programs, so that it's become very integrated, not always perfect. Are there tensions at times? Yes. Are there areas where we need to deepen both our understandings and practices? Yes, but it's foremost.

ANDERSON: Can you give me an example of something that's happened that's been a pivotal movement in Astraea's reckoning around race and racism?

ACEY: Pivotal moment.

ANDERSON: A board meeting or a funding decision? Does any specific example come to mind when you think about it?

ACEY: It's a good question, a tough question. Well, I think there's always — certainly at the grantmaking level, we're pretty clear with our criteria as we fund groups, but we also try to engage with groups. So there are moments, I think, when, within the grant decision, talking about what our interpretation, our understanding of what another group is doing and how we see — You know, I don't think we're doctrinaire, but we do have these criteria. So I think there have been some discussions at the community funding panel that address this, and sometimes difference. You know, is this group engaging in a way that makes sense? And some people may feel a different range of things. An example might be, if a group is a multiracial group, but there's very few people of color in leadership — you know, what does that look like? How do we engage with them? We don't have this quota, it has to be X, but if there is not some evidence. So that can lead to some different kinds of discussion.

Sometimes it's just very clear cut. It's when you get into certain gray areas, or you're looking at certain regions of the country where there are smaller proportions of people of color communities. What is the expectation? Because then the expectation is not so much around who's at the table. I mean, some of that, but how are you taking on race? So how do we balance that with our criteria, our understanding?

But you have to be careful not to be arrogant in that, and I think we succeed for the most part. I think there have been a lot of deeper discussions when you're making those grants, because you want to be really fair to the groups, but at the same time, you have this bigger vision and sense of what it's going to take to change things.

I think, at the board level, whenever we're talking about a policy — because, you know, that's where a lot of the policy decisions get made. So it could be anything. How are we reaching out in terms of getting new members, to make sure that our membership is reflective of the communities we're working with, and not only, say, white women of means.

ANDERSON: Right.

ACEY: Right? And not to make assumptions that also lesbians of color, queer women of color — Our donor base is fairly broad. I would say the majority of the donors, probably — I'll take a guess — 80 percent are lesbians or queer women, but there's also heterosexual women, gay men, some straight men, who are supportive. So we look at how we're fundraising too, so that we think of people we're asking to support our programs and our mission as our constituency, and we want that to be an educated constituency in terms of us trying to express what we're doing, but also to have that inclusion there.

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I think — when we look at what kinds of events we do. You know, who's on the stage? When we are looking at an investment policy for our small endowment — we have an endowment now and it's grown to about \$3.9 [million], and we're hoping to launch another endowment some time in the next couple of years or sooner. Like, what do those investment policies look like not only around race but antimilitary, tobacco, those things?

So we're constantly, I think, looking at issues that are not just race but cross different issues. Corporate fundraising. Who will we fundraise from? What kind of social screenings? We will accept corporate money, but we always look at, What's that company represent? And nothing is pure.

I'm trying to think of some other policies where it comes up. I think where it comes up constantly — because we think about the constituencies we're serving, but we also think about this broader framework of social justice, which for us means racial, social, economic, gender justice. As I said, we make mistakes. We don't always do the right thing, not intentionally. Because there is a broad participation of board, staff, panels — there's a lot of things that come up and that we try to resolve.

I think, and you know — and I need to provide more leadership myself. I think that how we take on disability, the issues surrounding that kind of discrimination and oppression, invisibility — I think we could do more in that area, and we've been saying that for a number — It's not like we don't do anything, but I don't feel that we have truly integrated a politic and a practice, that then also is internal as well as external.

ANDERSON: Where does Astraea fit in the larger world of funding? What are your relationships like with the other progressive and feminist funders?

ACEY: It's interesting, because I'll often joke or we'll be planning — I think because of our political perspective, we feel we cross many funding networks and entities and groups — women, progressive, public charity, LGBTI. So it demands that we're in different places, and we're actually looking at how, in this next period, how we can focus and perhaps have more influence both in what we bring to the table and what we bring home from the table.

I think, in terms of women's philanthropy and progressive philanthropy and queer philanthropy, I feel, given our age, we've played a leading role. Astraea's a founding member of the Women's Funding Network. We are very involved. I and board members and other staff have served in leadership positions in the Women's Funding Network — the board, the conferences. I think we bring a perspective that is unique, shared in many ways by others, so I think we're respected.

I don't always feel, across the board, even with progressive public foundations, that people truly get the lesbian and LGBTI issues in a very deep, visceral way. People may like the work we're doing, they may like individuals. They may be, you know, giving (inaudible) the progressive or feminist, be very supportive. But I feel overall, collectively, in the foundation world and the world at large, there's still some work there to understand and prioritize, and I think even in the women's movement.

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It seems like many people think the issues are resolved. And so, say an issue that has a lot of publicity and work going behind it and media — say, marriage and civil unions — those are important issues, and we should have our rights. That's without getting into the different strategies and goals about getting there. Whatever you think about marriage, I think, bottom line, queers should have the same rights.

ANDERSON: I love that *Beyond [Same-Sex] Marriage* piece though.

ACEY: Yeah. I was a signer as an individual in the *Beyond Marriage* piece, which tries to both acknowledge and honor the work that's been done in the queer community and with allies about getting civil union and marriage rights. That agenda needs to be broadened and articulated. Even those that are fighting for marriage would say that they're for something more, but what you do strategically and tactically is also significant.

ANDERSON: Right.

ACEY: But without getting into that, I think that, you know, my point is more that I feel my colleagues in the funding world — While there's been progress in the 25 years I've been in philanthropy, it has been so slow and incremental. We are still seeing very little money going to lesbian and to LGBT groups in the U.S. and internationally, and particularly groups that have an intersectional analysis, particularly groups that are

smaller, particularly groups that are led by people of color or lesbian and trans. Particularly those groups. Now, is it every single one? No. Some groups get more attention. But overall, I feel that there is so — While we've had progress, there is not a deep, deep understanding about how you integrate that. But I think that's a reflection, also, of the progressive movement in the United States, in which I do see some evolution and kind of coming out of the doldrums and understanding how all these issues work together. Because they're not just issues, they're about people's lives, when you talk about racism and class and gender and identity and sexual orientation, sexism.

I was in a meeting recently with people I worked with for many years — a collaboration — and people who I know support equal rights and justice, because that's their focus. I felt the need to say, I don't feel, as a group and even beyond us, that people are really embracing in a deep way the issue of sexuality and LGBT human rights. I feel a lot of personal support, but that's very different than getting — particularly some of these leaders — to get it integrated in their programs and to be at tables, and to be talking about it, not from a list, not like, Oh, and we believe in the rights, but to be able to really articulate what it means to be queer in the United States, what it means to be a young, queer woman of color, and to have their programs and their missions kind of more reflect that. Maybe not their missions, but at least it was received.

But I find that, in doing this work still in 2007, I can be at some meetings that are progressive and talking about movement building with other funders, and still be the only queer in the room, still be the one that says, "Where are the queers here?" Not in the room but in the literature, in the program that's going to be put out, you know, from every different angle. It's exasperating, it's painful. I feel like it's my job too, but sometimes it's shocking. Once in a while, I'll still get that sick feeling in my stomach, Okay, I've got to speak up now — but you have to speak up, and I'm sure my colleagues are in these situations too. It's not just me. I'm kind of using my own experience, but I know my colleagues come back from meetings and conferences with similar experiences.

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ANDERSON: Do you feel a similar way when you're with LGBT funders, around talking about race or class? You know, is there one place the women's funders, the LGBT funders, where there is really shared understanding, you're not a lone voice? Or is it, no matter what group of colleagues, you're having to push something, some piece of this?

ACEY: There are other places that feel more like home, and I use that very — you know, where there is —

ANDERSON: And what are those places?

ACEY: They're more isolated than ongoing, and there are certain colleagues who I know get it, who are also running institutions — funding

institutions, private and public. But there's no one gathering, one network, one meeting that I feel that it's all there together. There are some places where I feel it's — I would say for the most part, I don't feel it's all there together in a consistent place. There are moments, there are some gatherings. I'm thinking of a couple of instances where there are enough people in the room that get it. It's not the whole group, but there's enough people in the room that get the intersectionality. Excuse me for using that term, but to try to get the interconnectedness of people's lives and how that works within oppression and a discrimination field, if you will, and how that means —

To me it's like, every single day of your life — you could be a white lesbian and poor; you could be a wealthy woman with a lot of privilege; you could be a person of color of any race — each day, you have to think about these issues. Each day it's got to be kind of a question and a challenge to yourself: How am I going to take this on? You can't take on every single thing, you can't have a fight every place you go, but how do you — If you want things to change, not only for yourself but for the people you love, the people you care about, the people you've never met. Like, how are you going to take this on in a way — personal, what's your personal commitment? So it's got to be a life — it's a life journey. And you just say, In order to make this world better, if I'm going to do anything, even influence a small group of people, then I have to take on all these things at once. I have to be doing self-education, I have to have curiosity, I have to act, I have to figure that out. It's hard but it's not, like, impossible.

ANDERSON: What gives you hope in that direction? I mean, you talked about the movement and stuff you're doing internally, which is very exciting and I think something that you're really going to be proud of. Do you also see other directions in the larger movement of philanthropy?

ACEY: I do, in philanthropy but also in the movements.

ANDERSON: Yeah. You don't have to separate them.

ACEY: Yeah. First of all, my feeling about philanthropy is a very ambivalent one.

ANDERSON: Say more.

ACEY: You say, Oh nice, you've spent the last 25 years doing it. But both North Star and Astraea, for me, are vehicles, they're tools. If either one were veering off a path of thinking of themselves as more than a tool, bigger than they are, more important than they are in the world of philanthropy — Philanthropy is there to serve, and to really be a reflection of where the movements are going. Philanthropy should not be directing or guiding. Now you have to have criteria that come out of

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how you think change can happen, and that need to be really transparent, but we're only a vehicle.

Those groups on the ground — and when I say on the ground, they could be organizing groups or they could be big national or international — and there's a difference, and I have a bias in some directions, but you need it all. There's a difference between the big national or internationals, that's what I'm saying. Those movements have to be self-determined. We're there to serve in the context of how can this money, these connecting people — We know a lot of groups. One of our responsibilities is to make sure they know each other. We can encourage them, we can have dialogue, but we're only a vehicle.

We talked earlier about Astraea's growth. So to me it's not simply about — it's not even about building the institution. We have to build the resources. So in some ways, you're building the institution, but if you're building the institution just to get bigger and you don't have a sense of what that's connected to, and humility about that, then I feel that you're not really helping to influence change. I'm not sure what your question was.

ANDERSON: Oh, about hope. What gives you hope in terms of movement building?

ACEY: What gives me hope? I think a few things. I feel what gives me hope is that, in terms of Astraea, what I said earlier — that we've been able to grow and maintain the core values has been very important. I'm always very conscious of the risk involved in doing that.

What gives me hope in terms of philanthropy? I see some of my colleagues really evolving and really trying to be a reflection of what's happening in different movements — the women's movement, the whole broader social justice, peace and justice, the immigration rights movement, housing. I mean, we just go on and on. Environmental justice, and all those different areas that impact people's lives, and plus what we're doing. I see that there's a better understanding among groups about how this all works together, and a struggle, more of a struggle, to make alliances and coalition, but that the analysis —

I feel like, for a long period, our analysis as progressives — we were kind of lazy, not very disciplined, what might have been struggling — So I see this kind of growing out of — not from progressive think tanks so much, but from the movements on the ground and the relationships building there. So that gives me hope. I see different communities taking power, taking initiative, and they are working together more. It gives me hope to see, in the queer community, that the leadership of people of color and women has not necessarily trickled up, but I see change even in some of the national groups. So those are the things that give me hope, and I'm just kind of a hopeful person, or why get up in the morning?

But I do see, from my own discussions — both on a personal level and organizational, not just from a philanthropic perspective but from a real political — that people are thinking and acting different

politically than we have in a long, long time. So I think there's hope there. I think in philanthropy, in some of the circles that I am moving in, [people] are trying to think of more creative ways of thinking outside of the box. So instead of just about fundraising, how do we finance these movements? Not just fundraising, but how do we finance them? How do we do — some colleagues have been using, within the international network of women's funds movements, a term, *wealth creation*, for the movements.

So right now these are terms and frameworks, you know. And sometimes an idea takes on, but it's kind of thinking beyond, Oh, we're these institutions, we fundraise, we create this broad donor network of small and large gifts — because that's what we are — to, Wait, there's something else here. We know, even if Astraea were to double its budget, it is such a drop in the bucket. Which is not to minimize the money that goes out or what it means to the groups that are getting it. It means, you know, they can do things; but also just for morale, that somebody wants to support their work — because often we're the first funder or one of, you know, a few. Some groups go on to be able to do that, so I don't want to minimize that role. To try to think out of the box — which really gets to the economic system and who holds the power, and how to play with that some and push on it.

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ANDERSON: We have about ten minutes left. So why don't you talk about, you know, with your 20-year anniversary coming up, what you think your legacy will be at Astraea? Will Astraea ever survive, plucking you out from the center of it? And what your vision for yourself is beyond Astraea, if you have one.

ACEY: Right.

ANDERSON: Could you ever imagine leaving?

ACEY: Well, I can imagine leaving.

ANDERSON: Do you think they'd survive without you?

ACEY: Well, I feel like, if Astraea doesn't survive without me, then I have failed. So I believe that if I were to leave at any moment, that Astraea is strong enough to survive without any one individual. You know, we have people who — We have one of our beloved and strong board chairs leaving soon. She even extended her term, since we're going through transition. I think to myself, How am I going to survive without her? And then I think, I will, there's other people coming up. But it means changing and adjusting.

There have been key staff over the years. There's a key staff person now, who needs to go and do her next dream journey for herself. It leaves a big hole in my heart, but in our program too, and she's going to be missed by many, many people, but it's also what she put in place

and her leadership. There have been other staff. The many staff that come through Astraea, you know, they stay for a short time and they make a contribution. And also thinking of some that have stayed longer, like six, nine years. They left, and they left their work and something to build on.

So I think, Astraea's 30 years old, they were 10 before I got there. I, you know, except for that first year, maybe two, [was] the only staff person, but there has always been an engagement of the board and the staff who are there. We're now staffed with, I think, 17. I'm kind of losing track.

To me, being at Astraea was about helping to build a movement and the resources for it. Now, I'm not good at everything, so, you know, I'm sure if I left tomorrow they'd find a mess here or there, but I feel there are structures in place and there is leadership. Astraea does not depend only on me, which is — I'm not trying to have any false humility. I've worked hard, I am a leader, I understand that. I have a responsibility. But it's very important to know that you don't do these things by yourself. You might be a driving force, other people are driving forces. So I have no worries about Astraea in my departure.

I thought I would leave at 20, and it didn't work out that way. Some of my friends say, Well, there's always going to be something that you want to do there, and there always seems to be. There's always, Well, after this gets done. But I feel I've stayed as long as I have because it's been this place where I could grow and the organization was growing. Not without some bumps and steps backwards, but overall, I feel that I've had this great privilege to be in a job where I feel that I've been able to be the person — be all the parts of me. Even when I am in those meetings and I kind of have to raise my hand. But, you know, there's this core group. It's kind of like a shelter. No place is completely safe, but there is this pillar that's keeping you together. So I'm not sure when I'm going to leave. I can't imagine that I would be there more than a couple more years.

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In this coming year we're doing a strategic plan. We have kind of a transition plan in place, not so much like when I would leave, because a lot of people have different definitions of a transition plan. It's like, Pick your successor and when are you leaving? That's very simplistic. The board needs to hire who's going to come behind me, not me. I try to hire people who are leaders and can do their job, and if they can move into this position, great, but it's like, Can they do that work?

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ACEY: So I think in a couple years, it's quite possible that I would be gone. I have a two-year contract. I do want to see through this strategic plan and make sure there's a very good succession plan that has everything set up — the structures that need to be there, and that's pretty much in place or in process as well as, you know, a system, the next steps, the different committees, and things like that. It's a lot more complicated

and boring succession plan, but — on the minds of some people sometimes. What's my legacy? I don't know.

ANDERSON: I mean, what do you think you would be the most proud of if you stopped working at Astraea after 20? What are you most proud of in that work? Because somebody's going to ask you that in October, so it's good to think about it now. (laughter)

ACEY: Well, it's kind of like saying, you know, thinking, who's your favorite friend or who's your —

ANDERSON: It's tough, you can pick two.

ACEY: I can pick two? I think the thing — which is not like this one, concrete accomplishment — that I'm most proud of, that I feel I've been a part of, is just to have that consistent commitment to our core values and to social, racial, economic and gender justice. I mean, I just feel, to me, it's the thing that makes me the most proud. Yeah, we've put in creative programs, we've built, we've grown, we've got some good expertise. But when I think of, overall, that with all those things — any program, any initiative — they have been extensions — whether it's been in grantmaking or fundraising — they have been extensions of those core values. And that there has been a constant flow of different people coming into the organization, having influence, making an impact, moving out. That's what I think.

It's been a challenge. There are some days when I think, like, What the hell am I doing here? Tomorrow — it's it. The thing that I'm most proud of in terms of those things is that other people who have left the organization have taken with them something too.

ANDERSON: When you're finished with Astraea, do you imagine another leadership position in an organization or foundation?

ACEY: No.

ANDERSON: Or do you have a different dream for yourself after this?

ACEY: Yeah. I never saw myself as moving. They always say, Never say never, but I have never had the ambition or the aspiration to leave Astraea and go into another philanthropic. To me it was like, it was about Astraea. It was not about philanthropy. It was about the political values, the programs. It was not about philanthropy.

After Astraea, I do not see myself — You know, I'm 57, get through these next two years, I'll be 59. I do not have the desire to lead another organization. I more know what I don't want to do, and I think that's a combination of being there so long and also my age. It's a tremendous responsibility, and a commitment of time and energy, which

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I don't regret, but I feel like, as I move into my sixties, it's not where I think I'm going to be spending my time.

You know, I love to train. I've been asked to do panels and workshops, but some trainings, and so that's intrigued me, and so that might be a way. I'm being encouraged to write. I never have enough time to write. I'm not a great writer, but I'm a decent writer with some guidance. And then I feel like, let things open up, you just don't know. I would like to take some time off in between, and then I'm just, like, open to possibilities. I'd like to make sure I spend more quality time with my friends and my family and my dog.

ANDERSON: I think we're out of time. I'm going to turn this off.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Susan Kurka, October, 2007

Edited by Sheila Flaherty-Jones, November, 2007

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