

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

**DOLORES ALEXANDER**

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

March 20, 2004 and October 22, 2005  
Southold, NY

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

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## Narrator

Dolores Alexander (b.1931) was raised in a working-class Italian community in Newark, NJ, educated in Catholic schools, and attended City College in the late 1950s. Alexander worked in journalism most of her professional life and it was in her capacity as a reporter for *Newsday* that she came across a press release announcing the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Alexander became NOW's first Executive Director from 1969-1970, was a co-owner of a lesbian feminist restaurant in the Village with partner Jill Ward during the 1970s, and was a founder of Women Against Pornography in the 1980s. She has been present at many significant events of the women's movement: integrating the Want Ads in the *New York Times*, the lesbian purge of NOW, the National Women's Conference in Houston, 1977, and the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Alexander remains active in the lesbian community on the North Fork of Long Island.

## 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 Alexander reflects on her childhood in New Jersey, her education, and her early marriage as a lead in to her involvement with the women's movement. Alexander details her relationship to Betty Friedan and the National Organization for Women and her painful experiences as part of the lesbian purge. Alexander also describes her life with Mother Courage, the restaurant she opened with partner Jill Ward, which became a hub of radical feminism in the 70s. Lastly, she reflects on her work with Women Against Pornography and the anti-pornography movement's place in feminism.

## Restrictions

Alexander retains copyright to this interview.

## Format

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

## Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kelly Anderson. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Dolores Alexander.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

## Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Alexander, Dolores. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, March 20, 2004 and October 22 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Dolores Alexander, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, March 20, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

**Bibliography:** Alexander, Dolores. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, March 20, 2004 and October 22, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Dolores Alexander, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, March 20, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23-24.

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Transcript of interviews conducted March 20, 2004, and October 22, 2005, with:

DOLORES ALEXANDER

at: Southold, New York

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: As I said earlier, let's start with talking about your family background — why don't you start by telling me about your parents. I think one was Italian American. So tell me about your parents, where they came from, where they immigrated from, their family backgrounds.

ALEXANDER: OK. All right. Well, my father was first-generation Italian. His parents came from a town called Trivento, on the eastern side of Italy. And my mother was also first-generation, Polish, and I don't know what town her family came from. She was born in [Shenandoah,] Pennsylvania and my father was born in Newark, New Jersey. They met at a dance. They both loved to dance, and my father was a wonderful dancer, my mother said. And he was also quite an attractive man, and my mother was a good-looking woman, too. So they fell in love, you know.

My mother, let's see, when she was — she was young. She had moved here to be with her brother Bruce. She came from a family of two brothers and three sisters, and my mother's story is really kind of sad. Her parents both died on the same day, within 24 hours of each other: her mother in childbirth to the youngest, to the fifth child — she was a daughter — and her father, my mother's father, apparently from the flu. This would've been around 1917, something like that. Apparently there was a big flu epidemic. My mother was nine years old at the time, and so she kind of became the mother of the family. And there were two younger [sisters] — she was the oldest girl. There were two younger girls. She took care of them. And her brothers were, I guess by this time, young teenagers. It was a coal mining area and I think that they went to work in the mines.

My mother's mother's sister [Aunt Polly (Pauline)] took all five of them in. She was unmarried and she had a little business of her own, a kind of dairy business, I think. She had some cows and things like that. And so she took all five of them in because I guess she wanted to keep them together and it was really a very sad thing. So anyway, my mother, by the time she's 17, has gotten tired of taking care of these kids and so she moves to Elizabeth, New Jersey, to be with her brother Bruce, and

that's where she met my father at this dance. [Mom went back to PA for about a year to take care of Polly when she was dying of "dropsy."]

My father, let's see, he comes from a family of five brothers and, I think, four sisters — a large Italian family. When he brought my mother home, his mother was really upset because she wasn't Italian. And when they got married they had to live in that house, the family house, for a little while until they got on their feet. I guess it was the Depression, or the beginning of the Depression, and it was really hard getting work. So my mother has the worst memory of what it was like living in that house, because she said my grandmother was so mean to her. My grandfather liked her a lot, but my grandmother hated her.

So it was really difficult for her, and she was happy when she was able to get out from under her wing, although we always lived in my grandfather's house. But what we did was we moved up to the second floor. It was a very old house in Newark, New Jersey, and my father really totally renovated it. My father was a skillful carpenter and plumber and electrician. He totally renovated that house.

ANDERSON: So your grandparents lived downstairs and you lived upstairs?

5:37

ALEXANDER: My grandparents lived downstairs and we lived upstairs, yeah. And there were still a number of the kids — my father's brothers — a number of them were still at home. So it was a crowded house. And we used to get together every Sunday for dinner, which I thought was wonderful. I used to love those family dinners, because we'd have the traditional Sunday meal — you know, spaghetti with meatballs and then a roasted chicken and some wonderful pies or cakes or something that my Aunt Mary would make. I remember loving Sunday mornings because that was when Mary would make the spaghetti. There was an enamel kitchen table and she would put flour in the middle of the table and make a hole in [the center of the large mound of flour] and put eggs in it and I then — don't know what else — and then she'd start kneading it and roll it out. When she was making ravioli, I loved that because she'd fill the ravioli [with ricotta] and then she'd cut each one of them and she'd push it to me so that I could use a fork to seal the sides. That was my wonderful task for Sunday mornings. I loved that. So, you know, it was a big — *I* thought it was a happy family. I had a really nice childhood.

ANDERSON: But it sounds like when you say, "*I* thought it was a happy family," that maybe other people didn't?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, I think my mother didn't. And also, my parents fought a lot, you know. And they fought a lot about money, so that I really — I mean, it was in short supply, really short supply. When my brother was born, my father — my brother Richard is 18 months younger than I am, and my father didn't have a job. And that was pretty tough, being unemployed and having two kids. He eventually did get a job. But they did fight a lot

about money and I remember that I vowed that I would never fight with any partner of mine about money, you know, and I never did. I always sort of went in the opposite direction, you know.

So, anyway, I attended St. Peter's Elementary School in Belleville — it wasn't a very long walk to school, and we had charity nuns.

ANDERSON: What does that mean?

8:28

ALEXANDER: Sisters of Charity — that was the order. It was Sisters of Charity. And then I went to St. Michael's High School and they also had Sisters of Charity nuns there. I loved elementary school. I guess I didn't get in trouble in elementary school but when I was in high school, I kind of got into trouble, I think because I was too independent. By the time I was a senior in high school — I was smart, too, and I was mostly smarter than the other kids in the class. I was really bored, and in my senior year I played hooky a lot and the nuns, you know, they hated it. And so, I was constantly being called into the principal's office that year. But, you know, eventually I did graduate. I didn't go to college right away. I wanted to, but we couldn't afford it.

That was the beginning of my feminism. Actually, my feminism started a lot earlier than that. It started simply because I was a girl in an Italian family. Oh, yeah, I have to tell you this story.

ANDERSON: Yeah, say more about that.

ALEXANDER: This was a family story. My grandmother used to tell me that she could tell that I was a girl by the way my father walked down the block on his way home from the hospital. He was very dejected. Can you imagine? I was his first born and I was a girl, and he was disappointed. And she would tell me that like it was a funny story, you know, or a heartwarming story. Anyway, I didn't know what to make of it, when I was a little kid, when I first heard it. So I'm sure that was when I started to become a feminist.

And then, my father had a very traditional point of view about the way girls should be raised. My brother was younger than I but he was allowed a great deal more freedom than I was, and I remember my father — this is just another horror story. When I was in high school, I must have been complaining to my father about not being allowed to do something, because he said to me, "Look, your brother can go out and get drunk and sleep in the gutter and get up the next morning and brush his clothes off and go to work and nobody would say anything about it. It'd be fine. His reputation would be intact. You try it." That was another hard lesson to learn, and that just intensified my feelings of anger. Growing rage, I'm sure, growing rage.

So, OK. So I get out of high school —

ANDERSON: What about your mom?

ALEXANDER: My mom — oh, my poor mother. My father was a very authoritarian guy and she couldn't do anything without his approval. The funny thing is that she had a job. She got a job when I was really little. She went to work in a factory where they made paper cups and she ran a high-speed machine. I went there a couple of times. It was amazing to me that she could run this thing because it was going really fast. It was a production line, basically, and she had to feed the paper in and then after the cups were made, she had to take them out of the other end and I guess start to pack them or something. I don't remember the whole thing. But it was a hard job.

But she started working when I was really little, and she used to tell me that she had to work, that there wasn't enough money, and she really would've preferred to stay at home. That was not true, I found out when I was a teenager. My mother decided when I was really little — and because, I guess, my father was so authoritarian — my mother decided that she was going to get a job, because she wanted to have her own money. She wanted to have some say over the way that the family money was spent and, she wanted some sense of independence. Also, I think she really wanted to get out of the house, because, you know, my grandmother was just awful to her. So —

ANDERSON: Did you think that she had to fight your father to be able to do that, to be able to get a job? Do you think he found that emasculating, or —

ALEXANDER: He never said that. No, I didn't get that impression. I think he was really happy for the financial help, because times were so tough. I was born in 1931, so, you know, that was the height of the Depression, really. And my brother was born a year and a half later, and that was when my father, I guess, lost his job. Really, times were very tough, which is, I think, one of the reasons, too, that we stayed in that house and he started renovating it, because it would've been really difficult for him to buy his own house, which is what he wanted to do.

ANDERSON: I assume that they didn't feel that you should go on to college? What was their feeling about girls' education?

14:23
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ALEXANDER: Well, yeah, my father didn't feel that it was necessary to educate me. What for? You're only going to have kids. I said, "Well, that's a good reason for education." But no, he didn't feel that it was a good idea and he, of course, would not have given me any financial support for that. So I got a job when I got out of high school. My brother, on the other hand, my father made sure that he went to college and he paid for him. My brother went to a small college in Erie, Gannon, I guess, and he played basketball, so he got a small basketball scholarship. But my father supported him financially — no problem. The funny thing is, that although, you know, here I was sort of rageful about many things, I never really got angry at my brother. I really loved my brother. We got along. Well, we fought a lot but I was never competitive with him in

that way. I always went to his basketball games and was really happy for him and that kind of stuff. And we still, to this day, get along really well.

So I got a job with an insurance company as a clerk — Equitable Life, I think it was. I got a job with them as a clerk. And I worked basically as a clerk, and then as a typist, and then as a secretary, until I was about 23, I guess, and —

ANDERSON: You were still living at home in the Newark house?

ALEXANDER: I was still living at home, yes. Oh, yeah, that was another thing. I really wanted to move. I really wanted to get out of the house, but my father — you know, forget it. I did, eventually. When I did move, it was a terrible scene, just an absolutely awful scene. His attitude was, and he told me, that I would not be able to take care of myself. He was never supportive in that way, in helping me become independent. He really wanted me to stay home, get married, have kids, and live next door, basically, which is what Italian girls do, often — even Italian boys, you know, lately, anyway.

So I worked until I was around 23, and at that point, I really had this yearning to go to college, to educate myself, partly because I could see that I couldn't go any further in jobs and I couldn't make any more money. But it wasn't even for that reason. It was just that I wanted to learn things. I was curious about the world and I had this feeling that that would help me get out of the house. And so, I saved some money and by the time I had enough money, I guess, for a year's tuition I was, oh, 23, 24, something like that. And so I registered at NYU and I went to school there for a year. By that time, I had met the man who would become my husband, and his name was Aaron Alexander. Oh, by the way, my maiden name, or my family name, is DeCarlo, and Alexander comes from my husband.

ANDERSON: Not Italian?

18:30

ALEXANDER: Not Italian, no — Jewish, Jewish. Can you imagine? Jewish. But anyway, he was really very supportive of my getting an education, and at the end of my freshman year at NYU I guess I was running out of money and he told me that City College was free. My attitude was, Nothing is free. But it turned out that he was right. It cost only, I think, 35 dollars a semester at that time, and then you had to pay for your books. You know, that was the registration fee. So, I got the best education from City College. It took me about five years to graduate, but it was just the best experience I could possibly have — one of the most intellectually stimulating places that I've ever been. At that time, one of their claims to fame was that they turned out more Ph.D.s than — I don't know, they were up there in ranks of how many Ph.D.s they turned out. And the teachers were wonderful. They were just so smart and it was just an exciting place to be. I really loved it.

ANDERSON: Do you remember the political atmosphere on campus at the time?

ALEXANDER: There was no political atmosphere.

ANDERSON: Was it the mid-60s?

ALEXANDER: No. This was the late '50s, yeah, because I left school [in] '60, '61, something like that. Yeah. So, anyway, here Aaron is being supportive about my going to college. But we decide that we're going to get married in my first year of college, when I was at NYU. And that was when I decided to leave home. We weren't living together, were we? I think I would've moved in with him except that I just knew it would be just way too difficult.

ANDERSON: With your parents?

ALEXANDER: There'd be no way that I could do that and be open about it. But I did decide that I was going to leave home, finally leave the nest. And I got a room in a little hotel, a residential hotel. I think it was on Eighth Street, in the Village, you know, near NYU. And it was a crummy little room, but I could afford it and, so I told my parents that I was leaving. And my father hit the roof. He was almost abusive about it. [Verbally abusive.] But I left anyway. It was really very traumatic, stressful kind of experience.

ANDERSON: Did it sever your relationship with them for a while because you defied — or you moved out?

21:45

ALEXANDER: No, no, it didn't. No, I never stopped talking to them. Oh, yeah, my father would give me the cold shoulder, now that I'm remembering. That was his way of showing you that he was upset with you. He'd stop talking to you for a long time. He did that to my mother all the time and it just drove us crazy. And then I was the go-between, you know. It was awful. He would talk to me instead of my mother. And that was a really horrendous experience. But no, he didn't talk to me for a while. But at least we did have some continual contact.

ANDERSON: Was your mother upset about you leaving home?

ALEXANDER: No. My mother was not. She understood.

ANDERSON: Your ally.

ALEXANDER: She always understood. She was female and she had the same feelings and she did leave home when she was a teenager, because she didn't want to have to deal with the family situation any longer and she wanted

freedom, she wanted her own money. And that's how I was feeling, too. She perfectly understood it and she was fine with it.

And then I announce that I'm getting married and that I'm going to marry a Jewish guy. Oh, that was another scene. Well, I brought him home. I think I didn't tell them that he was Jewish. I just brought him home first, and they liked him. That was the amazing thing. They liked him and then I guess I told him that he was Jewish, and that upset my father a lot, so that when we got married, we just had a little ceremony. We got married at the Ethical Culture Society in Manhattan, and just had a little party afterwards, and my father refused to pay, to contribute any money at all to pay for this party. That was the way he was, you know, showing his unhappiness with me.

And still, I never cut myself off from them. Somehow, I don't know whether it was me or whether he would — somehow, we always got back in touch again. We'd be very angry at each other but then we'd stop being angry with each other and we would resume our connection. And I think also it was because of my mother, because she was so understanding and forgiving. She was just very good to me.

ANDERSON: Did the rest of your family disapprove or attend the wedding? Was it –

24:40

ALEXANDER: Well, my brother had gotten married the same year that I did, a little bit before me. And he had gone into the Army and he was in Officers' Training School in, I think, North Carolina, and he couldn't get home for my wedding. So no, he wasn't there. Who were there was my parents, [NOT] Aaron's parents. They did everything but sit shivah for him — you know what that is? They didn't do that, but they stopped, they really cut themselves off from him. That was really bad news. So there was just my parents, my aunt and uncle [Ann & Jack Crowe] and the two people [Ginny Laufler & Eric Strong] who stood up for us. That was my wedding party. But it was a wonderful little ceremony. I really loved it.

And then we got an apartment on 110th Street near Broadway. And it was close to City College and it wasn't too far for Aaron. Aaron had a job. I think he was doing public relations at the time, while he was taking a master's at Columbia. And he wanted to teach, and I don't know, I think problems developed fairly early on between us. His wanting to teach — well, what he did was, he started sending letters around the country, looking for jobs, looking for teaching jobs, and he found one. The first one he found was in Arizona, Tucson, whatever college is there, maybe the University of Arizona. He got a job there as an adjunct, I guess, teaching English or whatever. What's the –

ANDERSON: Literature?

ALEXANDER: No, it's 101, you know.

ANDERSTON: Co mpLit, or?

ALEXANDER: It's sort of like a little writing course, but it's like the very first one.

ANDERSTON: Composition, or something? [Freshman English.]

ALEXANDER: Yeah, something like that. That was what he was teaching. And he wanted me to go with him, but I said no, because in my transfer from NYU to City College, I had lost credit and here I was, already in my middle twenties, and I didn't want to drag it out any longer. I was going to be 30 or so by the time I graduated and I just didn't want to have to lose more credit and repeat courses and things like that. So I said no, that he should go by himself, and I'd go out there, he'd come home for weekends, and then we'd spend summer together.

But that was kind of the beginning of the end. You can't really separate for that long a time and expect a marriage to survive. So, first there was one year he went to Arizona. The next year he got a job [at Penn State, the 3<sup>rd</sup> year] in California, and I think the fourth year he got a job [at the University of] Hawaii.

ANDERSON: He was going further and further away.

ALEXANDER: He was going further and further away. So, it was some place in there that we decided that this is really ridiculous. We just have to acknowledge that we're not going to stay together. And he went some place — I guess he went to Mexico somewhere, for a divorce.

ANDERSON: How long were you married then?

28:25
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ALEXANDER: We were married then about five years. We had stayed together for about five years. Oh, I should mention, too, that our relationship was further complicated by the fact that he had been married before and he had a little boy, a son. And I liked the kid but I never felt motherly towards him. I never really wanted to have children and it was at a point in my life when I really wanted to keep myself distant from this child, because it would've been too entrapping, I felt, just too dangerous. But Aaron used to spend probably every Saturday with him and would bring him back to our apartment and he was very sweet. He was a little boy. He was three or four, I guess, at that point. And of course we contributed to his support. That never bothered me. I liked the child and I didn't mind giving money to his mother every month. That didn't bother me.

I'm not sure what our problems were, to tell you the truth. Well, we used to fight a lot, too. Oh, I know what it was. He was abusive. I married my father, apparently. He was emotionally and verbally abusive. And so, it became increasingly diff[icult] — it was quickly clear to me that we would not be able to stay together because of that. It's unfortunate that you repeat these old relationships. I don't know.

ANDERSON: Did you feel at the time that if you married somebody who wasn't Italian, it would help you to marry someone different from your father, or do you think you didn't even –

ALEXANDER: I didn't think about it. (both speaking)

ANDERSON: Think about getting out or creating something new for yourself?

ALEXANDER: I didn't think about it at all. I never thought in terms of psychology or analyzing.

ANDERSON: Or just wanting something different. Saying, I don't want what my parents had: I want something different.

ALEXANDER: Yes, well, that was clear. No, I didn't want what my parents had. I definitely wanted something different. And I know that I didn't want children. As a matter of fact, Aaron and I talked about it and it was fine with him. He already had a son, so that was also never a problem. Here I was in college and I certainly wasn't interested in doing anything like that until I got out. But even when I got out of school, I was not interested in it.

So, OK. So we got divorced around the time that I was leaving school and going to work. And in my senior year at City College, I became a stringer for the *New York Times*. It was –

ANDERSON: What's that mean, a stringer?

31:47
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ALEXANDER: Well, it was a little part-time job. I was a reporter and my beat was City College. And there were a lot of things that happened there. Nixon came to talk, and Eleanor Roosevelt came to talk, Malcolm X came to talk. I don't know. But one little story that I absolutely loved and they actually used was, I wrote a three-paragraph story about the dreidl championship. Do you know what a dreidl is? OK. It was really a cute little story and they liked it and they ran it and I was just thrilled, you know, that they thought this was funny.

So, I had a good year there and I asked the city editor at the time, I asked him for a job — not as a reporter, because I knew that they wouldn't hire me as a reporter and I didn't have enough experience for the *New York Times*, which was, you know, in my mind, the most important and best newspaper in the world. And of course, it was a place where I wanted to work and of course it was a place where I would've loved to have been a writer. But I knew I would never get hired doing that.

So I asked for a job as a copy boy, girl, whatever. And the city editor said to me that he would love to hire me, but he would have a revolution in the newsroom if he hired a girl for that job, because there had never been a female in that job. And that was traditionally how you became —

you went on the reporting staff that way, or it was one of the ways that it happened. So that was another –

ANDERSON: Were there any female reporters at the *Times* at the time?

ALEXANDER: There was one.

ANDERSON: So she must have come in a different route.

ALEXANDER: Nan [Robertson]— wait a minute, what was her name? She was well known at the time. [She had years of reporting experience elsewhere.] Years later she wrote a book, *Ladies in the Balcony*. She was the author of that. It was about how the press club in Washington made the women sit in this box, separate from the company. I think she was the only one. And there used to be stories. There was a woman, Marguerite Higgins, who was another woman. She had been a foreign correspondent for the *The Herald Tribune* and they used to tell such nasty stories about her. It was just awful. Oh, I know. There was a story that she had gotten pregnant. And so [Homer Bigard, her rival at the *Times*, wisecracked, “Oh, I wonder who the mother is?”] Now, in those days, it was nothing untoward. It was just so ordinary that you laughed. I laughed. I thought it was funny, you know, things like that.

And also, I guess, I didn’t really identify with women. Betty Friedan used to say that some women think there are three sexes: men, other women, and me. And that was how I felt about myself and the world and I really related to men primarily, not to women. I didn’t have many women friends and the profession that I chose was a male-dominated one. There were almost no women in it.

ANDERSON: Why do you think that was, just because of the culture at the time, that it didn’t encourage women to see one another?

ALEXANDER: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. So, anyway, I left at the end of my senior year. I had to give up my job at the *Times* [it went to a new senior every year] and started looking for another job, because the city editor had said to me that I should go into the suburbs and get some experience, and then try to come back to the *Times*. And so I applied to several newspapers, but I got a job at the *Newark Evening News* as a reporter. Now I knew the area, so I’m sure that that helped me get a job, and there were a couple of women reporters there, so that I wasn’t completely alone. But there was not an awful lot of support for [our work] — often the assignments that we got were female-type assignments, to cover parades or, you know, feature-type stuff.

ANDERSON: Not hard news.

36:59

ALEXANDER: Yeah, no. So I worked there for two and a half years and then I got a job with *Newsday* on Long Island and I worked there as a reporter for five

years. There, at *Newsday*, I hated the kinds of assignments that they gave me. I think maybe they called it a beat reporter, I don't know, I can't remember. But I was assigned a lot of stuff like covering local meetings and things like that. It was boring and I hated it.

I think I asked to be transferred to what was basically the women's page, but I think they called it the style section or something like that. And the other thing was that I used to have to work nights, and I hated working nights. And if you went to this style section, you worked days. So that's what I did. I transferred to that after a year, two years, and I really loved doing that. I was doing profiles of people. It was really interesting.

ANDERSON: And working more with women, because the staff was more female –

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes, I was. Yeah, that's right, come to think of it. But I did enjoy it.

ANDERSON: What was the atmosphere for women staff like at *Newsday*? What were the expectations or assumptions about being female there?

38:39

ALEXANDER: Well, on the general assignment staff, there were three females, me and two other women. And I remember saying to one of them at some point, you know, "I wish that women could be friends, that we could be friends." Because there was such a competitiveness among the three of us, you know. And there was a lot of competitiveness also when I moved over to this other section with the other women. And I'm just sure that I didn't make as much money as the men. I can't remember what the difference was, but I knew that there was a big difference between what they were paying me and what they were paying most men in the place. So, anyway, I was there for five years.

And in the fourth year, it was 19 — now wait a minute, 1966 was when I got this press release announcing the beginning of this organization called NOW, and I was very excited by it.

I have to backtrack a little bit. Because of the problems that I was having with my marriage and maybe because of the problems that I was having with my family, I decided that I was going to go into therapy, and this was when I was in college. I actually got some help. One of the professors referred me to NYU where I got a student analyst [a doctoral candidate], but somebody who was very good. And so, here I am in therapy, and I remember going to my analyst and saying to him, "I wish the black movement would get over with so we could start a women's movement." And he said to me, "You're 50 years too late." "Fifty years? What do you mean? The fact that we got the vote? That didn't mean anything. That didn't really do anything. We still have all kinds of discrimination against us." He was not very understanding, and I think that was also the beginning of the end of our relationship, because I couldn't believe his response. It was just beyond me.

So I was really excited when I got this press release announcing NOW.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you were ready.

ALEXANDER: Unfortunately, I got the press release the day after the press conference, which had been in Manhattan at Betty Friedan's apartment. The person listed on the press release was Muriel Fox, who was then vice president at Carl Byoir, a very large public relations firm. Muriel always had one of these power-type jobs, you know. She was an extraordinary woman and she was — in those days, if a woman made over 10,000 dollars a year, you were in the top 1 percent of the salaries for women in the country. That's extraordinary, don't you think?

ANDERSON: It is extraordinary, and it just points to how hard it is for women to be economically independent.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

ANDERSON: The rest of you were working for wages that barely put you over the poverty line —

ALEXANDER: That's true.

ANDERSON: It was really necessary for economic survival to stay married. I mean, it's really —

ALEXANDER: Yeah, that's true. So, anyway, I called Muriel and said, "I'm sorry I missed this press conference. How do I handle a story about this?" And so, she said, "Well, call up Betty Friedan. Her number's there. Call her up and go interview her." And so, that's what I did.

ANDERSON: Had you read the book? Were you familiar with her as a person?

43:22

ALEXANDER: Yes. I was familiar with her. Had I read her book? I don't think I'd read the whole thing, but I probably had read sections of it and felt that it was not really for me, because that wasn't me, I wasn't a housewife, I didn't live in suburbia. The thing that really fired me up and that I was much more interested in was — (pause in recording)

ANDERSON: OK. So, before I interrupted, I just want to remind you of where we were. We were talking about the press release that you got and calling Friedan and I asked you if you were aware of her book before you called her. So you were talking about how you felt about the *Feminine Mystique*. So why don't you talk about that again.

ALEXANDER: Well, I was definitely aware of her book and I guess I had dipped into it. But I felt that it wasn't for me, because it was about housewives. I wasn't a housewife. And it was about suburbia and I didn't live in suburbia. The book that did excite me, though, was de Beauvoir's *The*

*Second Sex*. I remember being so excited when I read that book and telling my analyst about it and wanting him to read it. And he said he didn't have time. (laughs) Another disappointment. The things I used to put up with just amaze me, you know, absolutely amazes me.

And also, I had seen Friedan at a meeting. Let's see. I was covering a meeting in New York. It was a conference in New York that was related to the EEOC, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And she got up to speak at the end. There was a panel and then she got up to speak. I don't remember what she said, but I do remember that she was attacked by other women. They just thought that she was outrageous. Oh, I do remember what she said. She said that women in high places, when they couldn't get promotions or didn't get equal pay, that they should file complaints with the EEOC. And they thought she was crazy, because you just didn't do that, you know. If you did that, you'd find yourself out on the streets. That was, I think, their thinking. But she was really attacked for that. And it had been my experience that when somebody is attacked that way and as viciously as she was, there must be something to what they're saying. I don't know why, but she went up in my esteem as a result of that, being attacked that way and what she said.

Also that day, I remember Pauli Murray — do you know who Pauli Murray is? [She was a famous poet and a lawyer, a tiny little black woman.] She was there and she stood up at some point and she said that women should organize or have a march on Washington or something like that, you know, some action, some definite civil rights-type action. She wasn't booed but I thought, Wow, that's great, because I felt that women needed our own civil rights movement.

But that would've been like '65, — the fall, I think, of '66 was when I got this press release. And so I went to interview Friedan, who was living in the Dakota at the time — you know, that building that John Lennon used to live in. And she was an interesting woman — very haughty, somewhat arrogant, very impatient. Dressed very stylishly, had a very stylish haircut, it was a Vidal Sassoon haircut. It was clear that it was a very expensive haircut. And of course, she was living in the Dakota, which was a very affluent-type building to live in. But the funny thing was that all of her furniture was Victorian. Later on, I found out that the reason that she had Victorian furniture like that was because she had this big empty apartment to fill and basically, she bought second-hand furniture. It was cheaper, you know.

It wasn't that I didn't like her when I met her. I felt that she — there was something about her. She gave me kind of short shrift. The reason that I think that that happened was because I think she felt I wasn't with an important enough newspaper, and so she didn't want to spend a lot of time with me, because apparently there was a whole bunch of people who were asking her for interviews at that point.

But anyway, I went back [to the office] and wrote a story about it and then several months later, there was the first meeting of the New York City chapter of NOW. That was the organizing meeting. Muriel

Fox found this place. It was held in a mansion on the Upper East Side, just off Fifth Avenue. You walked into this hallway and there were marble floors, marble walls. You walk over to the right and go into what I guess was the drawing room, but they had sort of moved all the furniture out and there was rows and rows of chairs. And I don't know, maybe 70 women, 50 to 70 women came to that first meeting. And there were some prominent women. Flo Kennedy was there. Gerda Lerner was there. What's the name of our justice, the Supreme Court Justice?

ANDERSON: Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

ALEXANDER: Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She was there. Just, well, a number of prominent women were there. And –

ANDERSON: And this was held at somebody's home?

50:48

ALEXANDER: Yeah, yeah. She must have been a friend of Muriel's or a business associate or something like that. Yeah, I mean, it was not the place that you would normally hold a meeting at. This was kind of a rabble-raising thing to do, and in this setting? It was so extraordinary. I think Muriel and probably Betty were expecting and really wanting for their new organization, professional women. You know, they didn't want secretaries and that sort of thing, they wanted women of substance. And by and large, they got them, at first.

ANDERSON: What did the room feel like? When you went to that meeting, do you remember how you felt, being there?

ALEXANDER: Well, the women in the audience didn't do much talking. It was mostly, I think, Friedan and Muriel and a few people at the front of the room. I don't remember the feeling in the room that day or what exactly happened, [lots of talk about organizing into committees and chapters] because — maybe it was because it was overshadowed by the second meeting, which was held at Flo Kennedy's apartment. It was her apartment office on East 48th Street. We had agreed at the first meeting to call our group the Image of Women Committee. But it really became a kind of employment committee.

And that first meeting was extraordinary, because that day, women couldn't wait to tell their stories. Oddly enough, we went around the room. I don't know who started that or how that happened, but that's what we did, we went around the room. And the question, I guess, was asked, Why are you here and what is it that you want to work on, or what can you contribute? And most of them, they just couldn't wait to tell their stories about their lives, about the discrimination they were facing on their jobs, what was happening in their marriages. It was just — it was really astonishing. It was just pouring out of people.

And what we decided to do was, we decided to integrate the help wanted ads. And we've talked about this. I don't know that I really want

to go into it, because I can't remember all the details and I did it so much better in an earlier interview. So, let's just say that we did work on that. I worked on that.

I was having a hard time, though, because I was so involved and so committed to this fledgling women's movement that — and here I was, working as a reporter. I was kind of a double agent, you know. I would go cover something but then I could call the people that we were covering, or the company or whatever, and ask them questions so that I had both sides and I could report to my women what was going on. It was an interesting place to be, but it was also a kind of uncomfortable place to be from the point of view of my editors. And I was right, really. I felt that if they knew the depth of my involvement, that they really would not want me to cover those things. So, I tried to — I didn't let them know, really, although I did.

It was interesting, because after that interview with Betty she gave me a number of application blanks and I took them back to the office and I signed up every woman that I could find in the newsroom. Now, dues were only five dollars in those days, so it was really interesting. But if somebody didn't want to join, I said, "Look. I'll pay the dues for you." Only five bucks, you know. So we got a lot of people as members and one woman especially, Ivy Bottini. Do you know who Ivy is?

ANDERSON: I do. She's in California.

55:14

ALEXANDER: Yeah, exactly. She was working at *Newsday* as an art director. And she joined and she was as drawn to it as I was and became also instantly excited and involved and passionate about it, I guess that's the word, passionate about the work. I used to say that *Newsday* fed my body and NOW fed my soul. It was just the most wonderful experience, those early days.

I met Barbara Love early on and had no idea, totally unconscious, had no idea that she was a lesbian until — I lived in the [Greenwich] Village. I was working at *Newsday* out on Long Island but I lived in the Village anyway and reverse commuted. And I had a little green Volkswagon and I would drive it up to the Upper West Side to the NOW New York City meetings. We met, oddly enough, in the Ethical Culture building. Funny how your life goes in circles. So, one night — and Barbara always went to those meetings, and I used to drive home and give Patricia Trainor, who became a dear friend of mine, a ride home every week after the meetings — and Barbara, too, because she had a place in the Village.

And Barbara disappeared for several weeks, or maybe a couple of months, I don't know. And then, when she came back, we were driving home in the car and I said — she's sitting in the back, and I said, "Barbara, where have you been? I've missed you." She began describing a trip that she had made to Mexico and a dear friend of hers — they had been in an automobile accident and this woman had died, had been in the hospital and died. And it became clear as she went on

that this was her lover, and it was a really heavy experience for her, partly because nobody would recognize her relationship with this woman, so, you know, who are you? No, you can't go in there, and that sort of thing.

So, at the end of it, I dropped her off first and I turned to Patricia and I said, "She's a lesbian." Patricia said, "Yeah, of course she is." I said, "You knew? (Anderson laughs) Why didn't you tell me?" Patricia said, "I thought you knew." It was funny.

ANDERSON: That's funny. Do you think that was the first person that you met that you were aware of that was a — that was your first introduction?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yeah, it was, definitely. Yeah, definitely.

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

58:24
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END INTERVIEW 1, TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

ANDERSON: OK. So, you just ended with your story about Barbara Love, and I want to have you to continue talking about the issue of lesbianism within NOW, but I also want to back up, just for a second, to talk about sort of the general scene in terms of New York and feminism at the time. I mean, were there other outlets or organizations besides NOW, or was NOW really the only game in town?

ALEXANDER: NOW was the only game in town for a while. Not for very long, though.

ANDERSON: This was mid- to late 60s, '66 to '68.

ALEXANDER: Sixty-six, '67, '68, yeah.

ANDERSON: So all of you radical feminist types were involved in NOW. If that was your — OK.

ALEXANDER: That's right, that's right. Muriel, who was a graduate of Barnard, got us invited by the then president of Barnard — a woman whose name I can't remember — to lunch. Muriel was hoping for, I guess, some sponsorship, possibly some funding. And the reason that I bring it up was because that was the day that I met Kate Millett and Kate Stimpson. They came in after the lunch and we were introduced and I was very impressed with them, because they were teachers there and that was an institution that I had held in reverence, so I was very impressed that they were teaching there.

The issue of lesbianism never — I think that the woman who was the president of Barnard was a lesbian, but everybody was very closeted. Nobody was talking about it. I had no idea for a long time.

And I think it would have been '68, I went to a meeting in the Village, in Sheridan Square — the apartment of Helen Leeds, who was a lawyer and a member of NOW. And the purpose of the meeting was to discuss whether NOW should be involved in what they were calling rap sessions, going around the room — you know, the earliest stages of consciousness raising.

There's this young woman sitting cross-legged over by the windows who didn't say anything during the meeting, but at the end, announces, "Well, as your vocal neighborhood lesbian" — I'm like, Oh, shit, there goes the Long Island chapter — because I had invited two women from Long Island to come in to see what we were about, and then go home and organize.

It was Rita Mae Brown. And Rita never stopped saying the word "lesbian" (Anderson laughs) and never stopped outraging everyone, really getting herself into all kinds of trouble, making everybody angry at her. (laughs) You ask about what was the tone like in those days. You know, she was really outrageous. And also, Rita Mae loved to tell you how poor she was and that she slept in a car and she was a student at

NYU — I don't know where she got her tuition money from, but — and that she was a writer and a poet. Very self assured, cocky little person, and she was little. And very likable, very funny. I found her to be, yes, outrageous, but I found her to be quite funny. I think Rita Mae is an original, you know? She really is an extraordinary person. She —

ANDERSON: What was — oh, go ahead.

ALEXANDER: She was the only one who said “lesbian.” Also, you asked whether we were the only game in town. We had been until I met — what was her name? I think it was a group, a very small group, called themselves New York Radical Women. Ann — oh, I'm sure you know — she wrote that thing about not having an orgasm.

ANDERSON: K-O-E-D-T, Koedt.

ALEXANDER: Ann Koedt, yeah. I met her —

ANDERSON: *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm.*

5:00

ALEXANDER: Right, exactly. She came to a demonstration that we had about the EEOC and — Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And we got talking and she was clearly a very smart woman, and so I invited her to join NOW, but she said no, that we were not — basically, her type. Well, she came out of the left and they were much more political than most of the women in NOW. You know, I wasn't involved in the civil rights movement. Some women had been. But I wasn't, certainly, and I wasn't at all political. But Ann brought around some of her friends, I mean, they certainly were curious about us and they came to a couple of meetings.

But I think that it was really because of that, those early tentative meetings, talks with each other — that was the beginning of the first Congress to Unite Women, you know. And I guess it wasn't at the first Congress to Unite Women, it was at the second Congress to Unite Women that the lesbian issue really exploded. They wore tee-shirts that said Lavender Menace and took over the conference, took over the stage, accused these feminists of being sexist and discriminatory and all sorts of things, because they wouldn't look at the issue of lesbianism and wouldn't discuss it.

ANDERSON: Were you there, at that second congress, for that action?

ALEXANDER: Yes, I was there only momentarily. I did see the lavender tee-shirts and the Lavender Menace but I was on my way to Washington, to a NOW meeting in Washington. So I just saw the very beginning of it, and I thought, Oh, God, this looks crazy. Let me get out of here. I want to say, too, that — this is very funny — I think that they put Lavender Menace on their tee-shirts because Betty Friedan had called lesbians “the

lavender menace.” Susan Brownmiller, however, claims credit for the phrase. What did she say? She said it was lesbian — oh, I’m not going to remember. It’s a good story, but Susan always brings it up because it really irritates her that Friedan or somebody else is given credit for this phrase when actually it was she who first —

ANDERSON: Oh, I know what you’re talking about. It’s in her memoir, I think.

ALEXANDER: Oh, is it? Oh, OK.

ANDERSON: I know what you’re talking about — the discrepancy.

ALEXANDER: She’s very funny about that. That was my phrase, you know. Everybody wants to — there are certain things you want to claim credit for.

ANDERSON: I think you’re right, that she was saying that Friedan was homophobic. But Brownmiller had come up with the phrase, that they were the lavender menace.

8:19
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ALEXANDER: Yeah. Something. I forget what it was. But anyway, Betty — it wasn’t that she was homophobic, it wasn’t that she couldn’t tolerate homosexuality or lesbianism, I mean, it was OK with her if women were lesbians. She just didn’t want them to talk about it. She didn’t want them to be public about it, which was basically the feeling in NOW. Yeah, we agree that you’re wonderful women and we want you to continue to work with us and we’ll try not to discriminate against you, but please don’t use that word and please keep quiet. Because they felt that this would hurt the women’s movement. And there was some validity to that, there really was.

I remember that the one and only panel that the New York City chapter of NOW had on the issue of lesbianism, a woman stood up — she was from the suburbs somewhere — and she said, “You know, it’s hard enough for me to call myself a feminist, and now you want me to be associated with the lesbian issue? Forget it. You’re making life much too difficult for me.” And I really understood that, you know, I really did understand that.

By that time, I think — had Kate come out? Kate Millett? I don’t remember. Had she come out? She —

ANDERSON: I’m not sure what year it was.

ALEXANDER: In that speech that she gave at Barnard in which she admitted to being bisexual — yeah, I don’t remember what year that was in.

But anyway, the lesbian issue was very, very slow to develop and Betty was awful about it. In June of ’69 I remember we went to California to a NOW board meeting, and Betty and I drove from San Francisco down to L.A. We got to know each other a little too well. (Anderson laughs) But when we were in San Francisco, she walks into

this meeting and she nearly has a fit because who does she see there but Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, and they looked gay to her and so she said to me, "Get rid of them. Don't let the press see them. Put them in the back." Difficult. Difficult to do, you know.

But it was true. They were using that word to bait us. The press was using that word to bait us. And you know, everybody who was opposed to us was using that word to bait us. And women were afraid of it. It really was a very strong weapon. I was afraid of it. You know, who wanted to be called a lesbian?

ANDERSON: And how much did you all know about one another's sexuality within the privacy of NOW?

11:45

ALEXANDER: Nothing.

ANDERSON: Was it an open secret? I mean, you had your Barbara Loves and your Rita Mae Browns — did you feel the place was crawling with them but you just didn't want the public to know, or was it really just [that] nobody knew one another's sexuality?

ALEXANDER: Nobody knew. In the beginning, nobody knew anybody's sexuality. Nobody did. But in San Francisco, at least for me, that was when I began to really become conscious, more and more conscious, growingly conscious about the whole issue. First of all, there was Betty's horror at these two women — you know, get them out, push them to the back.

And then, I had been invited by Toni Carabillo, who was one of the founders of the L.A. chapter of NOW — and it's possible she was president of the chapter at that time. She had invited me to stay with her when we got to L.A. Betty was staying with another friend. I walked into Tony's house and her friend Judy was there, and I was shown my bedroom and then they showed me the rest of the place, and it was clear to me there were only two bedrooms. Both had double beds, and I was given one of the bedrooms. So, suddenly, I thought, Oh, God, these women are lesbians. I mean, who knew? I had never asked. They'd never said, you know. But I liked them and they were the most competent — they were real hard workers. They did all sorts of things.

At that point, we had started a national NOW newsletter called *NOW Acts*. And I had too many things to do, so I asked Toni Carabillo to please take it over and to edit it and to write it, basically, and she said she would do it, astonishingly. It was a lot of work, and for no money. She wasn't being paid. So it was just amazing to me. And a lot of women took on a lot of work, really heavy tasks, because they were so committed to the cause. And for me, over the months and then the next couple of years, it became apparent to me that yes, the movement was loaded with lesbians and they were the most competent, the hardest workers of all — astonishing to me, you know.

Ivy, Ivy Bottini — we were driving a distance, maybe to Washington to a NOW meeting, and Ivy confesses to me that she is a

lesbian, and that she started a relationship with a woman and that she's going to leave her hus[band] — no, I guess she hadn't decided yet, but she would eventually leave her husband and her two daughters, to live this lifestyle. And I remember, you know [thinking], OK, Ivy, I still love you, but don't talk about this. Don't tell anybody else. That was my attitude, too. Don't tell anybody else because this is — you know, you're going to get yourself into so much trouble, it's not going to be worth it.

And of course, that's not the way she wanted to live, and it's not the way most of those women wanted to live. They wanted to really be open about it. And so, she was one of the people who really forced it to a head. Of course, it took a long time. There was something called the lesbian purge. Do you know —

ANDERSON: Yeah, I'd like you to talk about that. You could also back up and tell me how you became staff, how you became the first director, instead of being just a volunteer? And what that was like? Changing roles in the organization — because the lesbian purge happens after you're the director? So let's talk about that

ALEXANDER: Yeah, it did. That's right. Let's see. Oh, OK. I had a medical scare around 1968. I thought I had ovarian cancer. It turned out that I didn't and I just had an ovary removed and I was fine afterwards. But that really shook me, and I really looked at my life and said, you know, Is this the way I want to live it? The work that I wanted to do was the work that I was passionate about, was the women's movement. And so I wrote a proposal and gave it to Betty, saying that I wanted to become director, executive director, of the National Organization, and these were the things that I could do. One of the things that I said I could do would be fundraising. That was my least successful endeavor. (Anderson laughs) And that got me into trouble as we went along.

ANDERSON: You didn't have any background in fundraising, did you?

ALEXANDER: No, none at all, but I thought there were a lot of people in the organization, other people who would help, you know. And I guess other people tried. But foundations simply were not — it was too early on. Nobody was interested or else they saw us as an aberration, I think, something that probably wouldn't last very long. So, no, nobody wanted to give us any money. It was only the women who were already involved and committed who were willing to pay their dues and then some. Although none of us had very much money in those days. I mean, I was making — I think I was making 10,000 dollars a year by the time I left *Newsday*, which, as I told you, [put me] in the top one percent or something. But even so, that wasn't a lot of money. And raising it became — I don't know, I found it an impossible job.

But in any case, Betty said yes. I was astonished that she said yes. I mean, she did talk to the board about it and to the executive committee,

and everybody was thrilled to be able to say yes, that they wanted me. Now, of course, I was working for much less. I mean, I had taken a real cut in salary. I forget how much of a cut, but I took a real cut in salary.

ANDERSON: It was a full-time job at NOW, or part time?

18:50

ALEXANDER: No. It was supposed to be part time. I think that was how, yeah, I thought I could do other work, like freelance writing, and make more money. It turned out to be impossible, because the job was all-consuming. And it was where I wanted to be. It was what I wanted to be doing, so that I really didn't pursue the freelance writing, which was probably dumb, because I really became quite poor in the year and three quarters, I guess, that I was director of NOW. Where were we? What were we talking about?

ANDERSON: You were talking about how you suggested to Betty and the board that you become director — so you became the first director.

ALEXANDER: Oh, right. So, she said yes. And so I started working on it. And at first, the office was in my apartment. As a matter of fact, the whole time I worked, it was in my apartment. Oh, I should tell you that Friedan told me — she found an apartment on 93rd Street, I think it was 33 West 93rd Street, near Central Park West. And she sold her Dakota apartment. She got divorced, she sold her Dakota apartment, and she was looking for another place. And she found this place, and it was nine brownstones that had been joined together — called 9G in city planning terms — and totally renovated, beautiful job. They were cooperative apartments, but a number of the people who had bought them now didn't want to, or couldn't live there, and so were subletting.

So she sublet a place, a beautiful apartment, a duplex — two floors at the right-hand end of the building closer to the park. She told me about it, I went and found an apartment in the middle building, a wonderful duplex apartment, too. And I told Ivy and Ivy found an apartment in the other end of the building. So, here are the three of us in this 9G, and we had wonderful, wonderful apartments. And they backed onto this lovely garden that had been landscaped. It was just beautiful.

And one of the things that we did was, I remember that we had a fundraising party and we opened all three apartments to the party, and we celebrated Susan B. Anthony's — the fiftieth anniversary of her death, or something like that. And it was a wonderful party. And we raised some money from it. But I think that that was the major successful fundraising event that I did.

The [NOW] work was fascinating. There was way too much paperwork. There was way too much mail for one person to answer. You know, I was expected to keep track of membership, do the newsletter, do the mailings. It was really an impossible job.

ANDERSON: And how much were you guys trying to manage the chapters as a national organization?

ALEXANDER: Well, we weren't really managing the chapters. What we were doing was just giving advice. I remember, when Betty got divorced — where did she go? I guess she went to Mexico for the divorce — and when she came home, she came and she flew into Newark Airport, and I went to pick her up. And I told her to fly into Newark Airport because from there we were going to drive down to the Princeton chapter, where they would have their initial meeting, a kind of launch, and Betty would be there as the celebrity feminist to talk and to, you know, rah-rah kind of thing. So, that was the only support that we really gave. It wasn't like we had so much literature or anything like that to provide them with. We didn't. And wherever — it was really funny — wherever Betty would go, in whatever city it was, she would meet somebody who'd expressed interest in a chapter, she'd say, OK, you'll be the convener; you organize the chapter. And she'd come back with these little scraps of paper with names on it and addresses and [say], Here, this is the convener in Chicago, or whatever — Podunk, Detroit.

ANDERSON: So the national wasn't really setting an agenda for all the chapters either?

ALEXANDER: Well, we did have bylaws and that sort of thing. The one thing that we did want was that we wanted them to pay us dues. That was just beginning. It was such an early time that we were really only feeling our way along and building the organization. I mean, there were some women, I'm sure, who knew how to do this, but I certainly didn't and Betty didn't, really. There were a couple of women, like Kay Clarenbach, who taught at the University of Wisconsin, who was the kind of woman who sat on committees, got herself appointed to committees, and knew sort of how to set up things. She was one of the rare people who did. Betty was a writer. I was a writer. It was not the sort of thing that we were good at, efficient at.

ANDERSON: How was your working relationship with her in that year and a half?

25:12

ALEXANDER: At first it was very good. It was really very good — until we went to San Francisco to that meeting. And on the way down [to Los Angeles] in our drive, we stopped many places along the way. We stopped at Esalen [Institute] and she got involved with a woman named Virginia Satir, who was a leader of therapy groups there. And after we were finished in L.A., Betty went back to Esalen and spent most of the summer there, so that I became, you know, I became sort of de facto president, because she wasn't around. But we talked on the phone all the time.

Oh, I represented her at the beginning meetings of NARAL, you know, the National Abortion Rights [Action League; *organization was*

*initially National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws — ed.*], with Larry Lader, who wrote a book about abortion. He was a pioneer in the abortion movement. And I worked with him to organize that. Do you know Cindy Cisler? She was a NOW member, an architect, who was a passionate feminist who was involved in the abortion movement. So that summer, in any case, especially since Betty was out of town, that was, I suppose, when I really started working full time, because she wasn't there and I was taking up the slack.

I had gotten to know her a little bit too well on that drive down from San Francisco to L.A. — because there were some women in L.A. who were organizing a press conference, when there was going to be an organizing meeting for the L.A. chapter. And there was going to be a press conference about various things, and Betty was supposed to be there to be the prime speaker. Sylvia Hartman was the woman who was organizing it, and on the way down, Betty found it necessary to call Sylvia every day and yell at her. I mean, literally yelled at her on the phone. This was not unusual. Betty did this with a lot of people. And I remember saying to her, “Betty, you can't do that. This woman is a volunteer. You're not paying her. You can't abuse her in that way and expect her to continue to function and to do what you want [her] to do.” Betty seemed not to be able to grasp that. Somehow, I guess she felt that yelling would produce results, and of course it didn't. It made people very angry at her. That's what I mean by getting to know her a little bit too well, you know.

But then obviously she trusted me, because I really filled in for her in many important ways in that summer. I think that when she came back in the fall, I think that was when the lesbian issue began to become public. And Rita Mae was pulling her antics and Betty, I think she became a little disenchanted with me, because I didn't kowtow to her, I think, as much as she wanted me to. I had my own mind and would basically tell her, Stop yelling at people, and that sort of thing. She didn't like that.

ANDERSON: But she didn't become aggressive with you that way?

29:34

ALEXANDER: Basically, no, although I do remember — oh, God, I remember one night. It was awful. She was going to go to Washington to speak at a hearing that was — Bork, Judge Bork, they were trying to appoint him to the Supreme Court, and NOW was opposed to it. And so we wrote this speech together and then she gave it to me and I took it home and I typed it on stencil and ran it off on this mimeograph machine that I had, and it took me all night.

But when I got there — oh, that was it. I got there a little bit too late. I had gone to a meeting first before I came to her apartment to pick up the final draft, and she was furious with me because I was late. And that was when she began yelling at me. And I had had it, I think, and I just screamed at her, “Fuck you. Fuck you. When you learn how to talk to somebody like they're a human being, then I'll come back.” I was not

going to go back. But Ivy, who was there, said to me, “You have to do this job. You have to type this thing, run it off, because she’s going to Washington in the morning.” I said OK. I agreed to do it, but it took me all night to do it. And at six o’clock in the morning, I think I left these mimeographed copies in front of her apartment door, and went home to bed. And at seven o’clock, I get a telephone call from Betty, screaming at me, “Where are those copies?” And I said, “They’re in front of your door. Just go outside. They’re there.”

But that was the sort of thing that she did. She was a screamer, she really was. And she was abusive, verbally abusive, too. It’s really interesting that I’ve been involved with so many verbally abusive people.

ANDERSON: But it starts to deteriorate, your working relationship?

31:50

ALEXANDER: Oh, definitely. Yeah, definitely, it really did. But you know, many, many, many of the women in NOW just began to hate Betty. They just began to hate her. And they did not nominate her. She was leaving the presidency of NOW — Eileen Hernandez was nominated to be president and the nominating committee failed to nominate Betty even for a post on the board. And so that was when she gave her famous speech about how NOW was her baby, her base, her home. And she was really upset that she was not being recognized, even in this minimal way.

I’m having a hard time remembering now. The lesbian issue was developing at that time, but I’m having a hard time remembering exactly the details that led up to it. Maybe it was that Ivy was making it clear that she was lesbian, other people were making it clear that they were lesbians. And the straight women in the organization were really upset because they felt that that was really hurting the movement. And Betty certainly felt that way, too. But I didn’t. And by this time, I had established a good, correspondence kind of relationship with Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, and with other women, other lesbians around the country.

And because Betty had not been nominated to any post, and clearly she was being forced out of the organization and was so upset, somehow I became her scapegoat. And I suddenly became a lesbian who was working with other lesbians in a conspiracy to take over NOW. That was the thing. And she got on the telephone, a conference call, with the executive committee and screamed at them for something like two hours — threatened to call a press conference, exposing this conspiracy, you know, taking NOW down with her, basically. I think that the executive committee and the board just decided, a pox on both your houses, because she went, and I went.

ANDERSON: Did Betty fire you, or did the board?

ALEXANDER: No the board fired — well, no, actually, Kay Clarenbach, who was the chairman of the board, wrote me a letter suspending most of my duties. I'd have to really look that up about why. But you know, sort of taking half of my job away from me. I was never really fired, you know, not until we went to Chicago to a board meeting, and somehow in the course of that board meeting I didn't have a job. My job was going to be taken over by two people in the Chicago chapter. But it was now going to be just sort of a place where mail was received and maybe answered and the newsletter was going to go out from there. It was going to be just a distribution center. I didn't have a job. I was out of a job. It was a devastating experience for me.

And I wasn't a lesbian. I mean, that was the weird thing. I wasn't a lesbian. I became one later on, but you know, I don't know whether she drove me to it. I don't know. I really don't know. I was really intrigued by it. I was so impressed with so many women who were gay and how they ran their lives and that sort of thing. So, I don't know, I guess it was just that I was curious and just kept asking about it and exploring it in my mind and then finally meeting a woman and falling in love.

ANDERSON: You were also very supportive of the lesbians involved with the organization. So that was threatening.

36:36

ALEXANDER: Yes, yeah, I was, and I know that that was threatening. And I know that that also was one of the reasons that a number of women on the board felt freer to get rid of me, because they felt that this was not an issue that they wanted to deal with. It was an issue that they really wanted to just sweep under the carpet, didn't want to deal with. They were forced to deal with it a little bit at the — I was fired, I guess, basically in Chicago, sometime in 1970. And at the board meeting in September, I think it was September of 1970 or '71, the first national panel on lesbianism was held at the NOW conference, someplace in California. That was the one and only panel. And at that panel, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon presented the lesbian case, you know. I wasn't there.

ANDERSON: Did that end your relationship with NOW?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, oh yes.

ANDERSON: You were no longer involved as a volunteer with your chapter or anything?

ALEXANDER: I couldn't. No, it was too painful. It was just too painful. I was devastated. I mean, I felt really stabbed in the back and betrayed and I just couldn't believe that Betty had done what she did to me, because it seemed to me that she had to know that I was straight and —

ANDERSON: She'd at least known that you'd been married before.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, yeah. That's true. But I don't think that that was really the issue. I think Betty was just pissed off that I would stay and she was being forced out by this nominating committee, you know. And I really think I became her scapegoat.

ANDERSON: And that was a convenient excuse.

38:44

ALEXANDER: Yeah, it was. I think it was a convenient excuse.

ANDERSON: Did you remain neighbors at that point, up on 93rd Street? How did that work out?

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes, we did. We did. Yeah, we were neighbors until — well, we used different entrances so we didn't run into each other very much. And I lived in that building until we opened the restaurant in '72. And then shortly after we opened the restaurant, we moved down to the Village, because the commute was just too much, you know, from the Upper West Side. But I did live in that building for a long time, and Ivy also lived in that building for a long time afterwards. But, you know, it was never the same. I just couldn't work with NOW and most of the NOW women.

So, what I did, well, I withdrew from the women's movement for a long time and then opened Mother Courage. But in order to satisfy my need to do some activism I got involved with New York Radical Feminists and I worked on speakouts with them. I think I worked on one on marriage and another one on work. And those women — it was interesting, because they were mostly lesbians and they lived in the Village and the proximity was there and, you know, we just understood each other better. We were much more simpatico than I had been with these very straight-laced NOW women.

ANDERSON: We're almost out of the tape.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, I think we should stop there.

ANDERSON: Why don't we stop there.

40:32

END INTERVIEW 1

INTERVIEW 2      OCTOBER 22, 2005

ANDERSON:      OK. Are you ready, Dolores?

ALEXANDER: Yes.

ANDERSON:      OK. So, this is Dolores Alexander and Kelly Anderson meeting again in 2005, a year and a half since our original taping, to finish up the oral history with Dolores.

So, we're going to just let stand everything that we did last time, which was all of your background and education and the *New York Times* and all the way up to through those early NOW years. Is there anything else that you want to say about the National Organization for Women before we go onto some other topics?

ALEXANDER:      Well, yes. I think that the National Organization for Women, NOW, has gotten a bad rap, because we really launched the women's movement, the modern women's movement. But the radical women, unfortunately, have taken credit for it. And they dissed us, really, because we weren't radical enough, you know, we were middle class and white, mostly, and we subscribed to, you know, quote-unquote "middle-class values": equal pay for equal work, you know, job opportunities, things like that — although we did have one very controversial plank in our platform for action, which was abortion. In those days, they were calling it abortion on demand. I think we didn't quite phrase it that way. But I remember there was a terrific fight about that, about getting that into our platform for action. It was at the first national convention in Washington, D.C. It would have been, oh, I guess, late '66 or early '67. There were a couple of women who left NOW because they and their organizations could not support the pro-abortion plank.

And so, I mean, we were plenty radical, really, for the world in that day. We were extremely radical. But, you know, unfortunately, the quote-unquote "radical women's movement," they were younger women. I think they were just as middle class as we were. I don't think there were any black women or women of color in those days in the women's movement. I think that they looked askance at us because they were concentrating on their own black civil rights movement and even the women didn't think that the women's issues were that important.

So anyway, the radical [feminists] came out of the left, and they didn't have jobs, particularly. They were probably under 25, most of them, and we used to say that, you know, [they were] getting to us when they hit 25 and they're out in the world, working and looking for jobs, or trying to get promoted or trying to get a decent salary, that kind of thing, and then they'll certainly subscribe to our core values. So, I think NOW performed, really, brave courageous work and really have not gotten enough credit for it.

ANDERSON: Do you think that's still true, in terms of how younger women like my generation think about NOW, or the way it's written about in history books? Do you think it still hasn't gotten respect?

3:45

ALEXANDER: Yes. I do think it's still true. The younger women now don't seem to subscribe to feminist values at all, (laughs) you know? They question the whole women's movement and everything that we stood for. So, I'm confused by where they are and exactly what's going on with them. Hopefully, they really are the third wave, you know, and they're going to push on and create a brighter future, I hope.

ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah. So, what year did you stop participating in NOW, in terms of staff or board or leadership?

ALEXANDER: It was in 1970. I made some notes about this.

ANDERSON: Do you want to talk about your exit from NOW any more than we did the last time?

ALEXANDER: Well, yes. A little bit, anyway. I joined NOW [as director] in January 1969 and I was fired in the late winter or early spring of 1970. That year and then the following year was really a momentous time for me. When I left NOW, I was physically and emotionally exhausted, because I had felt betrayed by my sisters and by the women I loved and had been working with for several years, and it was just a devastating blow to me.

But not only that, I had, in 1968, the year before I became director of NOW, I had had major surgery. I had had an ovary removed. I think I had mentioned that I thought that I had ovarian cancer at the time, but didn't. OK. So, that was at the end of '68. Then, in '70, shortly after I left NOW, I developed a ruptured appendix. At the same time, my father was dying of colon cancer, and it was just a time of, you know, just emotional and physical exhaustion. So I was looking, you know, what to do? Where to go? What to do. And also, the people — I almost literally got by only with the help of my friends. And the friends, it turns out, were mostly the lesbian women who I had stood with and who had stood for me during the horrendous lesbian purge in NOW.

It was a time, too, of sexual experimentation, because the lesbian issue was being discussed for the first time publicly and was becoming a feminist issue, you know. And women were intrigued by it. Also, I think we were kind of going through a male-bashing, or male-hating, kind of period, when we didn't really want to have anything to do with men, and were turning to women for everything, including, I guess, sexual satisfaction.

So, I was no different from anybody else. I was experimenting sexually, too. And I have to say, I have to say that I have had less sexual experience with women than I have had with men, mostly because I would never treat women the way I treated men. (laughs) I'm serious. With men, somehow, I was able to have less emotional involvement if I

had sex with them. But with women, it was, you know, an immediate, very strong emotional connection.

But anyway, here I am in my experimenting stage and then I meet somebody, a woman, that I fall in love with, Jill Ward. And we are a romance, really, and our relationship really developed, I guess, in the summer of '70, when a group of us rented a house for a month in Bridgehampton. And Jill, on her way home to the city one night, at four o'clock in the morning, driving on the Long Island Expressway, has this revelation. Or actually, she has this craving for a bowl of spaghetti and meatballs. And it struck her: That's what I can do: I can open a restaurant! Because she had had experience at that in her family's business. They owned a kind of a country club, a swim club golf course in New Jersey, in Lincoln Park, New Jersey. They still own it, as a matter of fact. And she had run this little food concession, whatever, every summer while she was in college, and made a good bit of money doing it. And it was what financed her travels when she graduated from college, really, around the world. She was always a very courageous young woman, who, with a couple of her college classmates, bought motorcycles and just rode around Europe and North Africa and Central America for several months at a time and had a wonderful time.

So, you know, she was a person who clearly struck out on her own, didn't follow any subscribed path. This was in 1970. It was just after the women's march down Fifth Avenue, and Jill had been one of the main organizers of that march. To sustain herself, to support herself, she was driving a taxi in the city and her previous job before that was a very straight establishment-type job. She was a young executive in training with Arthur Anderson, that huge accounting firm that was involved — it doesn't exist any longer — it was involved in that financial scandal, the Enron scandal. So, but anyway, she hated it. She just hated having to live that life. So she quit without having anything to do. And that was when she began working for the women's movement.

ANDERSON: And that's how you two met, was through the movement, through NOW.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, that's how we met, was through NOW. It was through NOW. And so —

ANDERSON: So you two are together by the time she has this revelation that she wants to start a restaurant.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, our relationship was just beginning.

ANDERSON: Uh-huh.

ALEXANDER: So she comes back to Bridgehampton and she tells me about this idea of hers, and she says, "You want to join me in this? It would be a way for us to support ourselves." Just before that I had written a proposal for a

book and got a contract with a small publishing company. Eleanor Rawson and her husband had a small publishing company and I got a contract for a book about women like me. It was to be called *The Sexual Heretic*. Actually turned out to be — I wouldn't have been able to use that name, anyway, because it turned out that somebody else had thought of that in a different way. But anyway, so I had this contract and I think I got three thousand dollars as an advance, and it was very little money. So, how do you support yourself while you're writing? So I thought, OK, that sounds really like a good idea. So, how do you —

ANDERSON: Yeah, how do you start a restaurant? How did you find the place?

12:35

ALEXANDER: Yeah. How do you start a business when you don't have any money?

ANDERSON: Right.

ALEXANDER: I said to Jill I was confident that I could do it, not from the business point of view, which she knew, but because I felt that I knew how to cook and I felt that any woman, every woman, knows how to cook, which of course was ridiculous. (Anderson laughs) But that was my feeling. So, what do we do? How do we raise the money? So we write a letter, a proposal, that we send out to all our friends asking for small loans of a hundred, two hundred, three hundred dollars, at 10 percent interest — in those days, that was a lot — payable I don't know how many months afterwards, you know, after the restaurant opened. And if the restaurant did not succeed, we would get jobs [and] we promised on our word of honor that we would pay back that money. We were oversubscribed, really. It was quite a good experience.

ANDERSON: So you raised all the money you needed?

ALEXANDER: We raised I think maybe seven thousand dollars or something like that. And then Jill's parents helped a lot. So then we began looking for a place, a space for this restaurant, and I thought we should go into the Barnard/Columbia area on the Upper West Side, because I thought this would appeal to students. But Jill felt, the Village. And so we started looking in the West Village and we found this place that just — I couldn't believe that she wanted to rent it. It was called Benny's. It had been an old-time luncheonette and grocery store, neighborhood grocery store, that had been empty for years and was filthy dirty — utterly filthy dirty. (Anderson laughs) Walls — it was just a total mess. The kitchen — grease-stained, awful. But she said, "Let's take it. The rent is low and we can renovate it." OK.

And so, that's what we proceeded to do. We rented it and this was work that Jill loved to do. She still loves to do it, to take sledgehammers to things and tear down walls and rip up floors and put in new everything — plumbing and wiring and all sorts. She's good at it. Her father [Joe Ward] came to help us and he brought this young man

named Barry, who was an assistant to him. And without Joe, we couldn't have done it, because he kept buying us material and things like that.

In the meantime *Newsday* — you know, I had worked for *Newsday* — and *Newsday* did a story on us, on the business page, about our unique way of raising money and how it was going to be a feminist restaurant. And it was prominently displayed, I think on the back page of the newspaper, so it really got wide readership.

And the Securities and Exchange Commission [SEC] saw it and called us up. And one morning, you know, I answer the phone and there's this man who's saying, "Is this the Dolores Alexander who" — you know. I said yeah. So he said, "Well, you have to come down to talk to us, because you're violating some law." I couldn't believe what he was saying. So, we had a wonderful lawyer, Joan Goldberg, a good feminist lawyer, who was as astonished and outraged at this idea as — being called down to the SEC for having raised, what, maybe, let's say seven thousand dollars. We had violated some Securities and Exchange law? This is ridiculous.

So, anyway, they told us when they wanted to see us, and we asked them would it be necessary to bring our lawyer with us, would it be a good idea? And they said, "Oh, no, no. It's just an informal little [chat]." Well, we get there and like seven people fall in line behind us on the way to this conference room — lawyers, secretaries, I don't know what all they were, administrative — around this conference table. The cost of this meeting to the SEC was way over what we had [raised], what we were trying to raise. It was nuts, just nuts.

And they peppered us with questions, and for me, it was a scary kind of session because they were saying that we were in violation of this Reg. A — whatever the hell that was, Reg. A, Jill knew, I still can't figure it out, Regulation A — and that we would have to pay a fine of X number of dollars, far exceeding what we had been trying to raise.

Well, we left that room, our heads spinning, and went home and called Joan, our lawyer, and she said, "That's crazy." She would write them a letter. But in the meantime, Jill was a — is still — very beautiful woman and she turns male heads. And this young lawyer from the SEC calls her up and says to her in the course of the conversation, which she's taping, unbeknownst to him, he says that the people in the office wanted to see these freaks from women's liberation and that's why all those people fell into line behind us and went into this conference room. So we played this tape back for our lawyer, Joan, and she writes him a letter, calls him up — I can't remember — that just is blistering. And he says—

ANDERSON: That's the end of that.

ALEXANDER: OK, we'll drop it. But that was the sort of thing that happened to us a lot. The building inspectors would come into the space that we were renovating and garbage people, you know, garbage pickup people and

stuff, and they were really looking for bribes, you know. But we were women and we didn't do anything about it. I mean, we sort of knew what they wanted but we didn't follow through on it. And so they left us alone, mostly because we were these women's-liberation types and they knew that we could get a lot of publicity. I mean, we talked about it with them.

ANDERSON: Right, right, wow.

19:59

ALEXANDER: So they began — yeah, they began to leave us alone.

ANDERSON: And they had no idea you were a couple, to boot. (laughs)

ALEXANDER: No, that's right. that's right. They didn't — although I don't know. I mean, I think word went out fairly early on that we were lesbians and that the clientele would be largely lesbians. The women's movement kept talking about it as a feminist space. But anyway, we finally — my father died in February of 1971, but we still somehow pushed on, and that added to my exhaustion. We somehow still pushed on and we opened the restaurant in May of 1971, and it was a thrilling moment, because New York Radical Feminists — most of the women in New York Radical Feminists lived in the West Village, where we had — oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you the address, that we were at 342 West 11th Street, which was way west, at the corner of Washington Street in the Village. And it was OK for women who lived in the Village because you had to walk several blocks mostly to get there.

But the first night, we were filled to overflowing, and they were singing — I called them the Nerfers — were singing "There is Nothing like a Dame." It was that kind of a night — very celebratory and just wonderful, and we had loose shelves [that] dishes were piled on. And I remember that I took a pile off one end and I took a pile off the middle, and then when I took the pile on the right-hand side, the whole shelf collapses and this noise was just incredible. And a great cheer went up. It was very funny.

So, anyway, we were an immediate success. We really were an immediate success. We were reviewed by *New York Magazine*, by the *New York Times*, you know, by the *Village Voice*. And the people who would come to us on a regular basis were, well, Susan Brownmiller who became a very good friend of mine. And Kate Millett would come and play chess. We didn't discourage people from sitting around for hours, especially a woman like Kate, who was an attraction, you know. And Jill Johnston would come in with her little entourage all the time. So it was a very exciting place to be.

ANDERSON: Did it sustain that kind of energy over the whole life of the restaurant?  
So —

ALEXANDER: No, no. We decided, after we were in it for a while — we had the restaurant for maybe six years— we decided that there was kind of an arc. You know, [the first years were most successful], then there's a decline. I think three years was our high point. We had a third-year birthday party that was covered in *People* magazine, and there were lots of pictures of Gloria Steinem, [Brownmiller] and the woman who wrote *Memoirs of a Prom Queen*.

ANDERSON: Oh, Alex Kate Shulman.

23:56

ALEXANDER: Alex Kate Shulman, she was there, and there was a picture of her in the magazine — and lots of really well-known feminists. And there were lots of pictures. I was absolutely amazed, that *People* magazine — it was a national magazine — came to review us. But after that, you know, the excitement was gone. Women still came. They came from all over the world. We also had stories in Japanese magazines and people would send us copies and the only way we knew it was about us was because there was a picture of us or something like that along with the story.

At the very beginning, we had this one man, a research scientist at the Rockefeller Institute, a very eccentric guy, who lived in the Village, would ride his bicycle from his apartment in the Village to the Rockefeller Institute, which is on the Upper East Side, or midtown East Side, and then back home again on his bicycle — he'd have clips around his pants leg — and then he'd come into the restaurant. When we were new, every single night he would come into the restaurant and order whatever the special was of the day. He was so faithful and we just loved him, and he always came in alone. And as soon as he heard that we were getting reviewed by the *New York Magazine*, he said, "Well, I'm sorry, but you're not going to see me anymore, because you're just going to be so overcrowded." And he just stopped coming.

ANDERSON: Was that one of your few male patrons? You probably didn't have too many, did you?

ALEXANDER: Yes, that's right, that's right, yeah. That's right, we didn't have too many. Although, you know, Joyce Vinson, who became our manager, I don't know, in the third or fourth year, something like that, told us that we were near the docks where gay men hung out, and she said that — I wasn't involved in the restaurant so much at that point, and she said that gay men used to come in wearing these leather jackets with studs and chains and things like that, and she'd say, "They really look kind of scary on the outside but then they'd take the jacket off and they sat down, and they were pussycats." They were very sweet. They ordered whatever our specials were, and enjoyed them, gave us lots of compliments, and left wonderful tips. So we did have some male clientele, although it wasn't very extensive.

ANDERSON: Right. So, did it ever turn a profit?

26:40

ALEXANDER: Oh, yeah, in the beginning, it definitely did. Yeah, it definitely did.

ANDERSON: Because that's so hard to do, even with a successful restaurant. But you were able to live off the restaurant (both speaking) –

ALEXANDER: I'll tell you, what happened was, we discovered that — I guess Jill knew this all along: food is basically a break-even operation. How you make money is on your liquor sales. And it took us a couple of years to get a wine-and-beer license. We never got a hard-liquor license, partly because we didn't want to change the character [of the restaurant] that much by getting a license for hard liquor. But we were able to sell wine and beer. But I'll tell you, getting that license was — they put us through hell. It was another one of those instances where, Well, where are the men? Where are your male partners? Who's going to vouch for this? Who's going to be responsible for these bills if anything should go wrong? It was amazing. It took a very long time. One of the sticking points, oddly enough, was the fact that we had one bathroom for both sexes. And, oh, they couldn't believe that, because this was [in the early 1970s.]

ANDERSON: Right.

ALEXANDER: They just couldn't — they thought that this was basically immoral. I mean, we had to prove that it was really OK. We took pictures of it and all. They put us through an awful lot in order to get this wine-and-beer license. But finally, we did get it and that made a major difference in the fact that we were able to really turn a profit at that point.

ANDERSON: So, when you say, "We intended it to be a feminist restaurant," what did that mean to you at the time, a feminist restaurant?

ALEXANDER: Well, a woman's space. There was no such thing, you know. There was Schraft's, the Tea Rooms, you know, that kind of thing. But we didn't want to be a tea room. We wanted to be a space for strong, independent women who would be hopefully involved in the women's movement, and that did happen. After a while, women came from all over the world. They knew the name Mother Courage, and you know, it was a great attraction. Kate Stimpson, for example, who's quite a well-known feminist and who headed up the — you know, that genius foundation?

ANDERSON: MacArthur.

ALEXANDER: MacArthur, yes, she headed up that for a little while. She's now some important –

ANDERSON: She's a dean at NYU.

ALEXANDER: Exactly. She used to come in quite regularly. I loved her for this. She would bring in visiting dignitaries from all around the country, or from the world. I mean, she had a wide range of friends, and whenever they were in town and she was showing them around, she always brought them in for dinner. It was very nice. That was the kind of support that we had. And it was very important to us, it really was. And that was how we survived, and that was what we meant by a woman's space, or a feminist restaurant.

ANDERSON: But it sounds like, too, that your mission almost, in forming the restaurant, was as a sort of community center or a movement center, that you saw its mission as bigger than just serving up food, as being the –

ALEXANDER: Oh, yes, oh, yeah, meetings. Women would — New York Radical Feminists, especially — would come for their meetings. And NOW committees would come in, too, for their meetings. It was unfortunate, but we found that if there were any more than five women, we had to add a 15 percent — what do they call it –

30.07

ANDERSON: A service charge?

ALEXANDER: Women were lousy tippers, at least in those days, and they would stiff the waitresses. They would leave them just a couple of dollars, when here there was this party of seven or eight or ten people. And they would leave with maybe five bucks, you know, on the table. So, we said, You're going to have to pay 15 percent extra tonight They were OK about it.

ANDERSON: So, what was your involvement? You said that you were less involved over the years. You started off as what, as a cook, and moved into management, or –

ALEXANDER: Yeah. I did start out as a cook. (laughs) Jill and I, we were cooks, you know, bottle washers, everything. I remember that first summer, we only had one air conditioner, unfortunately. It was over the door, in the entrance. And the kitchen used to get to be, like, 110 degrees sometimes. In August, it was awful. And I remember one night, I was cooking, and I was looking at the order sheet and I was looking at the prep table, and looking back to the order sheet, and it was, like, information overload, all systems out, you know. I couldn't function. And Jill came in and she saw what was happening, and so she said, "All right, do this, do that." She sort of got me going again. And I said to her at the end of that night, "Jill, I am never going to work in that kitchen again unless we get another air conditioner." But my heart was not in cooking and washing dishes and things like that.

I remember one night, these two men reporters that I used to work with at *Newsday* came in and they just walked back into the kitchen. And here I am, up to my breasts in dishwater, you know, wet, messy. I

looked awful — I knew I looked awful, and [I was most unwelcoming demanding to know,] How did you get back here? I was so embarrassed. And I know that they were thinking, You left a good job for this? You're crazy. So that was — I had very mixed feelings about it.

Yeah, it gave me a certain amount of independence, but it was not work that I loved doing. So I began to ease myself out of it and I got a job, a part-time job, actually, with *Time* magazine, first as a proofreader and then as a copyeditor, and I worked for *Time* for ten years and for *People* magazine for ten years, and then retired at the end of the twenty years. And although I used to hate *Time* and even *People* for its sexism — although *People* was much better than *Time* — I have to say that they did well by me. I got a pension, I am now getting a pension from them. They had wonderful benefits, you know, health benefits and all sorts of other things. So I am able to get along well now on the benefits that I reaped at Time, Incorporated.

ANDERSON: So, did Jill remain as involved in the restaurant?

34:39

ALEXANDER: Yes.

ANDERSON: OK, when you backed away.

ALEXANDER: Yes. I guess I had always seen it primarily as her restaurant, her project, her business, you know. I was helping as much as I could, and she stayed in it, too, for six years or something like that. And then she reached a point of exhaustion. She just couldn't do it anymore. And that was basically what she put a note up on the door one night that said — oh, we were trying to sell it, too, and we were not having any success — and so she put a note up on the door one night that said, "Sorry, folks, I just can't do it anymore." And that was it.

I don't know how it happened, but at that point, we were able to sell it, probably because we came way down in price. But we did find a man, Michael Safdia, who came in and bought the restaurant, lock, stock, and barrel, and renamed it The Black Sheep. But he kept — I didn't know this for a long time — he kept the name Mother Courage listed in the phone book. And when people would call up and say, Is this Mother Courage? he would say, No, but — and give them this rap about how he was still a feminist-type restaurant, you know, that sort of thing.

ANDERSON: Is that still there, then? Is it still The Black Sheep?

ALEXANDER: No, it's still a restaurant, but now — Michael turned it into a French — the food was French country food and he developed this extensive wine cellar, and his prices were triple what we were charging. And he made a lot of money on it. He had the business for a long time and then he sold it, and I forget the name of it. But it's still a restaurant and apparently still doing well.

ANDERSON: So, during that same time, let's just back up to the personal side of this. You'd started this relationship with Jill, and it sustained over the entire period of the restaurant. Are you guys living together now at this point?

ALEXANDER: No, no, no, no. We haven't been together for many years, but we're very –

37:03

ANDERSON: Oh, no, not now. Sorry. (laughs) No, I meant at the time.

ALEXANDER: At the time, we were living together.

ANDERSON: And where was your apartment that you were living in? Was it in that neighborhood?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, we moved into — I was living — I think I mentioned this in the last tape. I was living on 93rd Street, in a long row of brownstones that had been joined together and renovated.

ANDERSON: That's right.

ALEXANDER: And Jill moved in with me, and we lived there for a while, but then found the commute, even though it was only from 93rd Street to West 11th Street, we found it just too harrowing. So we found an apartment just a couple of blocks away from the restaurant, and lived there. Also, we were able to park the car from there better because it was way west and, you know, things were a little bit cheaper than where I had been living. And we were together for the life of the restaurant, basically. And then, I guess as the restaurant was unfolding or whatever, unwinding, you know, winding down, we were breaking up at that point. But, as with most lesbian couples, you might have a period of not speaking to each other and being angry with each other and all that stuff, but then you become really good friends, and Jill is my best friend. I'm going into the hospital on Monday to have knee replacement surgery and Jill is my healthcare proxy and she's going to drive me into the city for the surgery. And so, you know, she's my very dear friend. And she and her partner have a daughter named Elizabeth, who is now 17. They're my extended family. They are my family since my mother died. I have a brother who lives in Florida, but we see each other once every couple of years. He's not very involved in my life at all.

ANDERSON: So, I want to ask a couple of questions about being a lesbian at that time, about your coming-out process. Did you come out to your family at that time, now that you're living with Jill and have a home together and this restaurant that's getting so much publicity? It must have been hard to keep any secrets.

39.31

ALEXANDER: Yes. Well, I didn't really want to keep secrets. My father — I knew I could never tell my father, but we were just — I was just beginning my

relationship with Jill. I was really just beginning as a lesbian when my father was dying. And I knew that I could never tell him. Interestingly, however, you know, in the last days of my father's life, he apologized to me for — we had always had a very stormy relationship, and what he was apologizing for was the fact — he said, "I wanted you to live a conventional life but you didn't want to. I wanted you to get married and have children and that was just not in your life plan. I'm so sorry that I insisted that you do this when I knew you didn't want to do it." He was really sorry. He was apologizing for giving me such a hard time about it, and for the arguments that we had over the years, you know. I was so touched by that, really deeply touched by that. And I felt there was a real resolution just before he died of our feelings for each other.

But my mother, I knew that I would be able to tell her, and did — let's see, it would have been only a year or two into the restaurant. My mother died a few years ago, but a very dear woman. She baked sweet breads for us — [date nut bread], you know, [pumpkin] bread or something like that, and it was a big hit. We would serve a couple of slices of it with spinach salads. People loved it. She was very involved in my life and she was a wonderful woman.

I felt that I had to tell her that I was gay when somebody was doing a story about lesbians and feminism, I guess. And I knew it was going to appear in *Esquire* magazine, and I just felt that she had to know about this, that I was coming out in that magazine, in that story, because I didn't want somebody else to tell her. So I sat her down and told her. I forget exactly the words I used, but I do remember her response. It was wonderful. She said, "I don't understand it. I don't approve of it. But you're my daughter and I love you." She made me cry.

But she said, "I don't want you to tell the neighbors and I don't want you to tell your brother." (laughs) It made me laugh. I said, "Mom, I have a feeling the neighbors already know." She said, "Oh, they don't think that way." OK. Because she was living in New Jersey, Nutley, And they saw us, Jill and me, together all the time. At my father's funeral, Jill was very much a presence, and various family functions around that. So, I really felt that they knew.

And as far as my brother was concerned, I didn't tell him. Jill inadvertently — it was totally unplanned. We were all together, my brother and his wife and me and my mother and Jill and my mother's best friend, Leah. We were all together having dinner at my mother's, and my brother made some kind of an antigay joke, or remark. And Jill became incensed by it and she said, "Well, as a lesbian myself" — the room emptied. (Anderson laughs) It was instantaneous. My mother got up and left the room, my brother got up and left the room. My mother's best friend, Leah, got up and left the room. The only one who stayed was my sister-in-law, and she was very interested. She started asking Jill all these questions about it. My mother then says, "Dolores, come in here and help me clean up this stuff." So I went into the kitchen and helped her clean up. So that was really — I mean, she already knew

about it, but she was not happy that her best friend learned about it in that way.

And my brother, we became really estranged. He had a hard time with it, really had a hard time accepting it. And to this day, I can't discuss it with him. He won't allow it. He changes the subject every single time. His kids know about it. He had five kids and they're all grown up now and have children of their own. But even as they were growing up, they could see what was going on and I didn't hide it from them, and they were fine with it — but not my brother. My sister-in-law, too, was fine with it, but not my brother. He still has a hard time with it.

ANDERSON: So, no wonder you're not close. You have to remain invisible around him. So, yeah. What about in the larger feminist community that you and Jill were a part of during that time: did you ever feel any homophobia or any discomfort among any of the feminists you were hanging out with, or were you mostly hanging out post-NOW with lesbians who were also feminists? A lot of lesbians felt a lot of homophobia within the movement in those feminist circles at the time. Did you guys feel that?

45:33

ALEXANDER: Well, yes. Among NOW, you know, there were a lot of straight women who came into the restaurant who didn't have any problem with us, who didn't have any problem with the lesbian issue. Gloria Steinem, for example, would come in — not regularly, but she came in quite a number of times, and she always brought somebody with her. One night, she brought her mother and, you know, there was always a little group of people with her. I mean, nobody ever brought it up. It was just an ordinary restaurant. And she was wonderful about it. And mostly people were wonderful about it.

The only feminist women that I ever had trouble with about it was with the NOW women. They, too, had a hard time accepting the fact that I had changed my sexuality. It was just not something that they understood or could approve of.

ANDERSON: Yeah, OK. Did you consider yourself a lesbian separatist or was that ideology attractive to you at the time?

ALEXANDER: Yeah. It was attractive to me. That was basically the way we were living, in a very separate way. I mean, it was not an ideological thing with me, it was just that was the way it happened, you know. But yeah, I didn't have any problem with that, with that theory.

ANDERSON: Well, even more than not having a problem with it, was it something that informed your life? Did you read Jill Johnston's work or people like that, or did you have that kind of intention behind the restaurant or your life?

ALEXANDER: I did read Jill Johnston and she came into the restaurant quite a lot. But I have to say that it was not something that I would really have promoted. I mean, I wouldn't join a cause about it. That was the way my life turned out but it wasn't because I was such an ideological believer in separatism, no.

ANDERSON: Were you part of any consciousness-raising [CR] groups at the time?

48:26

ALEXANDER: Oh, God, I did so much consciousness raising, I can't tell you.

ANDERSON: (laughs) Can you describe some of those?

ALEXANDER: Well, I'll tell you something. I have a treasure trove, really, of tapes of consciousness-raising sessions that I have just got to make sure they're preserved, and that's one of the things that I have to talk to Smith about. I was organizing consciousness-raising groups for what I was writing. There were a lot of women. I probably saw a trend before a trend developed, and was trying to write about something that hadn't quite happened yet. I was trying to find it, basically. And so I kept inviting all these women to sessions to sit around in a circle and talk about their life and their feelings about men and women and lesbianism and their heterosexual experiences and things like that, and feminism, relating it all to feminism.

Let's see, you want a flavor of it. I found that there were more women than I imagined who were adopting this new lifestyle. For example, I went to Washington, D.C., to interview the Furies — you know, Charlotte Bunch, and Rita Mae was there at the time.

ANDERSON: One of my oral histories was with Joan Biren, so we've got some good Furies stuff as part of this.

ALEXANDER: I went to D.C. to interview them and I think I have tapes of CR groups with them. But mostly, I know that I have tapes of individual interviews with individual women. And I was astonished at their life stories, the fact that they'd been straight all their lives, and because of — I mean, suddenly, they had this "ah-ha" or this almost like a religious conversion, you know. They saw the light and became a dyke. Now these were women who were heavy into politics, heavy into developing theory. And I wasn't. I mean, I was writing about it, but I was too busy with the restaurant and other things to really become a sort of theoretical lesbian. I was looking for what was happening and trying to describe it more than develop a theory about it.

ANDERSON: And when you say describe it, or this lifestyle, you are referring to women who are choosing lesbianism out of a politic that came out of feminism. OK.

51:45

ALEXANDER: Yeah. That was the question. Yeah, my question was, Have you always been a lesbian or is this something that you chose? A central question for me was, Are lesbians born or is it something that you choose? Yeah, we discussed that a lot. We talked about that a lot. For many women, it was a definite choice. And for many women, it was something that they knew it when they were five years old. You know, I couldn't break it down by numbers or anything like that, because it wasn't that scientific a study. But yeah, it was quite amazing.

And the sort of ease with which they made that transition now — at least to me, it seemed that they made that transition with great ease, although there probably was a lot of emotional turmoil, but it was difficult to get at that, you know. People were trying to be strong and not admit to how difficult the choice had been, how hard it had been to, you know, make that transition.

ANDERSON: What about for you?

53:22

ALEXANDER: Oh, for me, it was really hard — oh, yeah, for me, it was really hard. It wasn't until I fell in love with Jill that I stopped doubting and questioning and agonizing, agonizing, really. I had made a friend, Bea Kreloff, who was a lesbian, who became a dear friend — an artist — became a dear friend. She's sort of a motherly woman, and I kept going to her and asking her all my questions. You know, she had been married and she had two sons, but even while she was married, she was having a sexual relationship with a woman, a couple of women, over the course of, like, twenty years. This astonished me. You did? Does your husband know about it? No, of course not. It was something private.

Wow, there were worlds that were opening up that I had no idea of, and I think that most people have no idea that women do have, first of all, women do have a sexual life. They're very sexual. And the sexual life that they're having with women is a lot better than the sexual life that they were having with the men that they were involved with, you know.

That was a major question for me, too. Oh, yeah. A question on my questionnaire was, Did you discover lust when you became a lesbian? Because that was true for me. I mean, I think I worded it a little bit better at the time, (Anderson laughs) but that was true for me. I was astonished at how sexual I felt with women as opposed to men. I mean, I had had a number of relationships, sexual relationships with men, that had been completely unsatisfactory. Some of them had been very satisfying. But I had decided that the ones that were not satisfactory were — the men were stupid. They just didn't know how to make love. And that was probably true.

But I never felt that with women, that they didn't know how to make love. I don't know. It was just instinctive. I mean, I think that one of my first sexual experiences was with a woman who was a lesbian and had been for many years, who said to me, "Are you sure you've never done

this before?" "No, really, I never did." But yeah, it was a very powerful experience for me.

I was in analysis at the time with a neo-Freudian, no less, for many years, and it was a man, and I went to him and told him about this sexual experience that I had had, my first sexual experience with a woman and how powerful it had been. And his response was, "Don't worry. You're not a lesbian." And I said, "Hey, wait a minute. I don't care. That's not my question. My question is, What's happening to me? How come this is true?" Well, he wasn't able to answer that.

And eventually I stopped. I ended my analysis with him. You know, I always knew he was on my side. He was a wonderful man and helped me a lot. But as I said to him when I was leaving, "I don't have anything more to learn from you. You can't teach me anything. We have such different points of view." And he really basically didn't see that the feminist movement was necessary, you know. He thought, "Well, you got the vote. What more do you want?" Well, the vote, that's nothing. That was the beginning of my disenchantment with him, and shortly after that, I left. And also because, I mean, I wasn't into penis envy, you know. It was privilege envy. So, don't talk to me about these Freudian ideas. I just felt they were totally outmoded.

ANDERSON: Yeah, his framework didn't make sense for you anymore. OK. I'm going to have to stop the tape there.

58:15
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END INTERVIEW 2, TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

ANDERSON: OK. So, for this hour, let's first talk about Women Against Pornography [WAP]. How did you get involved with that organization? Why was that issue important to you?

ALEXANDER: How did I get involved? Susan Brownmiller and I were good friends by that time. This was 1979 and we had worked in New York Radical Feminists, we had worked on a number of things together and she had written about pornography in her book, in her book on rape, *Against Our Will*. And she had gone out to California where she met a group of young women who were involved in Take Back the Night actions and things like that, who were working against violence against women and who also had taken up this pornography, the anti-pornography issue. And she had invited one of the young — a young woman named Lynn Campbell to come to New York to help organize an anti-pornography movement here, because — and it was true, New York really is the media capital of the country, and the place where you could really make the most of the issue.

So, anyway, Susan B. had invited me to come to these meetings about the issue, mostly in her apartment in the Village. I forget the street right now [Jane Street], but anyway, she lived in the West Village. That was another way that we knew each other, because we had lived close to each other, just a block or two away from each other. Anyway, so she invited me to come to these meetings and I went and was really fascinated by the issue.

And, Susan, you know, she's really an amazing woman, took ten thousand dollars of her own money and created a fund to help to pay for this organization, or to pay for the development of this organization. Initially it had been called Women Against Violence Against Women — that was the name of the group — because the focus was going to be on pornography, and since it was really Susan's insistence that pornography was violence against women, she was mostly responsible for changing the name to Women Against Pornography.

That got us into a lot of trouble, I mean, trouble in the sense that women liked the idea of the title and the idea of women being against violence against women. But many women did not see pornography as a big issue, because, you know, *Deep Throat* — that movie had made pornography chic and cool and acceptable. I don't understand why, because when I saw that movie — it was just around there that, when we were first organizing, I saw that movie and I could not believe it. It was just terrifying, it was so degrading to that poor woman, to Linda Lovelace, that I could not understand why people found it funny or cool. [At one point a thin glass tube is inserted into her vagina. I was horrified, worried that it might break.]

But anyway, here we are, trying to raise money. We needed more than that ten thousand dollars to organize a movement, basically. And so we began fundraising and it was really difficult to convince women to

give us anything because they did not want to focus on pornography. They wanted to focus on violence against women. [Some refused to see the connection.]

We had decided that we would have a conference on pornography and a march against pornography. New York, especially, with all the kiosks, the newsstands on all the corners in New York, and all the little stores that sold cigarettes and cigars and newspapers and magazines, it was a constant assault, visual assault on women to see all these magazines — you know, *Penthouse* and *Hustler* and *Playboy* and some that were much lesser known but were really quite violent in their depiction and their [humiliating] imagery of women. So that was our focus. We were talking about this visual assault and how it created a climate of violence against women because, you know, these things were acceptable and they were degrading to women, so we had to do something about it.

So, OK, we'd gotten into trouble because we changed our name and also because, I mean, at least as far as lesbians were concerned, they used pornography. [Some] lesbian women used pornography. This sort of surprised me, but that was an objection. I mean, when I gathered lesbian groups together for little parties and to ask for money, that kind of thing, they didn't say so explicitly, but you know, you began to understand that these images were titillating to women. They did not see them as degrading or, at least, I guess, what they were looking at, they didn't see as degrading. So that was another problem.

But we had created this slogan — oh, we were given a storefront at the corner of Ninth Avenue and 42nd Street. Amazing. Carl Weisbrod, who was a lawyer who was working for the city at the time, helped to find us this space and it was free.

ANDERSON: Am azing.

7:30

ALEXANDER: It was a storefront. And so we found desks, people donated desks and things like that. And we put in telephones and opened this storefront with this sign out front saying Women Against Pornography and the slogan, "It's About Time." The slogan came to us because people, women especially, would walk in the door and say, Women Against Pornography: it's about time. (Anderson laughs) So that became our slogan. And the conference that we held, it was at one of the high schools on the West Side, with a big space, a big enough space. We knew that we'd get a lot of women attending, and there were at least five hundred women who came to that session. We were going to hold them on the same day but it became sort of logistically impossible, so we held the march one weekend and then the conference the following weekend.

And the march — again, because we were women who knew how to work the press. The press has always been sort of a major organizing tool for the women's movement, and we knew how to use it then and to our advantage. Of course, they'd be critical and that kind of thing, but at

least they would get the word out. That was the important thing. And they did get the word out about this march and conference.

So we had, I forget the number, but we had a large number of people who marched with us. We had a lot of trouble getting parade permits and they didn't want us to take over the entire street. They wanted us to confine our march to the sidewalks. But there were so many people that we were able to take over the entire street. And we went from Columbus Circle, which was where we gathered, and we ended up at that park behind the library on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Sixth Avenue, where we had a rally, the post-march rally. And it was a very stirring kind of demonstration.

Hal Prince, who — because we were in the theater district, we made friends with the producers, some of the producers, theater producers and just theater folk, you know, and Hal Prince was a very famous producer who just took an interest in us and we asked his advice about how best to make this march an exciting event. And he told us how to do it. He told us the kinds of posters we should make, how colorful they should be, that there should be a lot of them, you know. He had done *Evita* and he did the same sort of thing in *Evita*, with big posters and slogans and lots of excitement. And so, that was what we did for the march.

And it was a great event, and we got a lot of press coverage. *Newsday*, for example, put us on their front page, a big picture of the front line of the march on their front page. And we had people like Bella Abzug was in the front line march and Gloria Steinem and just, you know, really well-known feminists who came to support us, and who then afterwards spoke at the rally.

And from that moment on we were deluged with requests for interviews and to appear on various news programs, various talk shows and things like that. I remember we were invited to appear on *Phil Donahue*. It was the most famous television talk show of the time, and his home base was in Chicago, and three of us were going to go: Susan Brownmiller, me, and Lynn Campbell, who was the young organizer. And so we go to the airport, and we're going to be picked up in Chicago by one of the show's producers and driven to the studio. But because we thought we were waiting for Susan, Lynn and I missed the plane. Susan was on the plane and we missed it. So, it was then this hectic crazy thing about getting on the next plane and the producer was having a fit. She said she would never do that again. She usually had people come to Chicago the day before and stay in a hotel that night, the night before, and so they were there in plenty of time in the studio. But not that day. She was really — she was so upset with us.

But anyway, Lynn and I got there. It was an hour-long show and Susan went on first for the first ten minutes and we got there — amazingly we got there in time for the rest of the program. And that was really the making of our movement because everybody was watching *Phil Donahue* in those days. And of course, he was pro-feminist and was very supportive and it was a very positive kind of interview with us. So, that really launched us.

14:09

ANDERSON: And when did you become a staff person or the coordinator of WAP?

ALEXANDER: Well, that happened right at the beginning.

ANDERSON: Oh, it did. OK.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, it did. Oh, yeah. We discovered that Lynn Campbell, young as she was — she was only 21 or 22 — had a fatal form of cancer, skin cancer, I think, and was not expected to live for a very long time. And so, you know, it was necessary to not replace her, exactly, but to give her a lot of support. And so, Florence Rush, who also worked with us — a very prominent feminist in New York — and Susan, who lived in the same building, talked about it. And Florence said to Susan, “Let’s ask Dolores to do this.” And so that’s what they did. I forget where I was working at the time, but I was thrilled to be asked because I hadn’t been involved. There was nothing going on in the women’s movement at the time. And so, I said yes immediately. And it was just a wonderful, wonderful couple of years. I worked with them from ’79 until ’83, and really helped to build the anti-pornography movement (phone rings: pause in recording)

ANDERSON: We were talking about WAP and I have a couple of questions. You were saying you were there until ’83, I think. So that means that you were involved in the organization when the Barnard Conference happened in ’82. So, why don’t you tell me about your experience at the Barnard Conference.

ALEXANDER: Well, we heard about this conference at Barnard about sex and sexuality only after — well not after the fact, but well into the planning stages. We were not invited. Amazingly, we were not invited. Here we were the only game in town, we thought, and they totally ignored us.

But the reason was because there were these women who were pro-pornography, who were praising bondage and discipline — I mean, really, I thought strange kinds of sexuality — as a liberating experience for women. And, you know, we disagreed because we felt that the person who was the submissive one — not the dominant one, but the submissive one — was, you know, just a replication of what was happening in the heterosexual society, but even worse because she was being oppressed by a woman, another woman.

So, their views became the prominent views at this conference, and we decided to protest it because we were not invited to be on any of the panels or any of the discussions or anything like that. So, what we did was we organized a protest demonstration on the street in front of Barnard. And with, again, signs, and we handed out literature protesting our exclusion. And we mentioned a couple of names of people, women, who were prominent in that S&M type of movement and who we felt were — they had written about it and so we didn’t think there was

anything wrong with mentioning them. That became a big issue with them because we had mentioned their names and they felt that that was wrong and we shouldn't have done that, singled them out that way.

But the sponsor of the conference, a company — I've forgotten what company — heard about this brouhaha. And also they [the conference organizers] put out this little booklet that basically, I think, promoted these pro-pornography points of view. And that fell into the hands of this sponsoring organization and they became really upset, and withdrew their financial support and their sponsorship. And Barnard, some of the administrators at Barnard just turned on us. Because, you know, they lost their funding, and that had been an annual type conference. The subject changed from year to year but at least they had been able to have feminist conferences, and now they wouldn't be able to.

So that was a very — you couldn't go anywhere in those days without being — I couldn't go anywhere in those days without being assaulted by the pro-pornography point of view, and there was no rational discussion about it. It was almost an instant loud quarrel. I was very uncomfortable. I hated to go to parties because I'd be introduced to somebody and, Oh, they'd say, you're the — yeah, it was not a comfortable place to be.

ANDERSON: How did your relationship with WAP end in 1983?

20:08

ALEXANDER: Oh, it ended fine. Let's see. I had a wonderful working relationship with all of those women. They were all extremely dedicated and just — I mean, we had our disagreements and problems and stuff. But basically, it was a very good cooperative experience. Why did I leave? I think I left because I felt that — oh, OK. I knew that we were going to have trouble continuing getting our funding. Our funding was drying up. It was not a popular issue because, you know, organizations, foundations, did not believe in our cause, and so they didn't want to give us any money. And also, I think, again, I was tired. I was kind of burned out. You know, I had been doing it for several — '79, '80, '81, '82 — four years, and I just was really tired. And also, I wasn't making enough money. I had two jobs. I was working for WAP and I was working at *Time* magazine, because I couldn't live otherwise, and I just — I had to give up one or the other, and I just — I had to stay with *Time* because that was the place where I was getting all these benefits and all of that stuff. A pension was building, you know. So I couldn't leave that.

But I left WAP and they gave me a little party when I was leaving and they gave me a parting gift, you know, a pretty little pin. And I took a long vacation from activism. And eventually, I don't know, a year or two later, WAP asked me to come back and work with them again. But at that point, I don't know, the energy had wound down and, you know, the issue was established by that time. I mean, there was still lots of argument about it but at least it had been established as a feminist issue and I felt that we had changed the consciousness of the country about

pornography. It was no longer cool or acceptable, socially acceptable, where it had been. Not anymore.

One of the things that we did, especially early on, was we gave tours of the sex shops on 42nd Street. They were very popular, I have to say. We only charged five dollars. It was not really, you know, an important fundraiser. But God, it was an amazing consciousness raiser. We would go into these places and it was really unbelievable. You know, sometimes, I mean, nuns came with us and things like that.

I remember, though, like one of the first times I went into Show World on 42nd Street, there were women, live women, who were behind these windows. You know, you put your quarter in or whatever and then the open window would open for a specific amount of time and these women would be doing really lewd type dancing and they'd have almost nothing on, or maybe nothing on, I can't remember. But anyway, so a group of women went in and we all put our quarters in or whatever and all these windows raised. It was like a semicircle. And all these windows opened and this woman that was performing looked at us and she said to me, "Are you with a church group, honey?" And I said, "Oh, no, no, no." She said, "I guess you think that what I'm doing is awful." And I said, "No, we don't at all. We're really on your side. We just think that you're being exploited." So she said, "Well, listen, honey, this is better than fucking for free." (laughs) So, anyway, that was the tone a lot of the time from these women.

We tried to organize them. We tried to get them to come join us. We didn't have any success, really. So, not only did we do the tours but we also developed a slide show, slides of these magazines, the images in these magazines, and we developed a program presenting our ideas through it, showing how these things were violence against women. And it was very effective, and we took them to schools and groups, women's groups, and civic groups, you know. The 42nd Street redevelopment people, for example, introduced us to many of the civic groups in the area. And so, we'd show them our slide show.

So, we were really very effective. And as I say, I kept insisting that we changed the consciousness of the country on the issue of pornography. Whether the pro-pornography women liked it or not, we really did.

ANDERSON: Do you think it's still a divisive issue among feminists?

25:55

ALEXANDER: Oh, yes, oh yeah.

ANDERSON: So, even 20 years later, it's —

ALEXANDER: Yeah, I do think that, except that I think that young women don't see it. Sex has changed so much — you know, the notion of sex. Women are so much freer sexually than they were then. I mean, that was how many years ago? A long time ago — 20, more than 20 years ago — and a lot has changed. Young women just — you know, bisexuality even is

acceptable. I remember going down an escalator behind two young, beautiful young black women at a feminist conference in Baltimore or something. Feminist Majority put it on. And one woman was saying to the other that she had not told this man that she was dating that she was a bisexual because she said, "Every time I say something like that, it just isn't worth it. It's just such a big hassle." And she's saying this out loud, you know, everybody can hear. And I said to her, "Oh, I love you [for your openness]." You know, it's so natural. What she was saying was so natural. And she was so open about it. There was no shame or embarrassment or guilt and she was able to talk about it. Extraordinary. And that really reflected the change for me. This was a good ten or more years after I left Women Against Pornography.

ANDERSON: Right. What was the demographic of Women Against Pornography? Were you many women of color? Jewish women? Lesbians? How would you describe the group that was primarily involved in the work and the board staff?

ALEXANDER: The women who were the activists were mostly straight women. There were a few lesbians. I guess I was the main one. No, it was mostly straight women. And they were young women. And we tried to get women of color involved. We invited them to a couple of little events that we had and almost nobody showed up. One woman did. Her name is Abdur Rahman. She was a Muslim and was a feminist. Interestingly, she became a lesbian after she was in the group for a while. I think she probably was interested in it to begin with and that's why she came to us, but she did become a lesbian. I don't know whether she still is, but she certainly was experimenting with it.

No. I found that black women, even Hispanic women — they weren't turned on by our issues, you know, it was really unfortunate but they just weren't. I guess we didn't speak to them in some basic way. So they just — they really didn't come out.

ANDERSON: Was it a comfortable place for you as a lesbian?

ALEXANDER: Yes. Yeah, I didn't have any problem with it. I mean, these were — the women, the activists, were good strong feminists who were beyond that debate.

ANDERSON: Good.

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ALEXANDER: They had made up their minds and they were pro-woman. It didn't matter what you were.

ANDERSON: So, is the end of that era, in 1983, around there, the end of your involvement with feminist organizations?

ALEXANDER: Unfortunately, yeah, pretty much. There was not much going on afterwards. I did do — well, it wasn't really an involvement. I had a very dear friend, Toni Carabillo, in California, who was a major figure in the Feminist Majority, and worked very closely with Eleanor Smeal and I was going out to visit her a lot because she was dying of cancer. She was a very dear friend of mine and I just was so worried about her. So I would go out there a couple of times a year and in the course of my going there, I spent a lot of time with Eleanor Smeal and with that group of feminists. And didn't really work with them but contributed ideas and, you know, conversations. We talked political stuff. And so that was really exciting to me.

Oh, but wait a minute. There was one other thing that I did. In 1995, there was the Fourth World Conference on Women, the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, and I wanted to go. I just wanted to go so badly. And I knew that Charlotte Bunch and I had worked together on various things over the years, and she had an organization at Rutgers, the [Center for Women's] Global Leadership.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

ALEXANDER: I knew she was working on human rights for women, and I called her up and said, "Charlotte, I want to go to this conference so badly but I want to go as a participant. I don't want to just go as an observer. So please let me work with you. You don't have to pay me a salary." By this time, I think I was just retired. Yeah, I was just retired, and really looking — had lots of energy, was looking for something to do. She was thrilled that I offered to work with her. So, I had an apartment in the city, but I went to live with my mother in New Jersey so that the commute to Rutgers would not be so bad. And I went there, I went to Rutgers at least three days a week, maybe sometimes more, and worked with them on organizing for the conference.

And then went to Beijing and worked there in China, although I don't know if you know anything about that conference, but when the Chinese realized how many women there were going to be — they thought maybe 10,000 at the most, but 50,000 women registered and showed up. And they realized that this was going to be — they didn't want this kind of propaganda or this kind of freedom of thought and movement. And you know, they didn't want their women to be exposed to it, so they moved us from Beijing to this little town of Huiarou, which was an hour away from Beijing, and set up this system of [transportation] so that buses would take us there.

This conference — at least the NGO part, which I was involved in, the non-governmental organization part — lasted for two weeks, and for two weeks it rained. It was like a parade ground that they set up this conference on, and it was tents. It was tent city. We didn't live there but that's where all the displays and the organizations had their little conferences and things like that. By the end — and no kidding, it rained for two weeks — it became mud city and then flat city, because the tents

collapsed. Everything got wet. What a mess. It was just — what a mess. The thing that everybody was buying was boots and rain gear. It was absolutely awful.

At the end of it, however, I had at least another week in China to do some sightseeing and I went to the Great Wall and it was the most exotic trip of my life, you know, and the most thrilling one.

But while I was there, I felt I did some good work because the organization that I was with had a speakout. They didn't call it a speakout, [they called it a tribunal] but it was women from all over the world testifying to human rights abuses in their country. And we had a major impact there, I think. It was thrilling. It was just thrilling.

ANDERSON: And it must have been just so exciting having thought that the women's movement was sort of dead here, to feel all that.

35:10
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ALEXANDER: Yeah, to find that it was international and such depth. I mean, this wasn't — each country had more than just a burgeoning women's movement. They had lots of NGOs and there was strong, strong feminist — I don't know whether you'd call them movements, but presences in their countries through these non-governmental organizations. It was really quite amazing. I took lots of pictures.

At the very beginning of the conference, the Chinese offered a spectacle, a welcoming spectacle in this huge stadium, and it was the first day and women, everybody just flocked there. We were taken by these buses. But that was in Beijing, the major stadium there. And everybody wore their ethnic costumes. Oh, it was so — it was beautiful, and it was so colorful. From Africa, from Asia, from Mongolia, you know, everybody had apparently, very thoughtfully, decided that this first day, or first couple of days, anyway, they would present their ethnic dress. It was quite a parade of fashion and styles. It was so interesting.

And the Chinese are wonderful spectacle makers. I mean, this welcoming thing lasted for over an hour. Large groups of women and men in colorful costumes doing various precision dancing or marching or music, and also in these fabulous colors. And at some point, they released these hundreds of doves, you know. And there were all these wonderful signs, international peace signs and the dove was a symbol of the conference. It was just the most — I'd never seen anything like it. Well over an hour. But I guess this is sort of an ordinary thing for the Chinese to do. It was just great. It was really great.

The funny thing was about that, was they — rumor had it that the Chinese were really worried about this lesbian presence and they thought that the lesbians were going to make a public demonstration of their sexuality. And what we heard was that they thought that lesbians were going to take their clothes off and parade around, you know. And that was one of the reasons, allegedly, they moved us to Huairou. They had these trucks, or these vans, that were full of blankets to throw over these women who were going to take their clothes off.

I don't know whether this was true or not, but the military presence and the police presence was awesome. We couldn't go anywhere without opening our bags and having them inspected. At that opening ceremony, even our water was taken away from us. I remember, the first day that I went onto the fairground, going through this security check, they took out my lip gloss and opened it up and wanted to know what is this. And I had some Tums and they took them, well, what is this. It was just — it was astonishing. And some women said that they [returned to] their rooms sometimes and there was somebody in there going through their luggage.

The Chinese, they were just really scared. This was 1995. They were only beginning, I guess — they wanted very much to become an international player and the reason that they said they would accept this conference was they wanted the Olympics, and this was a way of showing the world that they were capable of entertaining a huge group of people. They got the huge group of people but they shunted us off into this terrible place, just a terrible place.

I guess their women were — you know, Chinese are intelligent people, they're well-educated people. Their women, I think, already were infected with feminist ideas and I don't know what they thought they were protecting [their women] from. But that was what they did, was to try to segregate us and to keep us away from their people. But it was a thrilling, a thrilling experience for me.

ANDERSON: And after Beijing, did you live — move out here full time with retirement?

40:48

ALEXANDER: Oh, yes. That was when I moved out here. I already owned a little house in Greenport which I had bought in 1985. I've been very fortunate, lucky, in my choice of houses. I bought the house in Greenport — I think it was the last cheap house in Greenport. And you know, when I sold it, well, I probably had it ten years, when I sold it ten years later, I more than doubled my money on it. My mother and I knew — at that point, my mother was in her middle eighties and I knew that she couldn't live alone any longer, and so I really pressured her into selling her house in New Jersey, and I sold my house in Greenport and together we bought this place. And I just feel — again, I feel really fortunate because I got this house which is on the water and I think a spectacular setting — it was like the last low-priced house before the market just took off, you know. So I could sell this place and get rich, but then where would I go. That's the problem. Property values all over the country have gone zooming in the last 10, 15 years.

ANDERSON: And you came out here because you already had connections and friends who were living here full time?

ALEXANDER: Yes.

ANDERSON: We've got about maybe –

ALEXANDER: I'm glad you're focused.

ANDERSON: Yeah, just to give you a sense of where we are, we've got about 15 minutes left, so I just want to sort of wrap up by talking about your community out here and the North Fork Women for Women Fund [NFWFWF].

42:39

ALEXANDER: Yes. I had been coming out here for weekends since about 1975 and developed this extensive network of lesbian friends. And, oh, I don't know, I'm not sure exactly when NFWFWF was organized. But it was a group of lesbian women who decided to put together an organization that would help lesbian women, because there was nothing like it, you know. I mean, we were always giving to other causes but it was really about time that we started helping ourselves.

And so this organization called the North Fork Women for Women Fund was born. You'll notice that the word lesbian was not in the name. It was because at the time there were a lot of women out here who were closeted and who didn't feel that they could come out, because they were worried about their jobs and their reputations and things like that. But it was a very successful organization and we have these annual events, auctions, dinner auctions, and we raised a lot of money each year that way. And also, there were other little fundraising events. And the purpose of the organization is to help lesbian women who have medical emergencies or who need help with medical expenses or even medical insurance.

And this organization has helped to attract more and more lesbians to the area. It's a very gay-friendly area. Actually, for lesbians, and for gay men as well. Over the years, I don't know, hundreds of thousands of dollars have been raised, and hundreds of thousands of dollars have been given away to lesbians. For example, I'm going into the hospital. There is a committee that grew out of Noof Woof as it's called, in a joking fashion. There is a committee called Help Her that grew out of this, and when I come home, they will have organized a group of women to bring me dinner every night for, I don't know, X number of days until I'm really able to do it myself — or to take and drive me to the doctor, or to whatever. And I've had so many medical expenses in the last couple of years with surgeries and things that I have gone to them for financial help and it was given to me without too many questions asked, fortunately.

I just feel so fortunate. And these women are great friends. I mean, they're wonderful people. It's a very sympathetic, compassionate place to live. And I just have so many wonderful friends here, you know. I don't know of any other community, lesbian community, in the country that does the sorts of things that we do, or that has that sense of community that we have developed, you know.

I have a friend, Olga, who sold her house in Southold and moved to Florida and bought a house there and wants to come back now because she has not been able to duplicate that sense of community.

ANDERSON: How is your community changing now that there's more younger women and lesbians moving out here, or how's that affecting the organization, too? Are they involved with it?

46:20

ALEXANDER: Yes. They're very involved with it. I think there's less need. You know, dykes, it turns out, are very well educated and very well employed. They make a good bit of money, usually.

ANDERSON: Well, the ones that are coming out here, at least.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, the ones who are coming out here. You have to, because these are second homes. So they have to be doing fairly well in order to be able to afford to buy a house here and to support two residences. But they, too, want this sense of community and they give happily. This last auction — which is always held over Labor Day weekend — there were almost two hundred women, and they made a profit of something like 37,000 dollars for one party. That's pretty good, you know? So, yeah, the younger women are coming in as much as — it amazes me. I was going through some photographs recently. My mouth is getting so dry.

ANDERSON: Don't worry, we're almost done.

ALEXANDER: I was going through some photographs recently of parties we had and things like that. Unfortunately, there were several pictures in which almost everybody has died, you know. We're getting old. But we're being replaced by young women who, I wouldn't call them feminists, exactly, but they're living the feminist dream. They're lawyers, they're doctors. It used to be that all these dykes were schoolteachers, not making much money and usually having to scrape together a lot of money — I mean, money to afford the second home. But now, these are younger women. Or, you know, it's not so hard for them to enter law firms or they're accepted in hospitals and practices and things like that. And they're doing really quite well. And they want to help. They're not going to be activists. They're not going to go demonstrate anyplace. But they do want to help each other.

ANDERSON: So, do you see the organization continuing on a long life?

ALEXANDER: Yes, oh, yes.

ANDERSON: You see a role for it still?

ALEXANDER: Definitely, definitely. There are some women — I mean, there's a new board every couple of years, you know, new women, new blood, so to

49:04

speak, new energy on the board. Yeah, I think the organization will go on for quite a while.

ANDERSON: How have you been involved with the organization?

ALEXANDER: Well, I was a board member for six years. And I guess I went on the board shortly after I moved out here full time. And again, you know, I can't help it. I throw myself into this. It really became almost a job, I mean, I spent so much time at it. I was an officer. I did the newsletter for a few years — I mean, I wrote it, I edited, you know. And helped with organizing various events and things like that. So, I was very, very involved. The last post that I held was as vice president and then acting president, often, when our president at the time was sick.

So I was deeply involved, and still am. I mean, anytime they ask me to do anything, like go to the auction and sit and take money or sell drink tickets or whatever, I'm happy to do it. It's a lot of fun, too, because then I get to see people, you know, that I don't see all the time. It's a wonderful sphere.

ANDERSON: And it sounds like the organization itself is really the heart of the community out here.

ALEXANDER: It definitely is, it definitely is. The North Fork wouldn't be the North Fork without Noof Woof.

ANDERSON: So just, I guess, in conclusion, I'd like to ask you to think about feminism as a concept. Does it still have any meaning for you in our life? Do you still call yourself a feminist?

ALEXANDER: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I still call myself and I still think of myself as a feminist, yes, except that now I think that my ideas of feminism are outdated.

ANDERSON: You do.

ALEXANDER: I belong to Veteran Feminists of America, and Jacqui Ceballos asked me to — I went to a Barnard conference that Veteran Feminists put on and there were a group of young women there who sort of challenged the older women on the panel, especially Susan Brownmiller, who has said that, basically, young women weren't doing anything, that there was no movement anymore. And these women took real exception to that. So, that fascinated me. And when Jacqui asked me to organize a conference on younger women with younger women, I said, "Absolutely." But then I began having joint problems and I began needing surgeries and things like that. So although I did a lot of work on it, I had to withdraw. But I did a lot of reading. I bought a lot of the books by younger women and did a lot of reading of the writings of young feminists.

And it's true, they have a totally different conception of what feminism is than I have. Basically, they have equal opportunity. Basically, they have equal pay — not quite, but, you know, close. Abortion was never a criminal act for them. It's just an accepted fact, so much that we fought for, they grew up with. They don't know that there was ever a time that they didn't have this right. So, yes, I mean, I think feminism is still very relevant but it's very different. The young women have a very different idea of feminist values.

ANDERSON: So do you see that as conflict, then? Are those two feminisms in conflict? Or is it just about change over time?

53:15

ALEXANDER: I don't see it as a conflict. I'm not sure. I think that the older women feminists are having a hard time accepting the young women because the young women — the older [women], it's like they can't hear what the young women are saying. These are their — [the older women] developed these theories. They developed this whole movement, and how dare you come in and say that this isn't right or it should be different. So (phone rings; pause in recording)

ANDERSON: So, do you want to wrap up your thought about young feminists?

ALEXANDER: Yes, the difference between young feminists and old: I think that older women have to learn to listen to young women. I think it's really hard for them to listen to young women.

ANDERSON: But some of that, too — don't you think that sometimes young women come at the topic without a level of respect, or, I mean —

ALEXANDER: Yeah, that's right. But we older women have the same attitude towards younger women. We, too, lack respect. We, too, are not really listening. We don't hear each other. That's what we really need to do. That's why I wanted to put together that conference. And I didn't succeed in doing it, but other people have done conferences around the country to get old feminists and young feminists together. We've got to talk to each other.

ANDERSON: Right, right, right. Yeah, it's the passing of the torch.

ALEXANDER: Yes, it is.

ANDERSON: It is. Well, is there anything else that you would like to add before we wrap up?

ALEXANDER: I can't think of anything. I really can't. I'm all talked out. (laughs)

ANDERSON: All right. I'll turn this off now. Thank you, Dolores.

ALEXANDER: Thank you. It's been a great pleasure.

ANDERSON: Oh, good.

55:22

END INTERVIEW 2

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