

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **JOAN E. BIREN**

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

February 27–28, 2004  
Silver Spring, Maryland

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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### Narrator

Joan E. Biren (b.1944) grew up in Washington D.C., graduated from Mount Holyoke College in 1966, and pursued graduate training at both Oxford University and the American University. Biren joined the women's liberation movement in D.C. in 1969. One of the first out lesbians in the movement, Biren and others (including Rita Mae Brown and Charlotte Bunch) formed a lesbian-separatist collective, the Furies, in 1971. Though the collective was short-lived, it had, through its publications, a significant impact on the strategies of the women's movement.

Biren is best known for her photographic portraits, some of the earliest documents of late 20th-century lesbian life. Realizing the need for affirming images and self-expression outside of traditional patriarchal language, her work has appeared in *off our backs*, *The Washington Blade*, *Gay Community News*, and on countless album and book covers. Biren has published two ground-breaking collections of her photography: *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* (1979) and *Making A Way: Lesbians Out Front* (1987). In the 1990s, Biren turned from photography to filmmaking. She documented the 1987 and 1993 gay and lesbian marches on Washington and recently completed an award-winning film on lesbian pioneers Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon.

### 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 Biren describes growing up in a Jewish family in Washington D.C., her education, and her entrance into activism. She reflects on the nuances of class and ethnicity, both in mainstream institutions and in the movement, and on her coming-out process. Biren describes her role in the Furies, the dynamics of the collective and the aftermath of its dissolution, reflecting on its impact on her life and on the larger movement. The interview also focuses on Biren's cultural activism and her work as a photographer. Biren describes the process of finding subjects, her intentions behind the work, and the impact of her photographs. She concludes with a discussion of her current work as a filmmaker in the gay and lesbian community.

### Restrictions

None

### Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Six 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 Joan E. Biren.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Biren, Joan E. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, February 27–28, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Joan E. Biren, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, February 27, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Biren, Joan E. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, February 27–28, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Joan E. Biren, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, February 27, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted FEBRUARY 27 and 28, 2004, with:

JOAN E. BIREN

at: Silver Spring, MD

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Joan Biren in Silver Spring, Maryland, at home, on February 27. And this is the first of two days of taping her oral history for the Voices of Feminism Project, and we're going to start by talking about your childhood. Can you talk about how your family came to Washington, D.C.?

BIREN: Well, my parents were both born in New York City. They were both first-generation Americans. All four of my grandparents immigrated from Eastern Europe, various places, and uh, my mother and father grew up and met each other in New York City, and my father came down to Washington to get employment during, at the beginning of the war, I guess, World War II, and after he got settled, he brought my mom down. They were married before they came down. So I was born here. I'm a relative rarity, that Washingtonian who stayed here. It's a very transient city, between politicians and the diplomats and the military. A lot of people come and go, and the people who stay mostly are not white people. So that makes me even a little more rare.

I was born during World War II, a Navy baby in a Navy hospital. My dad was in the military, and, um, we lived across the river, across the Potomac River in Anacostia, which is, you know, like the other side of the tracks now, and it was — when I went to elementary school, it was pre-Brown v. Board of Education. So when the schools became integrated, my parents, who pride themselves on being liberals, decided that for the children's sake — I have a younger sister — they needed to get to a better school system, so they moved to Montgomery County, Maryland, and I was, at that point, in sixth grade.

And so I grew up in the suburbs, and I swore I would never live in the Maryland suburbs, or any suburbs, ever again, and here I am, in the same county, Montgomery County. And I came out here kicking and screaming from Washington, D.C., which I had moved back into and where I lived for a long time, and I came out here for economic reasons, because I needed space for my work and I just couldn't afford to stay in

the city. And now, I love being here. I love it here. I have a wonderful community. I'm surrounded by family and friends and, you know, my chosen family and chosen community, and it's great.

ANDERSON: What else do you know about your parent's families? Where were they living in New York? How long did you know them?

BIREN: I was born on the day my maternal grandfather died, so I never knew him, but a lot of — you can imagine if you are born on the very day your grandfather dies, there are a lot of expectations about who you're going to turn out to be, and that grandfather was very revered by the family. He was — I don't know what he did, honestly. I know — my mother's family is very secretive and they didn't like their mother who abandoned them at one point, which is why the father was so, held in such high esteem.

ANDERSON: So she was raised by her father?

BIREN: No, she was really raised by her mother but her mother ran out a couple of times. The mother actually sounds much more interesting to me. She ran away to Canada and was a bartender for a while and you know, she sounds like she had some spirit in her and she had five children and obviously it was too much for her but it left, you know, clearly left a mark on my mother.

I know more about my father's side of the family. My grandmother in Poland was a seamstress. Strangely, she sewed a lot of kimonos because it was a time when Japanese culture was very big among the wealthy in Europe. They were not wealthy. I mean, obviously, they came over here partly for economic opportunity and a lot for religious freedom. They were — all four — also Jewish, and, my uncle on my father's side once told me my grandfather was the only Jewish guy who did his Army service first and then immigrated. So, I don't know. But they — I knew my father's mother the best of all four — I knew neither grandfather. They both predeceased me appearing in the world, and my mother's mother was not somebody that my mother wanted anything to do with.

So my father's mother was the only grandparent that I knew. She spent most of her time asking me when I was going to get married. And she herself was married at least five times. So, I said —

ANDERSON: — a little unusual.

BIREN: Yes, she was kind of unusual. And, um, I said to her finally, you know, my parents didn't want me to come out to the family even after I came out to them as a lesbian. They were — I don't know, but they didn't want me to. I think they just didn't want to deal with it themselves, and

of course, they put off on the other family members that they couldn't handle it or whatever. I always thought that they could and eventually I told everybody and they were all fine. But, you know, the way I dealt with it with my grandmother was, she would say, you know, When are you gonna get married and when are you gonna get married, and I would say, Grandma, why do you want me to get married? What's the point of getting married? She said, Well, you know, you'll have somebody to take care of you. I said, Well, look at you. You got married, you know, five times. And she was, at this point, by herself. And in the Hebrew Home up in Rockville, Maryland, and I said, Didn't work for you, so I don't think I'm gonna go for it.

ANDERSON: Did you have a conversation about it?

BIREN: No, she met my lover at the time. She was very sharp. She knew what was going on. You know, and she didn't have any — I don't think she cared that I had a lesbian lover. She just felt that if I had a man in my life that he could provide for me, and you know, she wanted me to be protected and provided for and I was constantly pointing out to her that men didn't actually do that necessarily, so. But she, you know, they were very poor in New York. My grandmother, grandmother Fannie, would just — whenever the rent was due, if they didn't have it, they would just move. And that's when my dad started fishing, and he would actually fish for — to provide food. And he loved to fish till the end of his life. That was his great pleasure, was fishing.

ANDERSON: Did he fish in the Hudson?

BIREN: No, I mean, he actually — if you can believe it, the East River at one point had fish, before it got polluted, I think, and also in the ocean. They lived on Coney Island. They lived in Brooklyn. They lived in Queens, the Bronx, you know, everywhere. They lived all over. So, he came down here, he was the only brother. He was the only son. He had four sisters and he was the first to move here, and he moved in with the son of a man who was in a burial society with his father. I don't know if you know about burial societies, but in Eastern Europe and in the Jewish religion, I don't understand that much about them myself, but they're kind of like, you know, support groups for people who are from the same village or the same town, and they come over and then they keep in touch with each other in the new country. And so, he didn't know this person who was the son of somebody that somebody else knew. I'm not sure about all the details, but the important part of the story is that he moved in with this person who turned out to be a card-carrying Communist and that haunted him the rest of his career because he became very involved in intelligence work and defense work and because when he was young, he had lived with this guy, he felt, and I

don't know if to what extent it was true, that it always limited his — what he could do and how high he could go. And so, because of that, he was always very wary of my affiliations and associations, because he didn't want me to suffer because I had done this or that or the other thing, most of which I ultimately ended up doing anyway. But it worried him.

ANDERSON: Your father did not share these political leanings?

BIREN: No.

ANDERSON: He was a liberal.

BIREN: Well, strangely, he was never a Communist. My mother, I found out later in my life, had been a Communist, but she totally renounced it and hid it, and, uh, so I was not raised as a red-diaper baby or anything even close to that. Although, it was very interesting to me when I found out that in her youth, because her family had been hit very, very hard by the Depression and you know, her sister, I know, pretended not to be Jewish, to get a job, and they had done a lot of things like that. But my mother was pretty radical and then, she was, of course, then disillusioned along with everybody else by Stalin and so on. But...

ANDERSON: Was she in some kind of student organization that she was involved with?

BIREN: Well, she — she, in fact, never went to college. So,

ANDERSON: High school?

BIREN: No, it was after high school, I think, and one of the great stories, perhaps myths — one never knows with my mother — was that she was wildly in love with this young man who went off with the Lincoln Brigade to fight in Spain and was killed and then, you know, poor her, she had to settle for my dad, who was such a great guy, you know, but always living somewhat in the shadow of this slain hero. And she went to these summer camps that the communists had, and the story is she was on this one side of the lake of this communist camp and my father was on the other side of the lake in what I think was some kind of socialist camp and they would swim out into the middle of the lake and, you know —

ANDERSON: So that's where your parents met?

BIREN: No, actually, they met in the city. He was in one, you know, you have high rises in New York and he saw her through the window and, you

know, one of those stories. Where, eventually they figured out how to meet each other after seeing each other through the window.

ANDERSON: How did you find out about your mom's communist leanings?

BIREN: Oh, she kind of threw it at me at one point when I was all full of myself about being a revolutionary and — and she was really just trying to — she always was somewhat competitive with me and even though she lived vicariously through me to a certain extent, you know, she also — because she had been so deprived in her own childhood, in her life, she felt — she pushed me to a lot of different things, many of which I did and then I did some of these things on my own, because I always had a very difficult and contentious relationship with her. So, I had come home from doing something I thought was very, you know, right on and revolutionary and being very righteous about it, I'm sure, and so, you know, she said to me, Oh, you think you're the first one or you think you're the only one, well, I — blah, blah, blah. That's how it came out. And then I was like, whoa! You really — tell me all about that, and you know, it was interesting.

ANDERSON: And she did.

BIREN: Yeah, she did. Somewhat. She told me about it.

ANDERSON: But your father wasn't afraid of his marriage to her and her previous Communist affiliations?

BIREN: Yeah, well, see, she was, um, she didn't have quite the paper trail, I think, that the other one did. I mean, apparently, you know, when you're, as my father was, investigated and security checks and background checks and all of this, nothing ever turned up about my mom but it always turned up about this guy.

ANDERSON: What was the political atmosphere like in your home? Were your mom and dad coming from different places?

BIREN: Well, but not so much, because once she became disillusioned, she actually became, you know, like any convert. She almost went further over in the other way, and they, although they'd liked to think of themselves as liberals and they were certainly democrats, they were, uh, you know, my dad worked for the Pentagon. He worked in the Pentagon. They were like real Americans, you know. They believed, as so many first-generation Americans do, I think, that this really was a great democracy and a great country and gave them opportunities and once they made it out of the Depression, which left a big mark on both of them — I think that's why my father became a civil servant, because

at that time in Washington, if you were a civil servant, well, you could not get fired. You know, you had it made. You had security. You had job security. You had a good, steady income. You weren't going to get rich but you were certainly going to be able to provide for your family, and that was, you know, I grew up in a home — this is not about the politics — but where, you know, there weren't luxuries. I mean, they always were afraid the Depression was going to come back. This was a very, very common story for people of my generation, I think. You know, that their families were marked by that era of such scarcity, that they all tended to be savers.

ANDERSON: But you were raised in a middle-class home?

BIREN: Well, I don't think it started out as middle-class. It certainly turned into middle-class. But when I was a child and all the clothes I had were hand-me-downs, all the clothes were hand-made, I mean, we — I think it was, at the beginning, really a working-class home. And then it morphed into a middle-class home. And my sister, who is five years younger than I am, really got more of the benefit of that than I did. Uh, I never felt deprived. You don't know. When you're growing up in a house, whatever it is, you think it's normal, you know, so it — certainly, I never was hungry, I never didn't have shoes or something like that. But it was — it was lower middle-class, I would say. And then we became upwardly mobile.

The political things that I remember about being young — I remember the McCarthy period. I remember when the Army McCarthy hearings were on television. I used to sit really under the ironing board because my parents — you know, it wasn't a very big apartment that we were in and both my father and my mother used to iron. My mother was a very early feminist in her own way. She was like, you can iron your own shirts, you know, to my father. And he did, because he was that kind of guy. And, although when I became a feminist, I called him every dirty chauvinist pig name in the book there was.

But I remember a feeling of fear in my house during that time. My parents had these 33 rpm records including some that were like songs from the South African Veld and some that were the Red Army Chorus, and they smashed them all up. They smashed up these records, and I remember that, and I said, Why are you smashing the records, and they — and I didn't understand it at the time, and then later, of course, I understood. They were just scared, because my dad could lose his job, and because McCarthy was hunting people down.

And, they felt unsafe as Jews also, I think, the Rosenbergs trial was happening. I didn't understand that. But, you know, they understood that.

20:45

ANDERSON: Were you aware of it at the time?

BIREN: No, no, not the Rosenbergs. We talked about McCarthy, but not the Rosenbergs. And what I think, um— I lost my train of thought.

ANDERSON: McCarthy, the Rosenbergs, being afraid as Jews...

BIREN: Right, right. That's what I was going to say. So the way they dealt with that was — my mother had not come from a religious family, anyway. My father's family was religious, but my mother started really wanting to assimilate, so we were raised very, very assimilated, because I think, again, that was her way of thinking we would be safer. And where I lived, when we lived in, you know, southeast Washington, we were the only Jewish family there, year after year after year, I told the Hanukkah story, you know, in my classes, because that was sort of the little nod that they gave to Jewish people and that was it. But beside the Hanukkah story, I didn't know much else about being Jewish. I went to Hebrew school at this little storefront place for a couple of years because I insisted on it. You know, I wanted to be Jewish. I fought with my family because they had a Christmas tree, because my sister was little, she said she couldn't tell the difference, all her friends had Christmas trees, you know, so we were going to have one. And, you know, I thought it was wrong. Even very young, I had this sort of purist mentality.

ANDERSON: Was it a sense of injustice or was it because there was something about Judaism or being Jewish that was really attractive to you?

BIREN: No. I didn't know enough about Judaism or Jewishness to be attracted to it. All I knew was all my friends were telling me I was going to go to hell because I was Jewish. You know, they were very Christian and they would say, Oh, you're Jewish, you're going to go to hell, and try to get me to go to church with them and change me. And it was just something in my — my innate stubbornness and something about, OK, this doesn't feel bad, why is every — I was just — very similar to how I felt about my lesbianism later. You know, everybody is telling you it's wrong, it's bad, but it's who you are and I was very fortunate to have something in myself that said you should be true to who you are, and I think that came out first around my Judaism. Although I abandoned my Judaism later and now have come back to it.

But it's — it was also something just about, if my mom wanted it, I didn't want it. You know, I was just contrary to my mom. So, if I would say, you know, I want to join a temple after we moved out to Bethesda, um, and she said, Well you can't join a temple. I said, But I want to. And I didn't understand fully how expensive it was to join a temple, and honestly I don't think they could afford it. But what she said to me was, God doesn't care where you pray to him, so you just go. If you need to

pray to God who doesn't exist anyway, just go to your room and pray. You know, like, shut up and pray. Because they never really talked to me about money. What I understood about money and how much there was and what was possible, I just had to intuit.

Rupert — excuse me — come here. This is my little Rupert. I have two Maltese dogs and he's the noisy boy who you just heard. Can you see him? OK. So, he's going to sit here for a while and be quiet. Yes, I love you, too. And people say to me, you know, they think I'm this big dyke and they look at these cute little dogs and they say, Joan you have the wrong dogs. And even people who don't know me, you know, I'll walk in the Xerox place or something, they'll say, You have the wrong dogs. This is actually — a big Labrador, right? Big something. And, so I just tell people these dogs appeal to my inner gay man. These little frou-frou dogs appeal to me.

ANDERSON: Let's talk a little bit more about your family and trying to assimilate. The choice for your parents to move to Washington, D.C., which was not a Jewish town then, not a Jewish town now. What was it like in the 1940s? Can you talk about what some of the residue of that experience for them? Was it painful to leave behind a Jewish world and a Jewish community? Was that a loss for them?

BIREN: It wasn't a loss for my mother because she never had it and she didn't believe in it and she didn't want it. I think it was a loss for my father. It was one of the many losses that my father chose to be with my mother. He had to change his name. His name was Jacob Berenholz and she wouldn't marry him until he changed his name to Jack Biren.

ANDERSON: This was in New York?

BIREN: Right. So he knew that he wasn't going to be able to live as Jewishly as he had if he was going to be with her. And he chose that. When I was in Bethesda, it wasn't even just in Southeast, when I was in Bethesda at Walter Johnson High School — I brought the yearbook which I haven't seen in probably forty years — I was very political and I was running for some student government office, corresponding secretary or something like that. And I was running against Betsy Wright, who was the granddaughter of Frank Lloyd Wright and I had, even then, it's interesting to look back on it, very artistic friends, and they — even though I was political and I was not artistic at all, in my youth, I was just like, totally political. But I had these friends and they made gorgeous posters for me. You know, campaign posters. Really fantastic ones. (And that's the UPS delivery, probably) Um, and they were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti in this high school in Bethesda. And um, I think it shocked my parents. I think they were very upset by it. I don't remember being upset by it except that the artwork was ruined.

And of course, I went on to win the election, and it was nothing to do with Betsy. She was not at all — I mean, it really hurt her actually, in a way that negative campaigning, we know, hurts the person, the other person, sometimes. And I know it wasn't from her, it was just somebody, whoever.

But in Bethesda, at the time, we lived in this little enclave, this new development, subdivision, called Merrimac Park that was almost entirely Jewish, very, very Jewish, but totally surrounded by a culture that had been there before that was — there were covenants in some of the areas, there were country clubs, Kenwood Country Club just down the road from where we lived, that would not accept Jews. And I remember I was taken there by one of my friends for dinner once and I was very afraid, because I didn't know, if they found out if I was Jewish, they would throw me out of having dinner at the country club. I mean, when you're a kid, even though I think I was in high school by then, or junior high, if you know, OK, this club doesn't accept Jews, you don't understand it's just about membership. You know, so you feel strange.

ANDERSON: Still, it was right to feel like it was hostile territory.

BIREN: Yeah, well, it was still at that point. And then when I went to college, at Mount Holyoke, they of course paired me with a Jew as a roommate because there — that was safe.

ANDERSON: Was there a quota at Mount Holyoke at the time?

BIREN: I think there was, but I can't prove it, you know.

ANDERSON: Did your dad pass at work?

BIREN: No I don't think he did.

ANDERSON: There were assumptions made because of his last name or because he wasn't a practicing Jew that he was a Christian?

BIREN: No, I think everybody knew he was Jewish.

ANDERSON: You were assimilated but not passing in terms of his career?

BIREN: Well, my dad — my dad wasn't the one who wanted to assimilate. You know, so I think he — it's a question I've never really thought about.

ANDERSON: I just wonder what kind of resistance he may have faced or obstacles in terms of he encountered because he did work at the Pentagon, and the

suspicion of Jews during the McCarthy period? Just by the fact of being Jewish.

BIREN: Yeah, I don't know. I mean, part of the problem was when they would do these — they would do these security checks and we had — on his side of the family, relatives who lived in Venezuela, who lived in other places because, you know, the Diaspora of the Jews when they left Eastern Europe, they didn't just come to America, they went all over the place. So, one of the things you have to do when you do these very thorough investigations is list all your relatives who live out of the country, because that's where, you know, there might be a security risk. So he had relatives — I mean, one was a concert violinist who was very famous but she lived in Venezuela, so that was bad from that point of view. So, I think it was more that than his actual religious background. But I never asked him what — how he carried it, you know, in his work life.

One of the problems was my mother was very antisocial, so that he — this was the other thing that may have held him back, because he couldn't really socialize with people he worked with because they invite you over to dinner, you know, you're at their house, and then the expectation is you would invite them back to your house for dinner and my mother just wouldn't do it. She, I think, wouldn't do it because she was never confident that she knew how, you know, because she had been so, um, poor and never gone to college and I think she thought she didn't have the skills. When they moved to Bethesda, they bought all the furniture in the model home because I think they didn't know how to buy furniture, and, you know, I was very critical of her when I was younger because I thought it was mean that she wouldn't let him do this. But now I have more sympathy for how afraid she was.

And I was allowed to have parties and my sister was allowed to have parties. We had kids in and out of the house a lot and we had relatives in and out of the house, but we never had my father's colleagues in and out of the house.

ANDERSON: That makes sense that she would feel insecure. It's a whole different world moving up, class-wise.

BIREN: Right.

ANDERSON: So, tell me about school.

BIREN: High school? Junior high school?

34:30

ANDERSON: I mean, what kind of feelings do your school years bring up for you?

BIREN: Well, I was the new girl, you know, when I moved out here and that was my last year of elementary school, sixth grade. I think people move on in different increments now, but then, we went to what we called junior high school, which would be middle school, I don't know, and um, you know, I got very friendly with the gym teacher. It's a cliché. I didn't have a crush on her, thank goodness, because that would be way too cliché, but I was very close to her as a friend, and I was an athlete, and then, when I was in junior high, I hit puberty. I wasn't an athlete, I was a tomboy. I was not really an athlete, but I liked to mess around with the guys. And, um, and then I hit puberty and everything changed, and I went to this — I remember going to Ms. Prescott, Lois Prescott, my gym teacher, and I said, Look, last year I could run this, whatever it was, 100 yard dash in such and such and this year, I'm slower, and why am I slower? And she looked at me and she said, Your center of gravity has changed, and that was because I got breasts. So that was my first knowledge that my breasts weren't helping me out. You know, I wasn't — I really was a tomboy and I really wasn't happy about, um, getting to this stage in my life where I was supposed to flirt with boys instead of tackle them on the football field, you know. It was a big change, in terms of the expectations of me as a girl.

And then I got this killer crush on one of the cheerleaders, just the WASPiest girl you could imagine. And I remember her name but I won't say it. You know, then you won't have to blank out the tape. But I really desired her, and somehow, I don't remember what I said to Ms. Prescott but I said, You know, I really can't be a cheerleader but I really want to hang out with these cheerleaders. So she created this position called cheerleader manager, and I sort of got to carry the pompoms around and go on the buses with them and, you know, hang with them.

So that's what I remember about school. I don't remember much about academics at all. I was always a very good student. I was pushed at home to excel in school because like so many families, they thought that would be the way that I would have a better life. So, I think both my parents are very bright. My mother is really, really bright, was. And, you know, didn't have a chance to get an education. So, she pushed me, my dad pushed me. It was the kind of family that you would bring home a report card, all As and one B and they'd say, Why'd you get a B? You know? That was it. And, uh, I had to work hard. My sister was even smarter than I was so she didn't have to work hard and she got great grades, but I worked hard and I got great grades. And, you know, teachers liked me. I was kind of a suck-up. I would sit in the front of the room and raise my hand and do all that stuff.

ANDERSON: Do you remember feeling different because of feeling like a tomboy and starting to have a crush on a cheerleader, on a girl?

BIREN: Oh, yeah, totally, I felt different. You know, kids had pajama parties, slumber parties, you know, and did each other's hair and stuff like that. I didn't know how to do hair. I didn't know. I didn't want anybody to do my hair. I just wanted to jump into bed with them. And I knew — I knew I wasn't supposed to in the way that you know you're not. Even though nobody ever told you, and you know your feelings are different.

And when I was babysitting — I was also quite entrepreneurial when I was young, because I didn't have much money. My parents didn't give me money, so I did a lot of things to make money. When I was really little, I used to collect glass bottles, because you could turn them in for the refund. So I was always very good at that. I used to stand outside the grocery store in the rain and ask people if they wanted their cash register tapes because you — if you got up to a certain amount, you could turn them in for something — I don't even know what — bowls. I actually still have some of the bowls now, because my father — they were in my father's — these beautiful green bowls, which are actually worth a lot of money now.

I really don't know why I did these kinds of things but I did them, you know, and there was a big work ethic in my house, and my father was a really hard worker and used to work on the weekends and my mother, proto-feminist that she was, said, Well, if you're going to work on the weekends, you're going to have to have Joan with you. So I spent a lot of weekends in the Pentagon, which is a very weird place for a young child, saying, Dad, why are all the wastebaskets upside down? You know, when they clear out all the paper, they turn them upside down so you don't throw something away and somebody can find it. This was sort of pre-individual shredders, you know what I mean? And I remember, once, my dad — we had gone and we had to go back because he wasn't sure he had locked the safe. And I remember, because it was the first time I saw my father scared. You know, you don't — when you're a young child, you think your father is never afraid, and he got upset because he thought he had not locked up some safe or something. What do you do as a young child in the Pentagon? You sit and you don't go very far.

ANDERSON: Did your mother work?

BIREN: She started, not when I was young — she was at home when I was young, and she started to work later. She really wanted to work but she — she was not happy, actually as a housewife and mother, but that's what she was.

ANDERSON: Can you say more about why she was a sort of feminist or proto-feminist?

BIREN: Well, she was so happy when feminism came, because it allowed — it sort of validated a lot of things. I mean, my mom used to wear blue jeans. Nobody's mom wore blue jeans. We're talking in the 50s and 60s? You know, everybody's mom wore dresses. Not my mom. She insisted my dad do a lot of housework and he did. And childcare, and he did. Which was great for us, because, I was a Brownie and a Girl Scout and he helped build all these camps, you know, that we went to and everything. I don't know where she got it, you know, I don't know where it came from. I always thought it came from not caring that much for my father. But it must have been something else as well.

You know, they fought a lot. I fought with my mother a lot and they fought a lot. And, I think they fought a lot about money, actually. And they fought a lot about how to raise us, although I'm not sure exactly what the differences of opinion were.

ANDERSON: It sounds like you were a lot closer to your dad.

BIREN: Well, now I am. Growing up, I was for a while and as a child, I was, but then, in the middle, I wasn't really close to either of them, partly because, well, you know, when I came out, that caused a — well, even before that. Anyway, there's a rift and I wasn't close to either of them. And then, my mother really didn't want me to be close to my dad and made it pretty impossible while she was alive. And then she died and my dad and I got very close, although it was only, you know, not that many years until he died. But when I was young, I think, my dad really — like every dad — wanted a son. He got two daughters. So, he just — he just related to me like he would have related to a son, which was good, because I learned, you know, how to use tools and how to fish, which I don't care for, but you know, he — rather than, you know, fathers deal differently with that disappointment, and the way he dealt with it was, he just carried on. And considering who I was, that worked out very well.

ANDERSON: And you didn't feel pressure from either one to conform more to gender stuff?

BIREN: Oh, my mother, absolutely wanted me to be more girlie.

ANDERSON: But she wore blue jeans and —

BIREN: Well, again, it was because she wanted for me what she thought would be best for me. But my mother knew. I'm telling you. She never entirely admitted this. My mother knew I was a lesbian way before anybody else, because she had, you know, when she was young and wild and communist and everything else, she hung out with a lot of theater people in New York. She knew a lot about homosexuality, and, I didn't know

this until later, she knew I wasn't just a tomboy. I mean, I think in her heart of hearts, she absolutely knew I was a lesbian and so she pressured me a lot to go out with boys, almost more than she pressured me to use makeup or anything like that, because she really wasn't that into that stuff, but she — from her, the pressure was to date men, boys and men.

ANDERSON: So you did?

BIREN: Yeah, I did. You know, what are you going to do? I mean,

ANDERSON: They let you go to an all-women's college.

BIREN: Yes, they did.

ANDERSON: How did you end up at Mount Holyoke?

47:05
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BIREN: Well, I wanted to go to an all women's college, oh, yeah. And I applied to Wellesley and that was my first choice, and I applied early admission and they rejected me. And I found out later, through an alum who was on one of the committees, that the reason they rejected me was because of my activism, which I had already shown in high school. You know, I was in high school in the early 60s which was the really, the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, and I, as a student leader, quote, I actually had a little jacket that said Student Leader, because —

ANDERSON: This was your elected position of corresponding secretary?

BIREN: Yeah, whatever it was. We had — in Maryland, we had trainings for all the student government leaders and they would take you off in the summer and put you in one of the community colleges and train you to be a leader. And one of the years, they had to integrate those trainings, and so they, you know, very carefully went around and said to everybody, you know, would you have a Negro roommate. And I said, Sure. So I was one of the first people to have a — what were still called Negroes at the time, and I got involved in a program for tutoring, what we now call inner-city kids, I don't know what we called them then, but you know, I had this young black boy I was trying to teach some literacy skills to.

ANDERSON: Did you go to Washington to do that?

BIREN: I think we went to some church somewhere in the middle. I don't — I don't totally remember. It was like once a week, and I loved it, you know, because it felt useful and it felt risky, and I liked feeling like I was in a movement for social change, even then. That was my first little taste of it. And there was this amusement park over near where we

lived, called Glen Echo Park, and it was segregated and it was because there was a swimming pool. Heaven forbid, you know, and that was the first demonstration I ever went to, and just a sense of power that you were doing something to change things, and I loved that. So anyway, I was already too much of an activist for Wellesley, so they didn't take me, so I went to Mount Holyoke.

ANDERSON: Was your high school integrated?

BIREN: Yes. But it was segregated within itself. I mean, we really had greasers and it was segregated by class as well as by race. I remember the class divisions, because I used to be, even though I was very sort of clean and middle-class by that point, I was always attracted to hang out with the greasers and, and the lower-class kids, because they just had more fun, you know, as far as I was concerned. Even though the kids I hung out with who were very smart also were, you know, starting to experiment with drugs and, you know, I was a quiz kid. I was on this program called "It's Academic," which was sort of the high school version of College Bowl, and we were the first year of it, and there were three of us. One of the other people on this team was Carl Pope, who is head of the Sierra Club now, and we — I think we lost in the final round to St. Albans, which was a private school that Don Graham who ended up — you know, Katherine Graham's son from the *Post* — so, you know, the thing that was interesting about it was that the producer is the one who was associated with Wellesley, and I became — after we went through this — I became a question writer for the quiz show, and that's how I made money for a while, by writing Quiz Kid questions. But the other interesting thing about it—

Rupert, you're not being very quiet. Can you see it? Would you like to go somewhere and rest? How about we try to have you rest again. OK. It's distracting. Lie down, lie down. That's a good boy. All the way down. Now I'm all full of dog hair. He's not supposed to shed.

I was also on a show called "Youth Wants to Know," where we would interview senators and congressmen, people who were — the one, my favorite interview was Harry Belafonte, but the interesting thing about this in retrospect, looking back is, that I was on television a lot, so even though, I always thought of myself as political [interruption]

ANDERSON: So you were on TV a lot?

BIREN: Yes, so that's interesting, because I didn't think about going into TV at the time, but I really was. But you get the idea, I was sort of this obnoxious bright kid that they made ask senators questions and stuff like that.

ANDERSON: The civil rights stuff: was that a problem at home? Your parents supported your activism at that age?

BIREN: At that point, they didn't find it too threatening. The place where I broke with them over it was in the summer of 1964, when I wanted to go south with the Freedom Rides and they said, OK, but we won't pay for the rest of your college education if you do that. So, I ended up being an intern on Capitol Hill that summer. But my deal that I made with them was, OK, if I don't go on the Freedom Rides, I'm not living at home, you know. So I got to live with my lover downtown. But it turned out very badly actually, but I can tell that in chronological order later.

ANDERSON: OK.

BIREN: But no, I don't remember them, until that — I graduated from high school in '62 and until the summer of '64, I don't remember that they had a problem. They just thought it was good liberal stuff up until then.

ANDERSON: Right, right, OK. So we have maybe five minutes left on the tape, so maybe we should just pause and then pick up Mount Holyoke with a new tape because I have a feeling you might talk more than five minutes about that

BIREN: OK.

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

- BIREN: [Looking at yearbook] Dramatics club. I don't remember that. That's interesting. I totally have no memory of being in dramatics club. 39, 139.
- ANDERSON: Let's see what clubs you were in. [laughs]
- BIREN: That might remind me. Joan Biren ponders one of the numerous toughies on her civil service form 57. That triplicate bane of all would-be federal employees. Because, you know, I worked in the summers.
- ANDERSON: The labor relations board?
- BIREN: Yeah. You did do your homework. I didn't even know that was on anything. 152, 149. Oh, shit, it's been a really long time. Let's see, 149. [reads aloud] "Leaders of the Organization Against the Stadium..." I have no idea — "rejoice over their purchase of Bill Hayden for the highest bid of the entire evening, \$35 at the slave auction." This was when, you know, before anybody had enough consciousness not to auction people off. And this is — Carl Pope, Jeff Berlin — these are the two other guys who are on the It's Academic team with me. I don't even see myself. You know, I had to wear skirts to school. It's so sad.
- ANDERSON: There was a formal dress code?
- BIREN: Oh, yeah. Oh, my gosh. You're taping. That's not fair. Anyway, so I don't care. I just haven't see this thing in forever. I wonder what the stadium was. See, I was not a National Merit Scholarship semifinalist. My nephew was, but I wasn't. There were very, very smart people in my school. You know, it was a very high achieving school. 52, 55.
- ANDERSON: Was the expectation that a lot of you would go on to four-year colleges?
- BIREN: Oh, yeah, totally. But I was on a National Honor Society and then, later, as Phi Beta Kappa, so, "Button Bangers Buzz to Success." This is about our, you know, "It's Academic" team. Anyway, I didn't know you were taping. So I'll just show you. This is what I looked like in high school.
- ANDERSON: OK. Hmmm, not a redhead.
- BIREN: No, definitely not a redhead.
- ANDERSON: You do look pretty funny, I have to say...
- BIREN: Well, that was the idea.

ANDERSON: Yeah, that was the idea.

BIREN: But, as soon as — when my parents went to Europe one summer, and they left me in charge of my sister and with a certain amount of money, the first thing I did was have my hair cut. See, my mother wouldn't let me cut my hair. But as soon as they went away, I got — I had short hair, and I took the food money and went down to Georgetown and bought a painting. So there's some art in me, even early on. And my mother hated this painting. I mean, first of all, she was furious that that's what I'd do with the food money, but you know, she just hated it. But my dad kept it. So —

ANDERSON: Where is it now?

BIREN: Well, my sister and I threw it away.

ANDERSON: It wasn't that great a painting...

BIREN: Well, after he died, we thought about it and I really wanted to, you know, but it was a real painting.

ANDERSON: So you were responding to art.

BIREN: Yeah, but my taste had changed over the years, shall we say. So, we want to talk about Mount Holyoke... [discussion of dog] OK, so it's 1962.

ANDERSON: You had some experience with civil rights, so you're politicized.

BIREN: Right, and you know, I continued to do this tutoring thing up there. There was a program, but I went on a scholarship. I was a waitress in the dorms, which was a very strange thing, because you're waiting on the people that you're living with, and —

ANDERSON: Explain what waitress in the dorms in the 60s meant. Was that just at mealtime?

BIREN: Yeah, mealtimes. Well, lunch and dinner. You'd go into the dining room. You know, there were tables, I think it was ten people to a table. And what the waitresses had to do was wear these little smock things and put — you had a little serving table and you'd put all the desserts on there and then you went into the kitchen and you brought the meals out and you served them to the people sitting at the tables and — you ate first. You didn't eat with the people at the tables. But you lived with these people at the dorms, so every dorm had a housemother who was

resident. This was not like an RA. This was like an old lady who lived in the house, and for some reason, the housemother took to looking under my smock because you were supposed to wear a skirt because it was a smock. But I, of course, would just wear pants and pull them up and somehow she figured out that I was doing that. So, I would get reprimanded, you know. But she didn't seem to have any real power. She was just sort of a nag, you know.

And then, not the first year but the second year, I had started to get very involved in student government at Mount Holyoke, so I was always going to meetings and having things to do and was late getting to the meals, because you had to get there early to do your — you had to set the table and put the things, you know, the desserts and everything—

ANDERSON: Was it formal? Like the students dressed?

BIREN: We had something called Gracious Living but that was only Fridays or something like that.

ANDERSON: Barbara Smith [also interviewed for the Voices of Feminism Project] talked about that.

BIREN: Yeah, you know, because this was supposed to teach us to be ladies and know how to serve tea or whatever the heck they were trying to teach us. And um —

ANDERSON: You were late.

BIREN: I was always late. I was very late, and the other waitresses liked me and they would cover for me. They would like, set my table and put my stuff out, but it really annoyed the housemother, because she couldn't, you know, discipline me because my job was getting done but she knew I wasn't doing it because I would like, rush in, you know, at the last minute and throw the thing on or whatever. I can't remember what exactly precipitated it, but we had this one dessert that was sort of this horrible Jell-o stuff. It was sort of like a mixture of whipped Jell-o and some other stuff. It just looked like vomit. And one day I came in and they were yelling at me because I was late, and this was the dessert that was sitting on the side tables and I just started throwing it around. I just — and other waitresses felt the same way. It was very hard to be a waitress because you lived with these people and suddenly from being their peer and their colleague, you were turned into their servant, and it was very demeaning. There was something terrible about it. And none of us liked it, obviously, and we all had to do it, and you know, I led by throwing the first Jell-o. I wish I could remember the name of this dessert. It had a nickname, you know, and everybody started throwing desserts, so when the people came in, you know — they would hold

everybody out until whatever the appointed hour was — they came in and [laugh] there was stuff all over everything. That was the end of my waitressing career, which was great, because by then I was already a student leader so they couldn't, you know — I was sort of promoted up for being a troublemaker. They gave me some, you know, assistant to the dean kind of job where I couldn't organize anybody else to cause trouble.

And then my entrepreneurial career carried on. I ran this business called "Wonder Box" which was, at the end of the year, you bought up all the furniture from the departing seniors and you stored it over the summer and you came back early and you fixed everything, you know, and then you sold it for a profit to the freshman. So that was my other job that I got. Because then I wouldn't be — I could make money but it wouldn't cut into my school year time. Only one person could do that, so I got that job. They basically — the administration — looked after me but the housemothers really hated me.

ANDERSON: And then there was less of a noticeable class difference between your peers and you?

BIREN: Yeah, but then I had to sit in the dining rooms, which I didn't enjoy doing either. Do you know what I mean? It was hard to be on either end of it, really, once you knew what it was. Anyway, in terms of — so that was one part of my experience there. So when my parents said they wouldn't pay for me, I mean, that was a serious thing, because they were paying as much as they could pay but I was still a scholarship student, and at that time, scholarships were really scholarships. They weren't loans or grant, you know, you didn't have to pay them back.

So, you know, I carried on my student government activities and I was studying politics, as a true child of Washington. It's a company town, that's the business of Washington, is government. It's what I knew and so it was my ambition at the time because that's what I saw, around me. But I wanted to be an elected politician because obviously those were the people who had it the best. It wasn't the civil servants like my folks. It was — I wanted to be a policy maker. You have to remember this — and then Kennedy got elected, and it was a time of enormous hopes and idealism and belief in the system, and I — I was right there, you know — even though I knew I was a lesbian and I felt different because I was a lesbian and I knew I was Jewish but that didn't affect me very much, frankly, at that point, I wanted to be right in the middle of it, and I thought I could be, because I hadn't come out yet.

ANDERSON: So you already knew you were a lesbian?

14:15
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BIREN: Yeah, I knew I was a lesbian because I had no desire or attraction to men whatsoever — even though I dated them because my mother

wanted me to — and I desired women. I mean, I felt it. It was totally visceral and impossible to ignore. I had to work really, really hard not to molest my friends, you know, because you had girlfriends. I had wonderful girlfriends. And you would have — I met this one woman at this leadership thing, you know, and she was from Baltimore and she would invite me up to Baltimore and I would stay in her house with her and it was all I could do not to jump into bed with her, not to — you know, I wanted to kiss her. That was it, you know, I just did. And nobody told me to, nobody taught me, I'd never seen it, I didn't know anybody who did it, it just was in me.

And I babysat a lot to make money, that's where I got distracted last time, telling you about my little entrepreneurial and I — some of the children I sat for, their father was a psychiatrist and I read in the books about how sick it was and I read all the pathology of lesbianism and that was the first thing I ever read, you know, that I could find to read about lesbians. And I never talked to anybody about it except that I made friends with this very strange man who was an artist in Georgetown at the time when Georgetown was really kind of an arty, funky place, and somehow I used to escape down there. I must have taken the bus or — I don't even know how I got there, and became friends with this guy who had a gallery but who also had lived above the gallery and painted. And I told him that I was a lesbian, because I needed to tell somebody and he seemed safe.

ANDERSON: You hadn't acted on it, these were just feelings?

BIREN: Just feelings, totally feelings.

ANDERSON: And you had a word for it because you looked it up in the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders]?

BIREN: Right. And I told him and of course, he knew some lesbians and he wanted to fix me up with this lesbian couple because he felt that would be cool, you know, for them, to have a third — [two voices: inaudible] — I'm pretty sure that's what he wanted to do, which of course totally freaked me out. You know, I was a kid. And so I told him, no, I wasn't ready for that. But even though it scared me, it was reassuring to know there were actually other people alive who did that and he didn't seem to think that it was horrible. You know, he was, like, oh, OK, I know some of those. [laugh] You know, and it took me a lot to verbalize it out loud to anybody. But he was, for some reason — he wasn't even gay, but he was an artist. Somehow, there's this strange theme of media and art, even when I thought I was on this fast track to Congress, you know.

And so I always knew, since that cheerleader in junior high, and I finally came out in my sophomore year at Mount Holyoke — I had already come out to myself, and this was my coming out with a partner.

This was coming out into the closet because we couldn't be public. But it was a sexual coming out.

ANDERSON: So you met somebody at Mount Holyoke?

BIREN: I met somebody at Mount Holyoke, and uh, her name is Boo Price and it's OK for me to say that. She was my first lover. She was also president of the student government and I was vice president of the student government and we were both political science majors and interns in '64. This gets back to this story I was talking about before. [inaudible] We were part of — I don't know what these things are, mock legislatures and all kinds of things, so we went to Boston because we were in this mock — you know, this student government thing. Mount Holyoke is in Western Massachusetts so we were driving to Boston and we were going to stay in the house of a friend of ours who lived in Quincy outside Boston, and it was in that house, um, while we were away from campus, that we sat up all one night and talked and eventually, you know, made love. And, it changed my life, changed my life. And uh, it was wild and crazy times, because coming out into the closet, especially when you're as visible as we were on campus, we weren't exactly low-profile people, and it's a small campus, it's not a huge school, you know, so it's — it's fairly easy to know what's going on with other people. There were no locks on the doors. You know, this is a women's campus that has a three feet on the floor rule. Men can only be on campus certain hours. During those hours, the doors have to be open and there have to be three feet on the floor. So if you're sitting on the bed with a boy, you know, three out of the four feet have to be on the floor. So this gives you an idea how, you know, long ago it was. You know, there was one phone in the hallway. The chapel requirement had just been abolished.

So here Boo and I were — I was 19, you know, I was beside myself with joy to finally be able to have sexual expression that meant something to me. And she was in one dorm and I was in another dorm, and they had bed checks. You know, they had — in case — what they would do — they didn't do bed checks every night, but there were random, unannounced fire drills where you had to all come out in your pajamas and be accounted for, so that — they said it was supposed to be about being a fire drill. And then you would, you know, sign the sheet and go back. So if you were going to take an overnight to another dorm, you had to get a permission slip from the dreaded and feared housemother. Again, my housemother. Well, you can't get permission to leave every night, you know, it's not how it works.

So, I would sneak out after curfew, there was a curfew, and I had a deal with my roommate who was very dear and very straight and very put upon by me and not appreciated by me, and this roommate agreed — really because I forced her in some ways — to sign me in after these

fire drills, you know, to lie for me, in case there were fire drills. And I would sneak out every night, pretty much every night, and go over to the dorm, which was across a lake and everything, and sneak around — literally sneak around in the bushes, you know, because it's a curfew, and you can't be seen.

Well, what happened was I got caught a couple of times by the security, who's this old Irish ex-cop from Boston, and became great friends with him. And I don't exactly, again, remember how it happened. He never turned me in. He never reported me. I ended up going over to his house and having tea and we just became great buddies, and that made it easier for me, you know, for the rest of the time, to do this sneaking around. Although I was caught and my roommate got in trouble for signing me out. She's the one who really got in trouble. I didn't ever get in trouble that badly, because in a way, they couldn't touch me because I was this student leader that they didn't want to tarnish their own whatever. And—

ANDERSON: Didn't Boo have a roommate?

BIREN: She did, but it was a suite. So I don't —

ANDERSON: They were like singles that were connected —

BIREN: Exactly. So I don't know what her roommate exactly thought. I didn't turn off the phone downstairs. I turned off the upstairs phones. So, Catherine, her roommate — obviously, this person shows up and is in your roommate's bed every morning, you know something is going on, and I think, you know, she was a little jealous. But she wouldn't do anything. And we would — you know, we did all these crazy, you know what people do. Where are we?

ANDERSON: We're talking about Mount Holyoke.

BIREN: Oh yeah, about Boo.

ANDERSON: About Boo, and I'd like to talk about the atmosphere on campus, how closeted you kept this. Because the women's colleges also had a reputation as being a haven for lesbians, I'm interested in hearing about the campus side of it, what kind of network you found there...

BIREN: None. I mean, we never —

ANDERSON: You never told anybody.

BIREN: We never told anybody and nobody ever told us. I think I told you that Jill Ward was the president of my class and I suspected, you know, we

used to see each other in the shower rooms and it seemed like nobody was showering by themselves, but you just didn't go there because it was too dangerous.

ANDERSON: So it was an open secret?

BIREN: No, I mean, I imagine anybody that had any sense probably could tell, but I wasn't sure other people were lesbians. I didn't know how to tell who else was a lesbian, so I don't know if anybody knew we were. We just — it was so not a topic.

ANDERSON: Did you often suspect lesbian relationships amongst your friends and peers there?

BIREN: No. That's what I'm saying. I didn't.

ANDERSON: You really didn't.

BIREN: I didn't know how to find —

ANDERSON: So you felt you were the only two at Mount Holyoke at the time?

BIREN: I didn't know that there were any other people. I looked around and I couldn't tell. I don't know if I assumed we were the only ones, but I didn't know who the other ones were. If, you know, you're on a women's campus, you're called uncommon women, I mean, you assume you're not the only one but you don't know. I mean it was very, very taboo. It was still very, very unspoken and what happened was that summer of '64 when we came down with our friend Judy and some other people and rented a house in Georgetown and were interns on the Hill and Boo, for whatever reason, decided to have an affair with a man, so we were roommates in this house and I was locked out of my room while she was in there with this guy, and um, it was horrible. And you know, I think she was freaked out by the intensity of our relationship, and this was a way of pushing me away and proving to herself that, you know, maybe she wasn't totally a lesbian or whatever. And then, you know, when we were back at school again, then we were pretty much together again.

And then, something happened, I forget. We were at the National Student Association and we had had a falling out and I ran against her for some national office — I think Chaplain again. I had forgotten I was Chaplain. I forgot I was Chaplain when I was in high school. So I think I was Chaplain again with this National Student Association and all of these lovers' arguments and everything got played out in this very strange way, in the politics. And then that summer after my junior year which was after her senior year, I had a Woodrow Wilson fellowship so

I was going to do a study in England for my senior thesis and she was graduating and going on the sort of, you know, rich girl tour of Europe after we graduate with her brother and a friend of her brother.

And what I remember is that after she graduated, she was in New York at the Plaza Hotel and I went there with all of the letters and poems that I had written to her that I had copies of and I got, somehow I got all of her — and all of the things she had written to me but mostly I was the one who was writing what I'm sure was terrible poetry, you know, and young puppy-love poetry, and burned everything in the Plaza Hotel, and while she was gone and I was waiting for her in the room and, there wasn't such a thing as smoke alarms, but the smoke was like pouring out under the door of the hotel room and the security guys came banging on the door and I'm in there crying and, and burning this stuff up. I was burning it, like, in the toilet or the bathtub, and they're banging on the door and I'm just trying to get it burned. Do you know what I mean? So, I wasn't letting them in, so they were banging louder and all I remember is, you know, crying and the smoke and the banging and the reason I was burning everything was because both of us still thought we might have political careers, and because everything that I knew about being a lesbian was that you couldn't be one when you grew up, do you know? So I thought, OK, I'm not going to let this ruin my life, I'm not going to let this ruin her life. We have to destroy the evidence, because this — especially if you want a public career, you're not going to be able to. I mean, so when they — when the first lesbians got elected to public office, I thought it was a miracle. But it certainly happened a long time after this. So, anyway, she wasn't too happy about the people at the Plaza Hotel being angry about this fire in the room.

And then she took off for Europe and then I took off for Europe with this bunch of Woodrow Wilson people from Princeton and then I sort of hitchhiked around Europe behind her. She would go on a train or a plane and I would hitch and then I would show up, you know, in Paris or Amsterdam, wherever she was, and then she might or she might not, let me in the room that she was sharing with her brother and the friend, and it was — I was hopelessly, hopelessly in love with this person. I mean, no degradation was enough to convince me to — to give it up. She was — I was sort of a stalker at that point, you know? But she would, she would periodically encourage and discourage me. And so I didn't feel entirely like a stalker but, you know, I mean, I was — I'm a very passionate person and I'm a very stubborn person and I thought she was the only one in the world. I was in love with her, I didn't know any other lesbians, I mean, that was it. So I was holding on to her desperately. I was a desperate, desperate person.

And she eventually got married and moved here. So then I saw her and eventually she got divorced and came out again and ran the Michigan Women's Music Festival and now the Mont Claire Cultural

Club and so on. So it's been a very, very long history but it had this incredibly tumultuous beginning. The beginning of my lesbian life.

ANDERSON: Did you find lesbians at Oxford

BIREN: Well, wait. I'm not done with Mount Holyoke yet, because I'm still answering your question. So then she was gone. So I was in my senior year, and I did find another lover. And this woman, whose name I can't tell you because she's now married to a clergyman, heterosexually, what I remember about this person was that we devised this scheme because, you know, when you're — we lived in the same dorm, so I didn't have to sneak around. So, even in the same dorm room without the locks on the doors, it's dangerous. So, coke bottles were glass at that time. So we would build a little pyramid of coke bottles. We would tie a string around the bottom one and we would attach it to the door, so that if somebody came in the room, there would be this big crash of the bottles and that would give us this split second to sit up in the bed and, you know, that was our — that was how we made love.

ANDERSON: How many times did the alarm go off?

BIREN: A couple.

ANDERSON: Not too many?

BIREN: Not too many, just a couple. But it gave us the security, you know, to feel like when we were in the bed and making love, that we weren't totally, totally vulnerable. But that little coke-bottle pyramid was all that was between us and — we didn't know what.

And what happened was that this woman, who was an English major and studied poetry, didn't write poetry, I believe now, although I can't say for sure, probably was a survivor of incest, or priest abuse. One or the other, I'm not sure. But something about whatever that was and our sex life and being in the closet or whatever, so she attempted suicide. Or maybe it was just because she was studying Yeats. I don't know. And had to go into the infirmary at Mount Holyoke. And I was so upset, that I asked to be allowed to be in the infirmary with her and they said, Sure. So she was there, and she couldn't leave, but I would go out to classes and I would come back and I was, like, living in the infirmary with my lover. This is very odd, you know.

So finally, the pressure of her suicide [attempt,] I went to the school psychiatrist, who was a guy, and this was a guy that I served on a lot of committees with, you know, because I was still — at this point, I was head of something called AAI, which stood for Action on Academic Issues, and this was in the middle of the times when the campuses were going through these terrific upheavals and, you know, what was

happening at the Free Speech Movement at Columbia and at Berkeley and in our little way at Mount Holyoke, we were going through it and so rather than be head of the student government, I decided to be head of this thing because it was more interesting and more radical, and our big reform was we got pass/fail classes instead of — you know, so you didn't have to do everything for grades. But it was that kind of reform of the institution.

So I had served on all kinds of groups with this guy and I went to him and I said, Dr. whatever his name was, I don't remember — I'm a lesbian. And he said, Oh, no, you're not. He said, You just think you are. But it's a phase and you'll grow out of it and it's best not to tell anybody. So don't even worry about it. You're not a lesbian. Because everybody at Mount Holyoke probably was a lesbian, you know, and if they had — they couldn't acknowledge it because then parents wouldn't send their children there, you know? So much for trying to come out. But, because they all knew, which is why they let me stay in the infirmary with this person.

ANDERSON: What were you looking for when you went to see him?

BIREN: I think that the subterfuge was wearing on me, because I'm by nature a pretty open person and a pretty honest person, and um, I think the suicide attempt had upset me a lot and I was looking for help as to how to deal with the suicide attempt and trying to figure out what part our relationship had in that, and if there was something I could do, you know, that would help her. Or help me not to feel powerless or guilty. I didn't really feel too guilty. I was pretty clear it wasn't — wasn't about us exactly. But, you know, I mean, somebody tries to kill themselves, it's pretty — somebody you love — it's upsetting. So, I went to him for help, some kind of help. And I didn't get any. And I thought if I'm going to get help, I have to be honest, so —

ANDERSON: Even when he said you weren't one, that it was a phase, was that some relief to you or were you angry at his response?

BIREN: Well, he wasn't any help, so I wasn't angry. I was, I think, disappointed that I didn't get any help. Did I believe him that it was a phase? I must have believed it a little bit because I tried to go straight after college, yes. I really, really tried hard to go straight because the life that I wanted, I couldn't picture being a lesbian, you know, partly. I mean, I couldn't picture a life as a lesbian because there were no lesbians living out lives for me to see.

ANDERSON: The basis for your career, then...

BIREN: Yeah, exactly.

ANDERSON: And so you said earlier that Barbara Smith was on campus at the same time you were?

BIREN: Yeah, she and I only had a passing knowledge of each other, but I remember, I mean, talk about quotas for Jews. The quotas for people of color was horrible. She was practically — I mean, maybe there were three. She probably told you but, there were hardly any women of color on that campus. It was awful. And, you know, Barbara was in one of the little special dorms that were for — I don't know. I was in Pearson's and there was a thing called Pearson's Annex and I think she was in that and it was — I don't know whether it was sort of the scholarship people or, you know, it was some kind of special dorm, scholars, special scholars. But it was probably mostly poor kids, only they didn't have to wait on the other kids. And, I remember that. I think that's right. Is that right?

ANDERSON: I didn't —

BIREN: Oh, you didn't do the interview? But later, you know, when I was a photographer and I wanted to make my first book and I went to Barbara partly because I had that connection and I could call that connection up.

ANDERSON: What do you remember of the atmosphere on campus around race? Do you remember discussions about civil rights?

BIREN: As I say, when I went there I was still tutoring kids in Holyoke, in the town of Holyoke. What I remember more than discussions about race, because I don't think there were very many, truthfully — first of all, Kennedy was assassinated when I was at college, the Cuban missile crisis happened when I was in college, which was very real for me because my father was very involved in that, and then the beginnings of the Vietnam War which became the — and as I said, all the student unrest was going on, so it was a very political time. And even in Mount Holyoke, which was very rural and isolated, the things that impacted us more than black civil rights were those things I just mentioned.

ANDERSON: What about women's issues and feminism? Do you remember any of that on campus?

BIREN: Betty Friedan came to Mount Holyoke, after she published *The Feminine Mystique*, and I remember the room that it was in, which is sort of unusual, and I remember listening to her and thinking that something was wrong with the analysis, even then. That's what's so interesting, because we were at a women's college, we were already empowered as women, you know, the whole Mount Holyoke zeitgeist is

really about being a strong woman and making a contribution to the world and here comes this woman and basically, she's saying stuff that didn't resonate with us, you know. It was, You're gonna be a housewife, it's gonna be horrible, you know, and we're being groomed to be contributors to the society. So even though we were also being groomed to be wives and mothers, the whole Mount Holyoke thing already was that that wasn't all that you were going to be. So it was funny, because I remember even then, it was like, I don't get it. I don't get what she's talking about. So, you know, the kind of Friedan feminism was never my feminism. Even from the very beginning.

ANDERSON: So that's what you remember of feminism there, nothing more radical in terms of student activism or—

BIREN: No, but as I say, it was part of — you know, we were very proud, that Mount Holyoke was the first women's college, everybody took for granted that women should be educated, that women should go out into the world. I mean, it was — it was educating missionaries who literally went globally around the world. Mount Holyoke women and students and the whole ethos of the college was feminist inherently but not explicitly, I think.

ANDERSON: And then you went from there to Oxford for graduate work or was there time in between? 47:09

BIREN: No, I went right to Oxford and that's where I tried to go straight. I went as far away from American women as I could go. With having no language skills, that was England.

ANDERSON: It was an intentional retreat from lesbianism or how would you describe it?

BIREN: Well, I would characterize it in a couple of ways. One is, I was supposed to go to law school and I was accepted at the University of Chicago Law School. I was not accepted at Yale Law School, which is where I wanted to go. Part of the reason I wasn't accepted was that I very, again, stubbornly insisted on taking sculpture courses every semester and getting Cs because I was really bad, and we had a wonderful sculpture professor, but I wasn't very good, and all my academic advisors and the dean and everybody said, Please don't take these courses. Don't take these courses. You know, if you have to go sculpt, just go sculpt.

ANDERSON: They were bringing down your GPA.

BIREN: They're bringing down my GPA and they wanted me to stop, and I didn't have time to not take it and be able to do it, and I really enjoyed it. And so I just kept doing it and so I didn't get into Yale. And at that time, I also had this boyfriend, because it was a good cover, you know, to have a boyfriend. And this was a very sweet man that was also a Woodrow Wilson scholar and I met him through that and he was at Princeton and so I would go down to Princeton. He was going to go to Yale Law School and so I wanted to go there with him, because I liked him. He was a very nice man, and we were not being sexual at all, because that's the kind of man he was. He wanted to get married and then be sexual, and that was fine with me. That worked for me. So actually, before I went away to Oxford, I went to say goodbye to him because he was going to Yale and I was going to Oxford and I wanted him to have sex with me at that point because I wanted to see what it was like to have sex with a man because I was on my road to trying to, you know, go straight. But it didn't work, for whatever reasons.

So I went to Oxford partly, I think, because I knew that there was no point in going to law school, which was my step on the political ladder if I couldn't not be a lesbian. So, I was going to take a year out and see if I could not be a lesbian and then go back to law school. And what happened was I ended up staying at Oxford for three years. Actually, I started out at the London School of Economics and then, I ended up in Oxford. I don't remember how that happened. But I had scholarships from Mount Holyoke and from Oxford. I think I went to Oxford because I got a fellowship there and I couldn't pay for the LSE. I really wanted to be in London at the LSE and I ended up in Oxford because of the money.

And it was very hard to be in Oxford. I was in an all-male college, graduate college, and there was only one other woman in this graduate college and she was an English woman who was studying anthropology and had spent most of her time with her African tribe that she was writing about and in her African tribe, she was a man. Because she was literate and that's how it was determined. So when she came back to Oxford, she was just very strange and not much — not much companionship.

So, you know, I was totally isolated from American women and did my best to be heterosexual. I finally, you know, lost my virginity, as it were, in heterosexual terms, I did find guys to sleep with. I slept with several guys and had sort of relationships during these three years, and did a lot of antiwar work, didn't do much academic work. And at the end of it, realized that I was a lesbian, and that I couldn't change that.

So, when I came back to this country and got involved in the Women's Liberation movement, I had my final coming out, which was when I got together with Sharon Deevey, who was my next lover, we finally came out publicly within the Women's Liberation movement, and that was — I've never gone back since then.

55:12

ANDERSON: Was that in '68?

BIREN: No, that was '70.

ANDERSON: '70. OK. You were England for —

BIREN: Three years, yeah. I came back at the end of '69 but I didn't come out until '70.

ANDERSON: And you met her here? When you were back in the U.S.?

BIREN: Well, actually, what happened was I came back from England to the U.S. in the summer of '68, to go to a political science convention and to demonstrate at the — in Chicago. I was gassed. There's a whole big story about that. At the time I got involved with this guy named David and he was in a commune and the women in his commune were in Women's Liberation and so in the summer of '68, I met these women including Sharon, while I was back here, but I didn't come back permanently until the end of '69, but I already knew the women and so I could, you know, hook back up with them right away.

ANDERSON: And was the movement a lot or some of why you were brought back home? Was that part of what was calling to you or were you just done with England?

BIREN: I didn't really enjoy being an ex-patriot. It wasn't very easy to be an American in Europe during the Vietnam War. I mean, Americans were not, you know, popular. Even though we did, as I say, mostly what I did was antiwar work with these other American men in Oxford. And we were one of the European branches of the Liberation News Service and we were also kind of a stop on the underground railroad that took deserters into Sweden and, you know, I was never not an American. I never really became British. A lot of Americans go over there and become British, as British as they can. I used to listen to old John Wayne movies at night to remember how to speak American, because it's very easy if you're immersed in a culture for three years to lose your American accent or forget things. And I was dating British men, you know. There's this one guy who wanted to marry me, who was going into the House of Commons. Oxford is a very kind of rarified society for one thing, and — and you know, you have servants who come in and make your bed. It's unbelievable difference from the kind of way I was used to living. And, you know, I taught British Constitution to students there. I mean, it was a very odd existence.

ANDERSON: There were a lot of reasons why you didn't really fit.

BIREN: I didn't — I could've fit, but I didn't fit, you know. I didn't want to fit. And what happened was, I started falling in love with English women, and [laugh] since they're the only ones around, you know, it was pretty clear to me that I was — and we would get — and it was drugs. You have to remember there were a lot of drugs. And really, in Oxford is where I started doing drugs a lot. We did a lot of LSD and we did a lot of hashish which was laced with opium because it was coming straight up from Morocco, so there was a lot of drugs so that I could — I moved to London at one point and I was living with these English women so you could get totally blasted on drugs and then sort of all collapse together and pretend that nothing happened. So it was kind of like the alcoholic's excuse, only different. And it was awful. I mean, I didn't — I didn't like it. I didn't like — didn't really, I mean, I was with some very sweet men and I was with some really horrible men and I kept falling in love with women.

So I never finished my Ph.D., which is what I was there for because I was too busy doing everything else, and I think once I had given up, finally given up the idea of law school, finally given up the idea of having a political career, finally you know, totally disillusioned with American government, didn't want to go into it anyway at this — I mean, I was really, really disillusioned. You know, I went from kind of the Kennedy idealism to — people today don't understand because they know the government lies to them. They know it's all a crock of shit. Back then, we really believed in it so when it turned out that it was — it was evil, it really messed with your head. So I gave up a lot, you know? I gave up admiring my father. I gave up wanting to go into the system. And I gave up the idea that I could be straight and normal. And then when I had pretty much given all that up, I was ready to come home, because part of going away was to see if I could be different, it was the geographical cure. [laugh] And it didn't work.

END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

BIREN: [showing photograph of herself] I'm in London. Can you see it? OK. So, again, one of these strange things — when you think back on it, it seems odd? — one of the things I did was, there was all this upheaval in Europe as well as in the United States in '68, and particularly in France, where they had general strikes and shut down the whole government and we really thought the revolution was at hand. It was happening. And somehow, I ended up going to Paris with a film crew from London. I don't have any idea how I hooked up with this film crew, but you know, there was no petrol, there was no gasoline. So they had a car and it was filled with gallon, five-gallon, you know, plastic containers for gas, and it was all in the back of this little mini Cooper type of thing that they had. And I was sitting on top of the gas. That was how — that was how I was getting there, because, you know, everybody wanted to go. It was totally exciting.

And we went to the Sorbonne and you know, the farmers were bringing in the food and it was — it really was a revolutionary situation and I think it was very important to me to be there in that because it was real to me. So that when I came back to the States and we were planning revolution, I believed it. I believed it was possible. I had seen a whole modern country shut down by the joint actions of students and labor against the government.

And even though in the end, it wasn't a totally successful revolution, at the time that I was in the middle of it and in terms of some of the results that it had, it was. And, and it was different than, you know, being gassed by the police in Grant Park in the Democratic Convention earlier in that year. But the combination of seeing your government turn on you, and feeling — and then seeing that you could shut down the government — it was very formative for me in terms of how I thought about the power of the people, as we called it.

ANDERSON: The revolution could be realized. It wasn't just theoretical.

BIREN: Yeah, it wasn't for me theoretical at all. So, that's it.

ANDERSON: Do you want to end with that story today?

BIREN: No. I want to think about if there is anything up until the point where really my feminism begins, if there's anything else I need to tell you so that when we start, we can start there. Is there any other background stuff that's important that you think we missed?

ANDERSON: You can tell me if you want answer this question today or tomorrow, whenever it is. You wrote in the short form that you did for me that your early identification as butch was really formative. And so, and as I just

commented on looking at the photos of you, you don't look so butch when you're at Oxford. So I'm wondering whether you want to speak to that because it forms your choice up to this point of if that's something that you really — what does that mean, early in your life versus something that you reckon was really post-feminism in your twenties?

BIREN: It's really — you know, in Oxford, I look straight because I'm trying to be straight, and before Oxford, I looked relatively straight. Well, let me show you. Turn off for a minute.

So here's what I looked like more at Mount Holyoke, and you know I wore this 69 tee shirt just to annoy people. I wasn't even sure what it meant. I just knew it was dirty and I was class of '66 but I wore 69 just because.

ANDERSON: Did you really play the guitar or was that a prop?

BIREN: No, no. My — my parents wanted me to play the violin and I wanted to play the drums and we compromised on classical guitar. But when I got to college, I was given to Elvis impersonations, so I'm sure that's what the guitar is about. And this is me as a baby butch. So I think it was latent. It was latent from the beginning but because of the times I grew up in, I didn't really have a chance to come out until uh, feminism. So I can talk about it more then. Is there anything else before we stop that you think about my childhood and my high school and my college or Oxford?

ANDERSON: I don't think so.

BIREN: OK.

ANDERSON: But we can always go back.

BIREN: You know what? Turn off one more time and I want to ...

BIREN: [talking on phone] So I have to say I'm talking to a reporter from the *Washington Blade* because I'm doing a chat on March 6 in honor of International Women's Day for the Rainbow History project here in D.C. and you're writing a story to try to get people there. Also, the other thing you should know is we moved it to a bigger room, so you got the e-mail about that? OK. Yeah, please, let's not send people to the wrong place.

So, the story you wanted to know was the one I told you about the *Dyke Postcard*, right? Well, what happened was, this summer I was traveling around with *No Secret Anymore*, the film, and I was at the Austin Film Festival in Texas and a woman came up to me at the end and this is very typical, that people come up to me at the end of the

show and, you know, tell me what they thought, and very often people will say something about my earlier work and what it meant to them, and usually they talk to me about the books.

But in this case, the person wanted to talk about the *Dyke Postcard* and the story she told me was that sometime in the early 80s, I think it was, she was going to Havana, Cuba, and a friend of hers knew a lesbian there and gave her the address or somehow how to hook up with this woman but she was very concerned as to how she was going to raise the issue with her of her lesbianism, because she wanted to connect with her as a lesbian but, you know, she didn't know what was appropriate, I guess. And when she got there, the woman had the postcard of me in the dyke photo on her bedside and that was the way they connected around being lesbians. And she was — obviously, she had never forgotten and it was very meaningful to me to know that even in the 80s in Cuba, my work had made an impact and been able to connect people.

So, it's one of many stories I hear and the fact that I continue to hear them twenty years plus later. And so, it's wonderful for me, because that's, you know, why you do the work. Because you want it to have meaning in people's lives. So I love these stories and it's one of the reasons I love to get out and I hadn't — you know, I used to travel around with my slide shows but going around on the festival circuit was really, really nice for that reason.

The photo was taken in a little town called Dyke, Virginia, which I believe is still there, which my lover and I were driving around one day out in the country, you know, we were just out for a drive in the country and we came across it and there it is. I think it's still there, if you look on a map. [end of telephone call]

OK. Now, you've heard a lot from Rupert, but I want you to see Miss Zoey, because she's beautiful. She's the little well-behaved princess. So you have to know there are two. They were both given to me. I did not choose either of them. She was a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday present from two of my friends in California who tortured me with the story about how they were bringing a girl to my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party. Tortured me. And he was abused and neglected and sort of left on my doorstep. So that's how I ended up with two little frou-frou doggies that I love very much. So now, you've seen Zoey. She will go away and be good and Rupert will probably make his presence known later.

ANDERSON: OK. So.

BIREN: The funny thing — I have to tell you a funny thing about Malteses. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp, who have written about this period and are wonderful scholars at Ohio, have a Maltese that they carry around in a little bag. John Scagliotti, who's a very wonderful documentary filmmaker, has a little Maltese, you know, gay filmmaker. Dee

Mosbacher and Nanette Gartrell, actually the people who gave me Zoey, they have two little Malteses. She's also, you know, made *Radical Harmonies* and a number of other great films. There's a long list — Oh, Karla Jay came in and interviewed me and fell in love with Zoey and now has two Malteses, one of whom I'm the godmother to. You know, who's a wonderful historian, lesbian historian. And there's a long list. So I feel that this is an important fact to put on the record, because it's not often commented on but it's —

ANDERSON: very common.

BIREN: Apparently. There you go.

ANDERSON: So, today is February 28. This is day 2 of Kelly Anderson and Joan Biren interview and we just heard five minutes of Joan being interviewed by *Washington Blade* but now I want to start our taping for the day. So, as we talked about yesterday, we've got about three hours to go today. So, we're going to do the first — we'll take breaks but we're going to spend the first tape talking about Women's Liberation, including the Furies. So, I'll let you start where you want to, just with an open-ended question of how did you find Women's Liberation? Tell me about your experience.

7:05

BIREN: Right. I think I told a little bit last night about how I was here in 1968 and I met women in this commune, including Sharon Deevey, who were already part of Women's Liberation in Washington, D.C. So when I came back from Oxford, I hooked up with them right away and became part of the Washington, D.C. Women's Liberation group, which was a wonderful group, in part, because Charlotte Bunch was in it and right away —

ANDERSON: When you say group, do you mean a consciousness-raising group?

BIREN: No, this was not a CR group. Actually, I was in a CR group with Sharon and Charlotte and a number of other people, and it becomes important in the story later. But this — Women's Liberation was a much larger — it was really the movement and it had a lot of CR groups and it had an office, a building on Biltmore Street in Northwest, and we had actions, we did a lot of actions, wonderful actions out of there. But in the beginning, I wasn't living downtown. I was living, again, out here in Takoma Park in a mixed commune that ran an alternative school. It was a very — one of these typical 60s, early 70s kind of hustles where nobody really did anything and we had to talk other people who were like us into paying us just enough to take their children every day, you know, so their kids didn't have to go to the regular schools, so they would have education from progressive radical

people. And somehow, I ended up teaching Greek theater because I loved it, you know, Greek tragedy, so I decided that's what I would teach. It's hard to explain these kinds of things now but people just did things, you know? And it seemed OK. I mean, we declared we were an alternative school, we didn't have to get registered or certified as teachers or anything. We just needed parents who trusted us with their kids and, and they were parents like us so they gave us their kids. So then, we were an alternative school. That's how it was. There wasn't a lot of need for government approval or imprimatur of anything because we were all against the government. So, it was, in some ways, simpler.

So I was living out here in this mixed commune which was an alternative school, teaching Greek theater, which is how the name the Furies came to be because I was into that, and also teaching — I don't know what we called it but it was, you know, women's empowerment. We didn't have the word "empowerment" but we had classes out here for these suburban straight women, mostly straight, where we taught Women's Liberation.

And this led to one particularly unpleasant experience I had that was after I was in the Furies but it was related to the school out here in the suburbs. We were trying to teach people what sexism was and I wanted to show them greeting cards, sexist greeting cards, but I was damned if I was going to pay for the cards so I lifted them. Because we actually survived a lot by shoplifting, but usually it was food. And I never shoplifted food. Really, the only thing I ever lifted was sexist material because, you know, it just seemed like, why should I pay Hallmark to show how sexist they are? But I got caught in this store called Woodward and Lothrop, which was a big department store, you know, with a dozen greeting cards hidden in my coat or something. I was not a very good thief. And you know, they prosecuted, which was really horrible. So anyway.

ANDERSON: So were you fined?

BIREN: Well, I hadn't been — as a Maryland student council leader, I knew some very good other student council leaders who had gone on to be lawyers in Maryland, so I got one of my old buddies from the high school days, which was very strange, because here I am, now a radical lesbian separatist, calling up and saying to this guy, you know, I need some help here. But they made us go right up until the trial and they didn't settle until — you're about to walk into the court room because the thing is to scare the hell out of you which, actually, I was pretty scared. And, you know, I got probation or something. And I imagine it's now expunged from my record. I think that was part of the deal, but, you know, we wanted people to understand sexism, and people didn't understand sexism.

How we came to understand it, I'm not sure. I'm definitely one of the people who came to feminism from what was called the New Left and I think a lot of how we understood it was by working in supposedly radical progressive mixed New Left groups and being used by the men in ways that we knew were wrong. Not just sexually, but all the standard things. Not listened to in the meetings, not having a voice in the decision making, asked to do the most menial jobs, and knowing that in a revolutionary setting, which is what we thought we were in with the men, that this was really bad and then, looking beyond the immediate circumstances and seeing that it was even worse in this society as a whole.

And then, of course, there were a lot of wonderful theorists, feminist theorists who were beginning to put out the critiques and once you start reading them, it just clicks, and you know in your gut — that Oh, my God, we're living in a male-dominated, male-supremacist, patriarchal system — and those were the words we had then. And we knew it in our guts.

ANDERSON: What kind of women were enrolled in your school?

BIREN: Really, suburban housewives.

ANDERSON: Did you have a hard time selling this to them?

BIREN: No, not at all. They were young and they were — I mean, something made them sign up. So once they were there, it was, you know, not a hard sell. Later, I taught as an adjunct professor at the University of Maryland and I taught Women's Studies 101, something like that, in the 80s. That was a much harder sell. I taught at night to sort of adult students and they, by the mid-80s, which was probably when I was doing it, didn't want to believe this because it would disrupt their world, whereas in the early 70s, people were much more ready to have their worlds disrupted. You know, basically, to be a feminist, if you're not a feminist, really does turn everything on its head. And so I think that willingness to have all your most basic values challenged is what determines whether there's going to be, you know, how hard it's going to be.

So anyway, I'm teaching this class, I'm teaching these kids, and you know, part of this bigger movement. This movement was focused very much, you have to remember, because it was pre-Roe v. Wade, on abortion. That was one of the big issues. And the other issue that was beginning to come into play was the ERA. And so, our Women's Liberation movement had a lot of focus on those and we had a couple of actions that I remember that were just terrific.

One was — I'll talk about the ERA one first. There was — because we're in Washington, you know, we're close to — for example, next

Wednesday, I'm going to go with these kids that I have a relationship with as a lesbian family to the very first hearing on the federal marriage amendment and we're going to try to disrupt the hearing, which is only going to have right-wing clergy speak about whether same-sex marriages should be allowed. And it was decided that everybody should bring their families, their gay and lesbian families, because it's a public hearing. So it should be really quite a mess [laugh] — which is the idea. So I'm bringing a 4 year old and a 2 year old, and their two moms.

But what we did — at this point, there was a subcommittee that was considering another amendment. This time, a good amendment that didn't pass, so we have to hope the bad amendment doesn't pass either. But at the time, we didn't think the Equal Rights Amendment was a good amendment and you have to understand that labor initially was against the Equal Rights Amendment because they thought it would make it harder in some ways for women to get employment because they would have to fit the same standards as men in terms of weightlifting and, I don't know, a bunch of stuff. Anyway, it wasn't our decision but the labor movement in general and particularly women in the union movement were against the ERA.

And we were against the ERA for that reason and another reason, which was that we didn't feel the government should have to decide whether we would be equal or not. We were just going to be equal. You know, this was the whole antigovernment [thing]. It's like, you're not the owner of me. You're not going to tell me if I'm equal or not.

So three of us from D.C. Women's Liberation somehow got on the witness list, and I was Angelina Grimke and I forget who the other people were. You know, we had these women leaders' names but of course the senators didn't have a clue who these people were so we were able to testify under these names. So there were three of us, Sharon Deevey, me and somebody else, and we got dressed up in our little dresses and went in and when it was our turn to testify, we stood up and we turned around. Birch Bayh, I remember, was the chairman of the constitutional subcommittee of the Senate. We turned our backs on them and we spoke to the women and the reporters and said, you know, basically, screw the Senate. This is what we think about women being equal. And it was all in the congressional record. It was — you can still find it somewhere. Angelina Grimke, blah, blah, blah. You know, right. So we were very happy that we pulled that off.

And it reminded me of another good action, where later, they were trying to pass something called the Human Life Amendment. You know, these senators keep wanting to — you know, this was after *Roe v. Wade*. It was sometime in the late 80s, early 90s, the Senate decided they were going to change the abortion ruling by a constitutional amendment and they had these hearings and these women all went in to the public gallery again but with signs and at a particular moment, they pulled out these signs and held them up and I was there of course, as the

photographer and photographed them and Tacie Dejanikus, who's from *Off Our Backs* had her sign upside down and I loved that. I mean, you know, because it was this — yeah, very scary and then, of course, the cops came and dragged you out of the room, you know, so I have to be right there to get the picture and have the cop dragging them.

ANDERSON: Did the cops drag you out of the room, too?

BIREN: Oh, yeah, totally.

ANDERSON: Even though you're not the one with the sign.

BIREN: Yeah, but, you know. I've been really banged around a lot by cops, a lot, doing what I've done. Just part of the territory for me. So I didn't put it together until today that these are all about constitutional amendments. Very interesting. How they go there so quickly. I mean, we went there with the ERA but they also — and none of them, of course, have been passed, so —

ANDERSON: Did your thinking change about the ERA then?

BIREN: Oh, yeah, my thinking — I ended up supporting it but I didn't end up working for it, really.

So, that was one of our actions. And then around abortion, we did so much work and, you know, in the middle, I have to backtrack in the story, but at a certain point, I came out again as a lesbian. So here I am as a lesbian working most of the time on abortion which, of course, can be a lesbian issue because you can be raped and whatever, but it's not a big high on most lesbians' agendas. So that when the split came later, when the lesbians were all thrown out of Women's Liberation, it really hurt a lot because we had been so part of the movement and we had not pushed a separate lesbian agenda ever. You know, we had done what was the consensus work of that Women's Liberation movement.

So one of the things we did that I remember quite well was that we decided to sit in at the office of the secretary of HEW, Health, Education and Welfare, which was the precursor of HHS, Health and Human Services that we have now, and again, I think we brought kids to that, too, actually, because nothing disrupts an office like children. And, you know, we didn't have our demands for childcare entirely in place but there was no childcare. And we also wanted people to see that we weren't against children, we were just against, you know, the lack of choice. I have a picture of this somewhere, you know, in the secretary's office. This was a sit-in. This was totally civil disobedience.

ANDERSON: And what year do you think it was?

BIREN: I think it was '70, and sitting under the desk, actually, literally, under the desk of the secretary, and my father came by, because my father worked at Health, Education and Welfare at this point. He had moved over from Defense into Education. And of course, he had no idea I was going to be there. He was like some deputy undersecretary or something like that. And it was a very interesting little encounter. Hi, Dad. Oh, my God, you know. So, we did that.

We did a lot of education — a lot of Women's Liberation was about education. A lot of it was about protesting and we had a group called Magic Quilt and the Magic Quilt was — the later incarnation of Magic Quilt was called The Feminist Alliance, but earlier, it was really where all the different groups with all the different interests came together in the center and planned joint actions.

Like, we planned a strike for August 26<sup>th</sup>, you know, because we had the idea that if women just stopped doing everything they did for one day, it really would stop the world. And it would show people that, I mean, nobody argues this too much anymore but really, people didn't think women made a difference. You know, women were running most of the major corporations and governments and offices and doing all the work and the men were sitting in the chairs of power, but they really didn't know how to do much of anything. It was the women who were doing it. That was our analysis. We knew that was true, so we thought if we could just get all the women to stop, people would figure it out. So, you know, we planned this strike and —

ANDERSON: How'd it go?

BIREN: Oh, well, you know, most people didn't strike, because they needed the money, they didn't believe in what we were saying, whatever. It's still a great idea. [laugh] Oh, you know, we had a march, we went down to the D.C. jail, we screamed at the people inside the jail in solidarity.

ANDERSON: And lesbianism was just an open secret at this point? Was it visible?

26:46
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BIREN: It's invisible. So then what happens is one day at the Women's Liberation office, Sharon and I become lovers. Nobody was there. We were, like, the main staffers, you know, it's a great office, had a lot of rooms. [laugh] And we become lovers and the way that happens at this time for various reasons that are a little hard to explain is, then I have to become also lovers with her husband because she is married. And this fell under the rubric of smash the nuclear family, which was one of the things that feminism was about. Not having nuclear families. So it was an early version of polyamory or non-monogamy. It was about not being possessive. It was about sex being something you could share. It was about — mostly, for me, it was about that was the way I could be lovers with Sharon, was to be lovers with Marty, her husband.

ANDERSON: So this was Sharon's idea?

BIREN: I think it was Marty's idea, because Marty — Sharon wasn't ready to leave Marty. But she wanted —

ANDERSON: She didn't keep it a secret from Marty, either?

BIREN: Right, right. And it would have been hard to keep it a secret. I think I've already said I'm really a rotten liar and, and you know, she was spending a lot of time on Women's Liberation but at some point, you know, you want to be together overnight, you want to be really together.

ANDERSON: So did you move in with her?

BIREN: I did, actually. [laugh] It was very awkward, and uh, Marty was one of these guys, you know, who was — also Jim Weeks, who was Charlotte's husband — he comes in later in this story — these guys were great, sensitive, perfect Women's Liberation husbands. You know, they got it. They did their share of everything. They were supportive. They were, you know, the kind of guys who wanted to make sure you got your orgasm. They were the kind of guys who definitely, you know, did the laundry and cooked and all, and they were great guys. I didn't love Marty, you know? I mean, I loved Sharon, but that was — that was the price for me.

So I moved in with them and we had, as anybody who's ever experienced polyamorous relationship knows, incredible scheduling hassles. Scheduling is the worst of it. I mean, honestly, that's the worst. How many nights? Who gets alone nights. When do they come — who's with who? How much? What about birthdays? I mean, you know, I've been through this apparently about every ten years, I forget how horrible it is and I give it another try. But you know, the scheduling, more than anything, I think, is the hard part. And, you have to work very hard on jealousy and possessiveness because I think there are very few people who don't have some of that in them. So you just have — and of course, I was the third wheel, so in a way, it was harder for me, you know, to legitimately feel any of that.

ANDERSON: Did you have an independent sexual relationship with Marty? Or was this always in the context of the three of you?

BIREN: Oh, no, it was totally independent. No, we didn't do threesomes. That was not the idea. Really, it was all about me and Sharon being able to be together and then, Marty, he would just get his as a payoff to let us have ours, or for Sharon to be able to be — have that. So, um, no-no-no. I couldn't have done that. You know, some people did that but just, I

don't know, maybe we tried it once. But you know, there's a lot of snuggling, cuddling together but I think actually being sexual was separate.

So anyway, at some point then, we decided to move into a large commune. It was the three of us and, uh, Charlotte Bunch Weeks and Jim Weeks and another guy named Joe, who, Joe Stork, who I was not having a relationship with but just, we were — without naming it, we knew we needed gender equality, so we had these three guys and three gals and, and uh, you know, everybody was very political, everybody was very involved in various movements. And the three of us in particular were involved in Women's Liberation.

ANDERSON: Where was the commune?

BIREN: Park Road.

ANDERSON: In D.C.?

BIREN: In D.C., yeah. I could go point it out. Nice big house. Big enough, actually, for this. And you know, a typical commune with the little chore wheel. Everybody took turns doing everything. Whenever I cooked, everybody ate out because I was the — Sharon worked really hard on trying to teach me how to cook. She had taught in a little one-room schoolhouse in Kentucky as part of — I don't know, one of those programs, VISTA or one of those, and she had this funny little book, like how to cook all in one pot or how to cook in five minutes, I forget what it was, and she, you know, she handed it to me when I moved with them and said, OK, now you're gonna cook. And I was, like, OK, but —

ANDERSON: How did it turn out?

BIREN: Oh, salmon coquettes that you could throw on the floor and they would not lose their shape, you know? And to this day, I'm not a cook. Because as I said, my dad taught me everything. My mother taught me nothing, so I didn't cook. My sister is a gourmet cook, so I don't know how that happened. But I — she got all the cooking genes and so, that went on for a while and then Sharon and I decided that we needed to come out in Women's Liberation. And we decided we would come out in our consciousness-raising group, because those were the women we were closest to. We loved them, we thought they loved us. We came out — there was actually a tape of it that got lost, which is so terrible. Somebody sent it uninsured in the mail.

But what I remember is, that it was, of course, very emotional and the first thing, and often the last thing that these women who we had formed this bond with us said, was, What about Marty? What about Marty? They were all worried about Marty. And of course, their

husbands also were worried about them, and we, Sharon and I, started what became a terrible split between lesbians and straight women in the Washington, D.C., Women's Liberation movement. And just by saying we're in love, we love each other.

ANDERSON: It sounds like in the CR group it was not a split over your sexual choices and your politics, it was about Marty. How did that translate into the larger movement as a whole, which probably didn't care about Marty, did they?

BIREN: They did, because they all had husbands or boyfriends, and their husbands and boyfriends didn't want them around us, because if I could steal Sharon away from Marty, who knew who else I would go after, or who else would decide, like Sharon did, to be a lesbian. So they had a lot of pressure from the men and in some cases, out of their own fears of not being with men, if they weren't ready to make, even in spite of their feminist feelings and beliefs. You know, it turns out it's a bigger jump between believing something and living something than we thought, because, you know, we could say, oh, male privileges this, this, and this, but giving it up, giving up privilege of any kind is a struggle. So I think this Marty was just a symbol of male privilege, male protection, male approval, male everything, that had value and power in the society, and the threat of losing that was too much, even for these feminists. So, we became very ostracized, Sharon and I.

ANDERSON: Did other lesbians come out to support you or were you doing this alone?

BIREN: No, we were really alone and what we did was look outside of Washington for other lesbians because we — we didn't even know — I mean, we were so naïve, we didn't know how to find the bars. We really were middle-class lesbians, and we went to the Constitutional Convention called by the Black Panther Party in Philadelphia — I think this was still '70, and... whenever I speak publicly, I always tell people I'm a butch who cries and not to worry about it, because I'm very emotional, and I cry very easily, so I'll probably cry a lot today.

ANDERSON: Do you want to take a break?

BIREN: No, I don't care. I mean, it's just who I am. That's why I kind of announce it ahead of time, so nobody should be uncomfortable, because I'm not — I'm not uncomfortable with it, because it just happens. It was very moving to me, because it was the very first time in this Constitutional Convention that I saw other women stand up publicly and say, I am a lesbian. I still can't speak, because it was so — it was so unbelievable at the time. It was not something I ever expected to

happen. You know, I had been living in the closet now for a long time, or I had been living in isolation, I had been living trying to go straight, and I didn't know any other lesbians, I certainly didn't know any lesbians who would stand up in a public place and say, I am a lesbian. And these women were from Radicalesbians in New York.

ANDERSON: So they weren't Black Panthers?

BIREN: No. This was a Constitutional Convention that they had called to make a new constitution for the United States and all the radical groups had come and these — the thing that was amazing about these women is they were standing up to challenge the Black Panthers to include, I don't know what — we didn't even have a word for it. We didn't call it sexual preference, we didn't call it sexual orientation, we didn't call it homosexuality. I think they just said lesbians, you know, and it was because they used the word lesbians that it was so powerful to me, you know, you have to — if you're going to include everybody, you have to include lesbians. I don't know what exactly the rhetoric was. And it blew me out.

39:40

So, as soon as that session ended, I ran to talk to those women and I caught up with one — I caught up with one of them in the women's room, I think, actually, you know, and had this memory of blah-blah-blah, in the bathroom, and I got myself invited up to meet all of them in New York. I went up to New York and I started — you always hear about lesbian recruitment. I started recruiting these women who were already lesbians to come to Washington, because I was still very rooted here, I've always been very rooted here. I didn't want to move up there and be with them. I wanted to bring the lesbians to Washington. And I became lovers with this — one of these women. I think I can't use her name because she became straight later which was the most, um, -

ANDERSON: But she was a member of Radicalesbians?

BIREN: Yes, and they called themselves also Radical Radishes. We called them Radical Radishes, you know.

ANDERSON: I've heard that.

BIREN: And you know, a lot of women go straight for one reason or another and this was the most sad to me. She did it because she had a brother who was at risk for a number of reasons. And she felt that was the only way to get him out of a very bad situation, so she married somebody to raise him, a man. But I've always thought it was just the saddest of all the — because this one was such a lesbian, you know. I learned so much from her about being a lesbian. You know, she's a working-class dyke. She had friends in the early 70s who were transitioning, which was unheard

of at that time, you know. It was that kind of really hard-core street working-class lesbianism. She had an apartment in the worst part of — I don't know, probably now it's like built up Chelsea or something. It's like way down on 7th Ave — you know, addicts peeing in the hallway and the bathtub in the kitchen, and I loved it there. To me, it was heaven.

ANDERSON: You're not with Sharon at the time?

BIREN: Oh, yeah, I'm still with Sharon.

ANDERSON: and Marty?

BIREN: No, Marty's gone. Once we came out, Marty was gone. Marty's gone. So I'm with this person and with Sharon. And trying to recruit people to come to D.C., which is a hard sell if you live in New York [laugh].

ANDERSON: It's a hard sell.

BIREN: Yeah, so I convinced about, let's see, I convinced this person and — I don't know how many of these names I can use — about three other people to come down, and we formed a collective. Now the negotiations about making this collective took about eight months. And I think the collective lasted a month. But it did get the people down here. OK, now, by this time, also Sharon took another lover who happened to be somebody I went to college with, Ginny Berson. And Ginny had just came back. Sharon's with Ginny, I'm with Donna, Sharon and I are still together. Ginny had just come back from Peace Corp in Panama. She and I, you know, had done some — we got a job. I don't know how we found these jobs. This is how we supported ourselves. We had a job counting the ships that went by some Sandy Point up by the Bay, so we'd sit there all day smoking marijuana and talking to each other and like, making marks on the paper. I don't even know where that job came from, but, you know, this is the kind of thing, you know, you just had these little hustles all the time, and —

ANDERSON: And this work supported your movement work

BIREN: Oh, totally. And so somehow Ginny and Sharon got together, I don't remember, but Ginny and Sharon and this couple of women from New York — endless negotiations about what we would do and why we would do it and everybody was political. This wasn't about just living. It was about having a living working collective. And the collective was called Amazing Grace, which I hated, even at the time, this is not a name I liked, but that's what it was called. And Amazing Grace was, as I said, not very graced or blessed and lasted about a month. And it broke

45:30

up totally on class lines. It was a very, very hard break for me because my lover from New York and I were on opposite sides of these class lines.

ANDERSON: How did that happen?

BIREN: And I lost her and the group. How did it happen?

ANDERSON: Yes.

BIREN: When you try to live with people, class differences come to the fore very quickly, I think.

ANDERSON: So how did that manifest?

BIREN: I'm trying to think in that collective how it manifested. I know how it manifested in the Furies but in *Amazing Grace*, I don't have specific memories. The specific memory I have is of total devastation because I had worked so hard and I wanted it so much and it was all the lesbians I knew in the world, after all. So to have this new world that we were building collapse so quickly, and so painfully, because I lost, as I say, I lost a lover as well as everything else that I lost. And it was so [inaudible] No, Sharon and Ginny were on my side.

And it was hard for me because, as I think I explained yesterday, I started out pretty working-class. But because I had so much educational privilege, I became very middle-class in my attitudes, you know, having gone through Mount Holyoke and Oxford, I was pretty privileged in many ways, including, unfortunately, in my thinking. And I didn't understand that. So that was hard for me. It was hard for me to feel separate from these people, to understand that I was the oppressor. To know that I was on the wrong side of a lot of issues. I didn't understand it. It was really — it was the kind of devastation that comes when — it's like you're totally surprised and you don't get it. Didn't give me any sympathy for men at the time, but it wasn't all that different from what was happening to them. You know, it's like, all of a sudden you're the bad guy. And you don't get it. I was a class oppressor, and I'm sure I was. And they tried to explain it and we couldn't — we couldn't get it.

I don't know what the specifics in that collective were but I could make some up, you know. I can tell you, in the Furies, this thing replayed itself and I have a clearer memory of it. So they left, and that left Sharon and Ginny and me. And we decided to try again because we still believed, I mean, we couldn't do what we wanted to do as three people and it was driving me crazy to be in a threesome where we were all living together, and again, it wasn't, you know, it was like Sharon was bouncing back and forth which was — that's in some ways to be the hardest position to be in, I think, the middle position.

And so we started putting another collective together, dragging more people down from New York. And this is when Rita decided to come and so Rita Mae came down. She brought another person with her and Rita is very strategic, so she decided to go after Charlotte, because Charlotte was still one of the main leaders of Women's Liberation in D.C., so they became a couple and Charlotte left Jim and thereby fulfilling all the fears of all the women in Women's Liberation, so that also increased the split even more than Sharon and I leaving had done. It was — we were the wedge, and then Charlotte was the thing that just really cracked it down the middle.

And Nancy Myron came down. I can't remember — I think Nancy came down — Nancy came down from Amazing Grace. I'm not entirely clear about all of this, but anyway, we put together another group, which we called Those Women, because that's how the Women's Liberation people referred to us. You know, those women. And Those Women became the Furies. And that was in '71.

And there were originally 13 of us and one of the people who's actually being interviewed by somebody else who's doing research who's name I should give you, who just wrote to me, who's doing research just on the Furies and *Off Our Backs*, and which was the feminist newspaper here at the time, and of course, a lot of the Women's Liberation women were in *Off Our Backs*. And her name was Betty Garmand and she didn't last very long, and I think it's because she wasn't really a lesbian, but I don't remember entirely why she left. She may have left also on political grounds. My memory of that isn't too clear. But so that left eventually 12 of us, although I think some other people were added in, and some of the people came from *Off Our Backs*, because when they came out as lesbians, they were thrown off of *Off Our Backs* at that time. *Off Our Backs* didn't want lesbians.

A lot of feminist groups didn't want out lesbians. They didn't want them because of a number of reasons. One of the reasons was, it would change the agenda, because by now, lesbians were starting to say, Look, you have to allow for us in these different ways. The other was, they didn't want lesbians because, in some cases they were still striving for a certain kind of acceptance that the stigma of being labeled a lesbian organization would hurt. And of course, men and the mainstream could use that against them and feminists were afraid feminism would be discredited as just a bunch of man-hating dykes quote-unquote, you know, blah-blah-blah. So, it was a long time until people like Gloria Steinem said, Well, you know, whatever she said, I'm a lesbian, too, blah-blah, that was supposed to take the onus off and show people that you had to be inclusive.

But this is a very — this is something that happens over and over. I mean, it's basically how the lesbian — it's basically how the lesbian-gay movement has related to transgendered people. I mean, it's not a different issue, really. It's like, how inclusive are we? Who's really part

of us? Who's gonna hurt us? Who's gonna help us? And you know, it took a long time until people figured out the more inclusive you are, the stronger you are, because — you know, we were separatists and we certainly didn't believe that at the time. So, you know, it's a different kind of way of thinking.

And it's a way — it was also a way of thinking, I mean, I'll talk about why we were separatists later but right now, so, we found — so these women had come, a bunch of women had come from the — you know, the Chicago 8 were this group of male leftists who were on trial in Chicago, for antiwar activity, and one of them was Dave Dellinger, and his daughter, Tasha, and a couple of her friends had been doing support work for the Chicago 8. And when that trial was over, they came down to D.C. and joined *Off Our Backs*. And then they decided they were lesbians and then they got thrown out of *Off Our Backs*. So Tasha and another person, again — I don't know where she is, so I'm not going to use — well, Susan Hathaway, because the names of all the Furies are already public. So, Tasha and Susan Hathaway and another woman who hadn't been part of the Chicago 8 but who had been in *Off Our Backs*, Coletta Reed, came out. Anyway they all had a house and we all had a house and then made, you know, made the collective together, and then people started swapping around the houses or something. And then we added, Jennifer Woodhul came later and Lee Schwing came later and I guess, Helaine Harris came with Coletta, because they were lovers. Unclear. A lot of people were sort of added in by lover connections. That's often how it works.

And so the Furies was probably the most intense experience of my life. For many reasons. First of all, you have to remember most of us are in our twenties and your twenties are very intense anyway. Secondly, we decided we were the avant-garde of the revolution and we believed that we were going to change everything. But when you decide to change everything, especially if you're a feminist, you have to start with yourself.

And you know, we really believed the personal is political in a way that meant we had to reinvent our lives entirely. If we were going to be revolutionaries, we had to live in a revolutionary way. So, that means you have to figure out what is a revolutionary way to live? Well it turns out, figuring that out is just about a full-time job, because everything is up for grabs. Once you decide that the world is messed up, then you have to question everything, everything. So —

ANDERSON: Did you decide that as a group?

BIREN: And as a collective you had to agree. So, we were a living working collective. We decided to share everything equally. Well, what is everything? The example I like to use is, does that mean toothbrushes? You know. We had one sleeping room that was wall-to-wall mattresses.

If you wanted to make love with somebody, you had to, like, book the private room. We shared clothes, we shared cars, we shared money, we shared. I mean, some of it was easy, some of it was easy to decide. It wasn't necessarily easy to do. If you had a favorite vest and somebody else was wearing it, that wasn't necessarily an easy thing. But that was easy compared to everything else that went down.

Middle-class women were expected not to be downwardly mobile. If you had the capacity to bring in bigger money, you were supposed to bring in the biggest money you could bring in; otherwise, you were shirking. Well, middle-class women didn't want to necessarily do the white-collar kind of jobs, because they weren't necessarily very fun. So, lots of — I see we're blinking, but lots of processing. This is where lesbians get the — are we out?

ANDERSON: We can go on for about five minutes.

BIREN: This is, you know, where lesbians get the rap of being people who process 24/7.

ANDERSON: Some of it well deserved.

BIREN: Yeah.

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

ANDERSON: Can we back up to talk about the Furies and who they were — I've read in books and articles that everybody in the group was white and that you guys came from different class sectors and that ended up being a divisive factor. Were there any other Jewish women in the group? Were there any women of color? Was it an intentional decision to be an all-white collective?

BIREN: It was not intentional to be all white. It was just that we didn't have any contact with lesbians of color. As I was saying, we barely had any contact with other lesbians, period. It was just all the lesbians we knew and because we were white and we hadn't found the bars, really, and we weren't very intentional about race, either.

1:00

ANDERSON: OK.

BIREN: I mean, it didn't occur to us that we actually could proactively try to find lesbians of color. We weren't a mixed-class group on purpose, either. It just was who we were. Who we were wasn't intentional. What we were trying to do was very intentional. Who we were spanned a pretty good age range, early twenties to early thirties, which was a big deal at the time. You know, the younger you are, the more every year means in terms of distance. And uh, Ginny and I are both Jewish. We were the only two Jews in the collective, and well, you know, truthfully, sometimes Rita Mae claims to have black blood. It depends on which day you talk to her.

ANDERSON: But she was not identified as African American at the time?

BIREN: She never identifies entirely as African American, but sometimes she says since she was a bastard, you know, she claims — it varies. I think now they were some kind of rich aristocracy, but at the time, it was better that they should be black, so they were black. The missing unknown forebears. It varies quite a lot who they are, in my experience with Rita. You'd have to ask her.

ANDERSON: So class becomes a really important marker and division

BIREN: The really important divisions within the Furies turned out to be class, old gay-new gay, which was defined as whether or not you were a lesbian before you were a feminist, or a feminist before you were a lesbian, and um, I just lost the third one — class, old gay-new gay, I lost my train of thought.

ANDERSON: Can you talk about those two?

BIREN:

Sure. It's bothering me because it was just in my mind. As you said, we're an aging population. Our memories and our minds are leaving us. So, I've talked about the part of being a living collective. I want to talk about the part of being a working collective, because that's why we were together, because we had this revolutionary work that we were trying to accomplish. We were radical lesbian separatist feminists. No, I think we said it lesbian feminist separatists. Radical lesbian feminist separatists. So each one of those things meant something, and was part of the ideology that we were developing. And the main thing that the Furies did was develop an ideology and try to spread that ideology.

And we did a really good job of figuring out what we thought. We did a pretty good job of getting it out in publications. We did a really, really bad job of relating to other women and actually organizing people. Which, if you're going to lead a revolution, at some point, you have to be able to relate to the masses whom we spoke of very often but whom we had a certain lack of connection to, shall we say. We were a very isolated, very insular, very intense, very inwardly focused group in many ways, even though we thought globally. That wasn't a catch phrase at the time but because of Charlotte, primarily — Charlotte had recently come back from Vietnam, Charlotte had a very acute global consciousness that she shared with us, and she said the women in Vietnam told her that it would take seven generations, you know, to make change. Well, we wanted change tomorrow. So this was like a very interesting concept for us to try to get our minds around.

We did a lot of studying. Rita insisted that everybody read Trotsky. Well, I had just come from Oxford where I had studied politics and I had read enough of that stuff. So that, I think, was the beginning of the clash between Rita and myself and that, you know, we continued to bump heads on many, many issues. Two strong personalities bumping up against each other. And, you know, I was being somewhat facetious in my remarks about Rita earlier, but, she would try to pull these cards on me, you know, one of which was that she was working-class and one of which, you know — and I was certainly privileged. So if I said, I don't want to read Trotsky, you know, it didn't fly too well.

So we would have these study sessions. Then we would have these discussions about things. Then we would try to hash out what we thought and then we would have what the Chinese, you know — this big Maoist time. Everybody carried their Little Red Books. I actually had a Little Red Book. We would have what we called criticism/self-criticism sessions, but basically what would happen would be you would be sitting up against the wall and everybody would criticize you and you couldn't talk. You couldn't answer back. If you were — and it was mostly the middle-class people who got put up against the wall, literally. Because part of our problem was we were too verbal, and we would — we had all these skills with argument that were slimy. So, we

4:30

just had to listen, and it was really, really hard, to sit there and not be able to talk and everybody tell you every single thing that you had done wrong. So it, in a way, for me, was the explication of what had happened in *Amazing Grace* that never got verbalized suddenly was [laugh] — this is one of the what-you-wished-for-coming-true things. You know, I had wanted to understand what the problems were and I got plenty of earfuls about what the problems were.

And, you know, part of the problem was that I was loud and pushy which, at the time, I didn't identify as anti-Semitic, but a lot of the language in retrospect is typical anti-Semitic language. So I didn't — it didn't comfort me at the time because all I thought of was, Oh, God, I'm loud and pushy, you know. I didn't think of it as being part of my cultural inheritance and that it was OK in some context, even if it wasn't OK in this context. And so, what I learned was that I needed to shut up and not talk and not write. And that's how I became a photographer. Because I didn't want to use any of the skills that were tainted by my patriarchal class privilege. So it had that very good effect, but it was very, very painful at the time.

And as I said, I disagreed with the collective about many things. Actually, the only side the — oh, age is the other thing I was going to say. There was a — that was the other split, the young-old split. And the only — of those three major splits, old gay-new gay, class, and age, the only one I fell on the politically correct side of was the old gay-new gay and that only half, because I had been gay but I hadn't been gay out or in working-class settings. In other words, I wasn't a bar dyke. I had been lesbian. I had experience being a lesbian before I was a feminist, but not in the preferred way.

ANDERSON: Let me just clarify. So the premium was placed on being gay before feminism. I mean, that was considered more valuable, and it was considered more valuable to have been gay in the bars, and yet, the rap that lesbian feminism gets from the historical record is that there was a lot of hostility to old gay or to working-class lesbian who came from the bars. Can you speak to that discrepancy?

BIREN: Sure, I can. You know, actually, feminists, including ourselves when we finally figured out where the bars were and we went to the bars, we went into the bars and literally circle danced. In other words, we brought our feminist culture into the bars so that it was like, you didn't have partners, you were all together, you were — I mean, of course you were coupled in some ways, but there was this, you know, communal collective consciousness that went with feminism that was totally, um, not what was going on in the bars, in the lesbian bars at the time. So, to come into a bar where there were couples dancing and make a circle and start dancing — I mean, you couldn't alienate people — you know, if you wanted to alienate them any more completely, you couldn't figure

out a way to do it. I mean, we were not respectful of the bars, in that sense of valuing that culture. That part is true. That rap, I think, is true. I personally never heard anybody bad-mouthing roles, bad-mouthing dildos, bad-mouthing any of those kind of things that we are said to have bad-mouthed, knocked. I think — what we did was we just weren't sensitive and respectful of what was going on there. We just made it our own place as much as we could and that was a different place than it was when we went into it.

We wanted those women, the bar dykes, the working-class lesbians, to join us. They were our constituency. We thought they were really valuable. We just didn't treat them with respect because we didn't basically treat anybody with respect. We were incredibly arrogant. We really thought we had the word, we thought we had the way, we thought it was our destiny to teach everybody else how to do it. But it didn't apply to working-class people anymore than anybody else.

ANDERSON: But butch-femme really wasn't a dividing factor then?

BIREN: No. Absolutely not. And the other rap that we get is that we weren't sexual. Take it from me, we were. We were sexual. We were very sexual. And how 70s feminists get the rap for being antisexual or asexual, I have never, ever understood that, because we came, you know, straight out of the polymorphous perverse 60s into the 70s full-blast, nonmonogamous, you know. It's a mystery to me.

ANDERSON: Residues from the sex wars in the 80s and the anti-porn stuff?

BIREN: No but they put in on the 70s.

ANDERSON: Maybe it happened in the 80s. Look back to see where it came from, I don't know. Amber brought it up and said in her interview, she said, I don't know where the myth comes from but let me tell you, my lesbian feminist commune was a hot bed of sexual activity, so you concur?

BIREN: I do concur. And, I mean, you know, and we continued to use drugs. So those things — you know, sex, drugs, rock 'n roll. I mean, we were there. Lesbian feminist separatists, sex, drugs, rock 'n roll, no contradiction, you know, for us.

ANDERSON: Yes. Were you ever paired into monogamist relationships or were you still — was that something that was also —

BIREN: Well, Ginny and Sharon were still together for a while and Sharon and I were still together and, you know, I insisted that Ginny be in a different house because I just couldn't take it, being in the same house. The noises just drove my crazy, frankly.

ANDERSON: In terms of the insistence about sharing everything, did that also mean lovers and sex?

BIREN: No, that was OK. Except to the extent that Sharon and I turned out to be a very strong couple within the collective. That is part of the reason we were purged first, because it was an alliance, and you know, that was not a good thing for the other people who were trying to exercise power, that we were bonded. So it was about power, it wasn't about sex, in that sense. There weren't supposed to be leaders as you understand, since we were feminists and since we decided everything by consensus, there weren't supposed to be leaders. In terms of strong personalities, clearly the strong personalities, as I said, were Rita and myself. Charlotte is very strong but she's a Libra so her strength was always dedicated to trying to bring people together but, you know, she's incredibly strong and smart.

ANDERSON: So it was you and Rita.

BIREN: Well, that's my perception. But the fact that she had Sharon and me purged, I think, says something. You don't purge somebody who's no bother.

ANDERSON: Do you want to talk about that story here?

BIREN: No. No, I want to go back to the old gay-new gay, because I want to explain something about that that's always puzzled me. The ideology that we constructed, as the Furies, that was so important and so threatening was that anybody could be a lesbian, and that if you had a feminist belief system, that it should lead you to lesbianism, because it's about using your energies for women and not for men. All your energies. And that anybody could do that. And the people like Coletta and Tasha and Susan and the ones who had come out of feminism, many of whom in fact went back to heterosexuality later — not Coletta, I don't think — but that made sense for them. How, you know, it made sense for me, I don't know, because I knew I was a lesbian before I had any feminism, as I told you. And basically, I was going along with an ideology that said lesbianism was a product of a feminist ideology. But I did. And I didn't feel that was a contradiction so much at the time. I felt a lot of contradictions at the time but that wasn't one of them. And so, what we said, you know, that was important, was that heterosexuality was oppressive to women and that lesbianism was a way toward liberation and freedom. And that it would eventually cause the fall of male supremacy and patriarchy.

And that in order for us to build our strength, to be powerful enough to bring down such a powerful system, we had to separate ourselves

from men. And that was the separatist part. And this I think you will find in many, many movements — that oppressed groups, to become stronger, separate. You know, that's what Black Power was about, that's what a lot of other movements go through a phase in movement building, where you fall back, you figure out who you are, you figure out your strengths, you get yourselves together before you can go into coalition or go into working with other people.

So, I think it was a very normal kind of thing to do, but it was also a very hard thing to do, because we were cut off from our families, we cut off from our former friends. Not by our choice — we were ostracized by the women's movement, so we didn't have a choice. So in a sense, once they had broken off the ties with us, we had to be separatists. But it also, you know, had to —

ANDERSON: You still worked with men, so that didn't translate into absolute separatism —

BIREN: Oh, if we possibly could not, we didn't. We gave away a boy child at the beginning of the collective. Coletta had two children. One was a boy. She gave the boy to the father. You know, it was about not having — it was about having as little to do with men as possible. And straight women. I mean, if we had to, for employment, for survival, but reluctantly. I mean, we would have been just as happy never to come in contact with men. When we say radical, we were radical not just in terms of our politics but we were radical in terms of — we were purists almost to the point of being fascists about everything. I mean, I can't — I can't describe enough how zealous we were in taking everything to the extreme. We were really extremists. Purists. And very, very righteous.

20:35

ANDERSON: Give me an example from your daily life that shows that in terms of the household or the meals or clothing —

BIREN: Well, I mean besides, you know, I mean, we shared everything but that's not the kind of — that's not the kind of thing I'm talking — I'm really talking about more politically than in terms of the living. Politically, an example would be — this is the hardest thing for me to talk about, OK?

Whew, and obviously, I'm going to cry, because I never talk about this without crying, even though I've worked on it a lot, and this is the part that's the most painful for me about this time. It was decided by the collective that we were too much of an avant-garde group to devote our valuable energies to child care, and therefore the three remaining children would have to go. These three children — one was an adopted child that Coletta had, who actually was a child of color. One was Tasha's daughter, and the other was a little girl named Cassidy, who was also of color, whose father purportedly was a Young Lord, which is

the Puerto Rican group that's sort of the equivalent of the Black Panthers. Cassidy's mother was underground, and she was a friend of the people who had come from the Chicago 8. She came to us as a tiny, tiny sick infant, and Sharon and I — I should only speak for myself, I formed a particular bond with this child, and just loved her a lot and watched her grow up, you know, and didn't want to give her back, away, whatever.

Sharon and I tried — even before the collective had decided to, that we didn't, that we weren't going to keep the children, Sharon and I had tried to adopt this child. Because we wanted to, because we loved her, you know, and we went, in all our naiveté, to see some lawyers, and because we are who we are, we said, Oh, we're a lesbian couple, we have no visible means of support, and we want to adopt this baby, because she has no parents, you know. She's been abandoned.

And these lawyers literally, literally, actually laughed us out of the office, like, You must be out of your minds. Who do you think you are? What can we possibly do for you? It's 1971. You're lesbians. What are you thinking? And to this day, I don't like to drive by that office, you know. I know where those lawyers were, I know where I went, and I know how humiliating and disappointing it was to learn that this baby who was ours in our minds, couldn't be ours legally.

So when it came, the collective came to the decision that they wanted to get rid of the children, you know, there was nothing we could say, and we didn't know how to reach the mother. I didn't know who — how to get to the mother, you know. It's hard to explain this now. I mean, people went underground for a lot of real reasons, you know. They had done things that the government was going to prosecute them for, and they had to hide. And this is what this mother was doing. It's very hard to hide with a sick baby.

But some of the other people knew how to contact her, and they contacted her and gave the baby to her and she put the baby for adoption and a straight family adopted her and in spite of Sharon and I trying to find her several times since then, we've never been able to locate her. And, you know, she's 30-something now. She's not this little infant that's in my mind, you know. But I wanted to find her. I have, you know, I have her baby pictures. I have her — movies of her, and she was the greatest little kid, you know, beautiful little brown baby. Very, you know, very wonderful little baby.

And what I didn't understand until much, much later was that the loss of that child made it really hard for me to relate to kids until very recently, because, you know, I hadn't really worked it all through until, you know, maybe ten years or so ago.

So, that was one of the clashes we had, because I was not — obviously, I was not for giving the children away. So, Sharon and I, for that reason and for other reasons where we disagreed with the consensus, were purged from the group.

Now, the interesting thing about the purging was that Sharon and I had in fact the best relationships with women outside the collective. We were the ones who had reached out in some ways and still had some connections. Very little, but some. So the collective didn't want us to tell people that we had been purged, because they felt it would reflect badly on them, and we believed so much in what they were doing that we actually kept the secret for, I don't know, a long time. So here we were. We weren't in the collective, we had to pretend we sort of were in the collective, we weren't anywhere. We were in this limbo. But because — even though they had dumped us, we still believed in enough, in the majority, of what they were doing to not want to hurt them. It's really hard to explain. It really is hard to explain, how you can be so committed to an idea and to a group, even if they destroy you.

ANDERSON: Do you believe this had a lot to do with your class at the time?

BIREN: Well, it had, you know, because —

ANDERSON: I mean, you really internalized that you were at fault, that you —

BIREN: Yeah, I didn't think I was wrong about the specifics but I thought I was — you know, we had another clash over this woman who was thought to be an informer. I didn't think the way we treated her was right, because we didn't have any proof and we really destroyed her. I thought it was wrong. Everybody else thought we needed to do that because she was a danger. Who was right? I don't know, but it was — I was often on the outs with people. It wasn't necessarily about class issues, but because of my class privilege, I was disruptive when I disagreed, because I could argue. I grew up in a house arguing. I don't know if that was clear yesterday, but I really learned how to argue in my family. I argued all the time, and I was good at it, and and I was disruptive to the consensus process, because I wasn't often in sync with other people on issues, on the issues. I didn't fall in a line easily if I didn't agree.

And you know, the irony is that once Rita taught the collective how to purge people, she was the next one to get purged. Sure. Because she was the next biggest mouth, and that's when the youth movement sprang up, and Rita and Charlotte and I, all born in 1944, and Coletta was older than us. I think Nancy is a little older than us, but then we're the next oldest, and all the rest were younger. And there was a much younger — Jennifer, Helaine, Lee, really much younger, and they were like, OK, nobody's really listening to us. We never get to talk, you know. So, you know. Charlotte was always very diplomatic and smart and strategic. Nobody got purged after that. That was the end of the purges. But then the collective fell apart.

ANDERSON: Right. So it was a year or longer.

BIREN: Yeah. I know it seemed like a lifetime, but the newspaper continued after the living, working collective fell apart.

ANDERSON: Now, did you continue to have a role in the newspaper?

BIREN: Oh, yeah, my pictures all over the newspapers. I mean, that was the other thing. They still needed me — actually, *Motive Magazine*, I think we did this special issue of *Motive* and, you know, this is the Methodist magazine, Charlotte had these ties to the Methodists and of course, it was the end of the magazine, it was the last issue they ever did, but we did this wonderful, wonderful issue of *Motive* and you know, I was on the editorial board of that and I think I got purged somewhere in the middle of that, I don't remember. But you know, they still wanted my work. They just didn't want to argue with me anymore.

But taking that child away — and I want to make it clear that seemed normal and logical to them at the time, you know? It's like, OK, women are always made to do childcare. Children are what take us out of the position of being powerful just in the way that we're going to separate ourselves from men, we're going to separate ourselves from children so that we can be, you know, focused on this task. I mean, they — it made sense in the context of their thinking. I was just always able to — I mean, I was just always a passionate, emotional person and my ideology wasn't pure enough to bend, you know, my feelings. And so I was a liability to the collective. I mean, that's how they would think.

But it made sense in that — in the mindset. I understood what they were doing, I just didn't want to do it. But I respected it enough to like, sort of, halfway go along with it. It's a very hard thing to explain to people now who would say, Oh, my God. They took this child. How could they do it? What was the matter with them? Were they horrible people?

They really weren't horrible people. They were very, very serious, very dedicated revolutionaries and, you know, I kind of failed the test at some level. I'm kind of proud of it at this point [laugh], you know, but at the time, it was a failure in some ways. So, because I had — that's what I had wanted to do. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't do what they did to this woman who we thought was an informer. I couldn't do what I wanted to do to children. I couldn't not relate to other people the way, you know — I just wasn't good at it, in some ways.

In other ways, you know, I was great. I mean, I never, ever put my name to anything that we wrote because I was trying to get away from taking credit because of... But I wrote a lot of the stuff and I helped think through a lot of — I mean, I was a trained political scientist, you know, so a lot of what came out was mine, but I never — I never wanted ownership because that would only lead to, you know, more up against the wall.

ANDERSON: But you always put your name on your photographs?

BIREN: Yes.

ANDERSON: And why was that?

BIREN: I was already out of the collective by then, and I had — I took JEB, I didn't put Joan E. Biren, I took JEB.

ANDERSON: Why was that?

BIREN: Well, a lot of reasons. You know, when I was a kid, I fished these little letters out of the cereal boxes and put them on my bicycle and I thought it was cool. So I always liked the name. But I also did it partly because I had this mistaken idea that if it was short, people would put the credit line and if it was long, there wouldn't be room for it. And truthfully, being here in Washington and my parents being embarrassed about everything, I did it as a way of being closeted, which I'm not proud of.

36:16

ANDERSON: To protect them.

BIREN: Oh, yeah, but people always use protection as an excuse. You know, white men were always protecting white women and that's why they were racist. Do you know what I mean? Protection. Anytime anybody says they're protecting somebody else, you have to be suspicious of it. I mean, you know, I used to go around when I went around with my slide shows and a big part of that was to try to encourage people to come out. Now of course, in the Furies, we said, Come out. Period. You know, that's it, the only way. You must come out. OK. So when I softened up a little bit, you know, I said, You know, obviously, it's your choice. You do it on your own time. You have to make the calculus of what's to gain and what's to lose but here's what's to gain. Let me encourage you, you know. It's a little different rap. But I always would say to people, Has anybody here ever come out and their parent died as a direct result of that? Because everybody always says, It would kill my mother. If I told her, it would kill my mother.

And I took a lot of risks because I went to the — I never knew who was in the audience. There was a lot of people, often, and I said, If you have ever come out and somebody died, please let us know. And nobody ever did, thank goodness, but I'm very suspicious when people say they were protective.

So I take — I've never said this out loud. People always ask me about JEB. So I'm coming clean on this tape. It was a way of being, staying closeted. For whatever the reasons were. So at some point, I started — and also after I found out that having to be JEB didn't mean

people were going to use it more than if it was longer. I got this unwieldy credit of JEB (Joan E. Biren). Because by then, a lot of people knew me as JEB so I couldn't, like, not be JEB. But I didn't want to just be JEB anymore, so —

ANDERSON: Right. So were you going by that name with your friends or was it only a professional tag line?

BIREN: It started out just as a sort of nom de camera and what happened was, as people beyond my immediate circle started to get to know me, people did start calling me JEB. So at this point in my life, I have very, very close friends who call me JEB. Del and Phyllis call me JEB. A lot of people call me JEB. And what happens is, I don't hear it. I don't know often whether they're saying JEB or Joan because I just answer and then when I have to write people, I don't know what to sign. I don't know how to sign it.

ANDERSON: Which are you most comfortable with?

BIREN: I'm equal — that's what I'm saying. I'm equally comfortable. I don't hear it. I don't, you know — truthfully, the very, very closest people probably still call me Joan, but I'm very used to JEB.

ANDERSON: I had always assumed it had something to do with gender, but —

BIREN: Oh, no.

ANDERSON: Isn't that funny. But Joan was such a feminine name, when there might have been a time when you wanted something that was more ambiguous or masculine —

BIREN: No, I just thought it was cool, so maybe I thought it was cool because it was more gender-neutral or more masculine, but that was not — that was not a conscious thing. It was probably a little bit in there. I never thought of Joan as being particularly feminine. And a lot of people, you know, the 70s, a lot, lot of people took new names. There a lot of, you know, Sparrow, Helen's Daughter, and you know, people changed both names. So —

ANDERSON: Did you come out to your parents at this time?

BIREN: Yeah. What happened was, you know, my parents lived here. The Furies collective was here. So I would go over there, actually I went over there with collective members, went over there with Cassidy — whoops, I wasn't going to say her name, the baby, you know, and my mother said, No, that's not my grandchild. So at one point, my mother said to my

41:05

sister, Gosh, Joan has dykey friends. [laugh] And my sister who I was out to, I was explicitly out to, said, Well, you know, duh. “Duh” wasn’t the expression at the time, but, you know, whatever the 70s equivalent of “Duh” was. Well, why do you think Joan has dykey friends? I mean, the fact that my mother would use that expression, that she would know that, is why I think she knew all along. I think my mother knew. Knew well before I did.

So, my sister basically came out for me, and my liberal accepting parents totally flipped out. And wouldn’t speak to me. Would not speak to me. I found out from Andi, my sister, that she had told them and that they were upset as parents often are, still, but back then, especially.

So, what happened was very interesting. One day, Sharon, who knew that this rift had occurred, was down at HEW doing some work. One of the things — one of the hustles that Sharon and I did was we got a job writing a curriculum, a K-12 curriculum on women’s history, so, you know, we were teaching little children all about Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. I mean, you know, it was great because there wasn’t any women’s history. I mean, we were really digging it up. So we wrote one of the first curriculum on women’s history, and I don’t know how — I think we got that also through IPS, which is, when you said, we worked with men, mostly the men we worked for were with the Institute for Policy Studies, which was this sort of lefty think tank that Jim and Marty had had connections with and then Rita and Charlotte got jobs there and then I think we got this curriculum-writing thing — was for the NEA, I don’t know if came to them or not. Anyway, somehow we got it.

But Sharon was over at HEW and just took it on herself, just decided that she would go see my dad. So she went to see him and said, Why aren’t you talking to Joan? And of course, as I said, it never really was my dad, it was always my mom, and so that we started talking with the unspoken agreement that I wouldn’t talk about being a lesbian. So that went on for about, I don’t know, ten years or something. And then —

ANDERSON: You wouldn’t bring Sharon or your other friends home?

BIREN: Oh, no, I’d bring them home, we just wouldn’t talk. [laugh] I mean, I didn’t want to go home, you know, that much. But I did. I mean, I never didn’t bring people with me, mostly because I couldn’t stand going home by myself, because my mother was always much more horrible to me if I was on my own. If there was somebody there, she would try to, you know, be like a normal person. And I understand, you know, in reflecting on what I had said yesterday, I realize that it sounds like I really, really hate my mother, because I’m always saying bad things. I don’t hate my mother but I have to tell the truth about her, which was she was a very miserable person and she was very miserable because of a lot of things that happened to her. But it didn’t — you know, I have

more compassion for her than I think I've been expressing, but in any case, eventually they came around because I said, You know, if you want me in your lives, you're just going to have to talk to me about this stuff.

And you know, there was a big — this is like jumping way ahead, but since I'm here, I'll just tell the story. My sister was getting married, heterosexually, which was kind of unusual because my sister was sort of a feminist and I never thought she'd really get married, and she lived in California. I was with Minnie Bruce at this time.

ANDERSON: This was the 70s?

BIREN: Early 80s. And Andi wanted me to come and be in the wedding and my parents said, Well, we'll pay for you to go out there. Because, you know, I never had any money, never had any money, and lesbian photographers not being your high-paid profession during the 70s and 80s, I said, Well, I'm not going to go unless Minnie Bruce can go. So if you can pay for me and Minnie Bruce, I'll go, otherwise I won't. And they said, Well, we can't do that. And I said, Well, you're paying all this money for Andi to get married, you're giving Andi this huge — whatever they were giving her — you know, parents of the bride. I said, This is this gargantuan celebration of heterosexuality. I get nothing. I get nothing. I've never gotten anything, because my partner is a lesbian. She is my family and either I'm going to go with my family or I'm not going to go. And they said, OK. Don't go. So I didn't.

And then, I think they felt so bad because I cried, and I had never cried with them, it was always, like, I'm a lesbian. It's wonderful. You think it's terrible but it's the greatest thing. You're worried for me. You're afraid for me. You don't need to be because this is great and I'm happy.

So my whole thing had always been with them, I'm happy, I'm happy, I'm happy. So when I cried, they were like, Oh, oh. Yeah, so there's something wrong here, you know. So, when they got back from the wedding, which I didn't attend, they bought me a car as a wedding present.

ANDERSON: As a wedding present?

BIREN: Well, as Andi's wedding present. So that was — that was a big — right there was a big break between We're not talking about this to Oh, we're sort of beginning to get it a little.

ANDERSON: And after that, they were more comfortable and more accepting of your partners?

BIREN: After that, we talked about things more. My mother still liked — she liked to argue. So she would, you know, provoke me intentionally. She would say terrible things about people with AIDS, which I don't even think she believed, just to argue. But they loved to come to my events because lesbian and gay people love lesbian and gay parents to be supportive, because I think many people's worst fears is losing their connection to their family. So if you're doing a show, like I would do, and I'd say, My mother and father are here. And they would stand up. My mother would wave like the Queen of England, and everybody would applaud her and think she was just the greatest, and she loved that. So, she loved to come to my stuff. Not that she ever gave me any personal, like, Wow, your work is really good. It was just because she liked the attention. My dad — my dad would say nice things about my work. But, anyway. It was a long slow process.

A lot of people — including one of my ex-lovers, the one I had talked about who tried to kill herself — saw me with this child, and I would take this baby and say, Oh, this is my baby, and said terrible things to me, like, How can you — how can you plan to raise a child? That's not fair to the child. That's a terrible thing. What makes you think you can be a mother? And my mother said, Well, I'm going to have to get a foster grandchild because this is not — you know, I can't accept this child, for whatever the reason was, you know. Of course, she never got a foster grandchild. That would be way too much like real work. But she would say that to me just, you know, to be rejecting, and we've had a lot of — I mean, people didn't think it was right to raise children. So...I lost the train of where we were. But basically, there were power struggles within the Furies.

ANDERSON: Yeah, I think we finished — I mean, we talked about the dissolution of the Furies and then we went on a tangent about coming out to your parents —

BIREN: Well, I want to go back to the Furies in terms of the legacy of our work.

ANDERSON: OK. What do you think that is?

51:36

BIREN: Well, partly we helped develop this ideology, part of which has survived. I mean, if you looked at, for instance, Adrienne Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality*, it's basically a recounting of exactly the things the Furies had been saying ten years earlier or more. I forget — that came out in the mid-80s, maybe. And I talked to Adrienne once and I said, Hey, have you ever read the Furies, and she said, No. So then I sent her the stuff and she was, like, Oh, wow. So, you know, she came to it totally separately, but it was the same in many ways, in many respects, but I think it got into the air, you know, it was there. It was in print. It was in people's minds.

And then what happened was, after the collective split up, all of us went on to do things that helped build an alternative women's culture, which is really what the rest of the 70s was about. Charlotte and Rita went on to *Quest* magazine, which continued, not as a lesbian, but as a women's — oh, kind of an academic, sort of theory magazine. Coletta and Helaine — I think that's right, definitely Coletta and somebody — went on — no, no, Coletta and Nancy, I think, Coletta and Nancy went on to found Diana Press, and the interesting thing about Diana Press was that the first little pamphlets that they published were in fact collections of articles from the *Furies*. So that put them into book form.

ANDERSON: Is that *Lesbianism in the Women's Movement*? —

BIREN: Yes. That has a picture of me on the front. This is still where I'm in the period of nobody wants to have their picture taken. How are we going to put out pictures of lesbians? Cynthia Gair, who was not in *Furies* in connection with Helaine Harris, I think, started something called Women in Distribution and they distributed a lot of things including the Diana Press books and then Helaine went on, you know, to actually become one of the founders of this thing called Daedalus Books, which is a distribution company, really. Ginny and Jennifer, maybe Lee, I can't remember, went on to found Olivia Records, which has morphed into Olivia Cruises. I went on to do my photography and eventually started a group called Mooforce Media, which distributed films. And Rita, of course, became an author of her own books. And —

ANDERSON: That's lesbian culture right there.

BIREN: Yeah, so that's a lot. That's music, film, literature, photography. So, all of us went on — from that small, little collective of twelve people, went on to found some of the defining institutions of so-called women's culture. Which of course, was always lesbian culture.

ANDERSON: Right, and brought to that the common ideology that you had formulated together.

BIREN: And part of that ideology meant that, for example, when Olivia decided to make a record, they found a woman engineer. They found women musicians. You know, it wasn't always easy. It was new, it was different. It really was different, and it was based in the idea that women can do anything, and we need to build an alternative to the mainstream culture and it needs to be with women.

ANDERSON: Uh-hmm. Ginny talked about that in *Radical Harmonies*, teaching women all these skills —

BIREN: Yeah, she was mostly talking about the production skills, which is also producing events, producing concerts, and Moonforce did the same thing. You know, you can't send a film series out to Iowa, unless somebody in Iowa knows how to rent a hall, do publicity, and all that, so we did a lot of that, too.

ANDERSON: Right, right.

BIREN: Because to build a culture, you have to have a distribution system, you have to have a way for — it's not enough just to make the work. You can make the work and it can sit in your drawer. The trick of building a culture is to make the work accessible to other people and that was where a lot of it was.

ANDERSON: And in terms of the legacy among you, your relationships, can you speak a little bit, say, how much you remained colleagues and friends over these last 30 years?

BIREN: Well, Sharon and I have always remained close, even though losing that baby broke us up pretty much, you know. It was — you hear this all the time, you know. Families lose a child to sickness or accident, and then they can't go on because — and I think that happened to us, and um, and I left town because I couldn't — I've always wanted the geographic cure again. I just didn't want to be here. But Sharon and I have always — she's so dear. Every year on our anniversary, she always — she calls me up to thank me for bringing her out [crying], you know, which is a great thing because sometimes, you know, sometimes it's not so good that you brought somebody out, and I've never brought anybody else out, just Sharon. Every other lover I've had has already been out, so it's particularly nice to me — I actually have a policy against bringing people out which, since I'm single now, you know, it's an important policy because when you're my age and single, you know, that definitely narrows the field. But I love it that she does that.

And Sharon is in touch with Rita, but I'm not. And I'm in touch with Charlotte. Sharon organized a reunion, I don't know, somewhere in the 90s, I think, and Nancy — Nancy and Charlotte are very close, Nancy and Charlotte and Sharon and I and maybe somebody else came. I talk to Coletta every once in a while, Helaine every once in a while. Everybody else is kind of lost.

ANDERSON: How was the reunion?

BIREN: Oh, it was great. I mean, we did it as a panel at a conference. It was fun. I liked it. I liked hearing other people talk about it, you know, talk about those times. And I agreed with everything everybody said, which was nice for me since I so much disagreed with people at the time.

ANDERSON: So did it feel healing to you?

BIREN: Oh, yeah, sure.

ANDERSON: It was such a painful time.

BIREN: Yes. I think so. Yeah, I made some film of it, so I keep thinking I'm going to make — if I ever do anything autobiographical, I'll have it.

ANDERSON: Uh-hmm. A film of that panel?

BIREN: Yeah, and of us getting together, you know.

ANDERSON: Sort of *The Big Chill*, you all had a weekend together.

BIREN: Yeah, yeah.

END TAPE 4

## TAPE 5

ANDERSON: Let's talk about your field of photography. I guess I always knew that it was about the pull of the need to create the images that had been about you, but I didn't realize it was also about — I mean, a retreat from a language that was causing some pain. So let's talk about how you learned the craft and also your reasons for using this medium for what you were looking for, in terms of trying to create a language.

BIREN: Well, when I was a kid, I had a friend who lived two houses up the street from me, and her mom decided to invite me along — in the summer, they would go up to the Catskills to the grandmother's house, and she invited me along. I always thought she invited me along so that her daughter would have somebody to play with but I recently found out from the daughter that she invited me along because she wanted to get me away from my mother, because she didn't approve of the way my mother was raising me, which was quite a shock. But she was a photographer, so she was my first person that I knew who was a very serious, professional sort of photographer. And when I was looking through the pictures yesterday, I actually found some pictures of myself that she had taken and developed in a darkroom.

So, I always had that in the back of my mind and then, when I got together with this woman from New York, my lover from New York, she was a photographer. She was actually studying at Cooper Union and she took a lot of photographs while I was around and I loved her so much that I loved the photography, too. Somehow it was all mixed up together. I actually have one of her pictures downstairs in my studio, of a very dykey woman, and so when all this stuff hit in the Furies, I think that's why I turned to photography.

There are a number of things I could have done. But I can't draw very well. You know, photography — I'm more of a techy, so photography was a logical choice for a lot of reasons, because we had this whole, you know, philosophy about a prick in the head, which is what we called anything that you had learned from the patriarchal system gave you a prick in the head — that I knew I had to kind of teach myself.

So I decided to teach myself through a combination of a correspondence course and I took a job at a local camera store, which was very interesting because the camera store was sex segregated. The women all did the retail. You know, if people came in to order pictures, you were the clerk that wrote down what they, you know, #22 and #29 and #20, and the men all got to sell the cameras. So we did the photo finishing and they did selling the cameras. So, Mr. Baker had this side and Mrs. Baker had that side and literally, the store had two sides. And it was, like, apartheid, you know, and I said to Mrs. Baker, I want to learn that stuff. And she really liked me and I was smart and good and,

you know, all those things. So she had this huge fight with her husband about getting me over the, you know, barrier, so that I could learn the cameras. And very reluctantly, this guy would let me every once in a while, learn stuff about the equipment.

And that was so totally ordinary about how sexist things were. I mean, that's a really good example of how in the world, it was so hard for women to learn anything, or have any opportunity to advance, or to make any real money. And there it all was, just around this simple little mom and pop camera store.

So, that actually — well, teaching myself photography was a pattern for me. I then never went back to school, really, for anything, although — well, that's not true, because I did get an MA in communications and had a little filmmaking in there, but mostly I've taught myself everything that I do and that I know, because I just had this distrust [in male-dominated education.]

And I made a lot of my money, such as it was, I made a lot of the little amount of money that I made by traveling around the country doing slide shows and workshops. And in these photography workshops, the main thing that I did was undo the damage that people had done to them by going to photo schools and studying photography in universities where they would bring in their lesbian images and be totally dumped on by their professors and their colleagues, and they, you know, completely undermined about their skill level because of the content that they were doing. So I almost had a career in undoing professional education.

So I really distrusted it, and was glad that I was self-taught. Even though, when you are self-taught, you always suspect that there's an easier way to do everything or that there's a quicker way to learn everything, so it's hard, and you have to fight the self-doubt all the time. But you do have the confidence that you're not doing it in some bad way that everybody else does also. So it's kind of a tradeoff.

So I taught myself photography. So then I had some beginning grasp of the technical end of it. And at this time, I was using a 35-mm Nikkomat camera and I was shooting using mostly black and white, I think only black-and-white film in the beginning, and developing and printing my own prints.

Because that was also part of our philosophy. The publishers owned their own presses. You know, you wanted to control as much of the production process as possible. You didn't want to have to go to some male-dominated business to ask them to do whatever. Plus, if you were to come into my camera store with a roll of film that had lesbian pictures on it, they wouldn't give it back to you because in fact, still to this day, there are these ridiculous obscenity laws that mean that the photo processor is liable if there's anything obscene, and of course, the definition of obscene is in the eye of the beholder.

So, anyway, very early on I got my own darkroom and, you know, very rudimentary but —

ANDERSON: How'd you come up with the capital to invest in this new profession?

BIREN: By working at the camera store. [laugh] I mean, I did get a salary. And so I had a grasp on the technical aspect. Much more difficult was finding people to photograph. Much more difficult.

ANDERSON: Did you start by photographing landscapes, or —?

BIREN: No, I wanted to be a photographer in large part because I needed to see images of lesbians, and it was, you know, a visceral thing. I wanted a reflection of my reality, and I think everybody wants that. My experience is that there's an enormous hunger among people to be able to see themselves. You know, people want to see themselves in photographs, they want to see themselves on TV, they want to see themselves in film. It's always an enormous emotional high the first time you see something that is you in that medium. And that is because there's this huge hunger for the kind of validation that comes from seeing a reflection. And part of why I've devoted my life to what I call "making the invisible visible" is for that reason. And because there was no visual history that I could refer to when I started doing this and because I think people without a history are just lost. I think that you — this is why I'm doing this oral history now, is why I've done all the documenting that I've done, is because if you — every single time a lesbian comes out, they think they're the only one, that's so hard, and it's so unnecessary at this point. You know, to go through that rootless feeling.

So the first picture I took was a picture of two lesbians kissing because I needed to see the kissing, and nobody would do it. So, I kissed Sharon, held the camera out, and that was my first lesbian picture I'm going to show you because it's an important one, and...that was the beginning and the rest of it was trying to talk other people into going in front of my camera. So a lot of what I did was — oh, look, Sharon wrote something. This is my copy of my book in which I asked everybody in the book to sign and of course, I never pull it out but I pulled it out for you. And Sharon wrote, My dear Joan. I need my glasses. Anyway, here it is. You can read it. Tell me what it says. Or you could just hand me my glasses.

ANDERSON: I think I can read it. Dear Joan — I can see the photo but not the writing.

BIREN: OK. If you hand me my glasses, I'll read it to you. It probably doesn't matter, but anyway, you get the idea that there was just nothing. I mean, of course, there was *The Ladder*, but I didn't have access to it, so that

was part of the problem. For me, there wasn't. [reads] I'm glad I was there in the beginning. Your book is beautiful. The ladies, the production, and the contribution. Much love, Sharon.

Anyway, she was there in the beginning. And from there it was a process of developing a way of talking to women about why it was important to be photographed. Which is a different thing than being out. Because generally, the thing about being out is you can be out in one place and not out in another place. I remember when I first photographed Barbara Smith, you know, and I always go through this whole process with people about what can happen to the picture and where it can be and she said, Well, anywhere but Cleveland. [laugh] You know, because that's where her aunt was who raised her.

So I had a lot of people who would give sort of permissions and partial permissions and I was always trying to push for, It's going to be published. I don't know what will happen to it after that. Somebody may take it to Cleveland.

You know, can you do that. In some ways, I had to present the worst-case scenario because I needed people to be prepared to deal with whatever would happen. And I didn't want to take the pictures and spend my precious money and time if I couldn't publish them.

Right from the beginning, all I wanted to do was photograph lesbians and all I wanted to do was publish the pictures and I thought of myself absolutely as a propagandist. I didn't think of myself as a photographer or documentarian, an artist, any of that. All of that came later. For a really long time, for me, it was just political. It was just about, we need this, it has to happen, nobody's doing it, I'm going to do it. Because I need it personally, also. But I mean, it wasn't, like, I need to be an artist. It was, like, I need to see this stuff. So...

ANDERSON: You started with your friends.

BIREN: Absolutely started with my friends. Everybody you see in the Furies newspapers were friends. And as I say, I was often my own subject in the beginning, and by necessity.

ANDERSON: How hard was it to convince — what was your success rate in terms of convincing people to be your subjects?

BIREN: Well, one of the things I've said is that I really felt like my camera was a barometer of the climate of the times, because it got easier and easier and easier to, as people came out and the movement grew and people felt more comfortable. So that there was a synergy there between me putting out the images, people seeing that people weren't immediately, you know, hauled off to jail or whatever their fears were, that people didn't lose their jobs, that I was careful and respectful. It was a lot about building trust between myself and my communities. And, you know, a

lot of photographers have visible communities. I mean, they photograph their neighborhoods, they photograph their families, whatever they photograph. I didn't have that. We were not a visible community. So I was making something visible and the more it became visible, the more it encouraged other people to be visible. So it was very synergistic and it definitely changed and changed and changed, to the point where people wanted me to photograph them because they knew if I photographed them, not only, would I be respectful but other people would see the picture and that's what they wanted at some point.

So it was — but it was a long process. And it — I had to develop special release forms and I mostly just sat and talked to people a lot without a camera, without the camera even being there. And then, within a small circle of my friends, after I had talked to everybody and I knew that everybody in this, whatever group it was, that I was in, was OK, I started having my camera all the time so then this particular couple of groups of people stopped being self-conscious about me having a camera. I mean I really — it was like, you know, another part of my anatomy. I just was everywhere with it, and I photographed everything. And when I stopped doing that, people were really upset. You know, it was, like, Oh, we're having a birthday party and JEB doesn't have her camera, what're we going to do? It was, like, You can't do that. You cut your arm off. What happened here?

It was a very — that transition at the other end was almost as hard as getting into it because it had become so much assumed by everybody around me that I would be there and I would be photographing, and that's — that's great, because then people stopped being self-conscious and that's what you want.

You want — I mean, if you're the kind of documentarian that I am, you just want it to be very real.

ANDERSON: Right. What were your priorities in terms of the image you wanted to create and that you first published in *Eye to Eye*?

BIREN: Well, just anything was good, so it wasn't like you had priorities. I mean, once I had the picture of the kissing, you know, that took care of one priority. But truthfully, I — most of the pictures in *Eye to Eye* — let me hold this up again — in my first book, most of the pictures, I think if you look through, actually are individual lesbians and people are, like, Oh, how can these be lesbians? They're not in bed together and they're not kissing and they're not, whatever.

But my priorities were, as much as possible, to show the diversity of who lesbians were, which to me meant class, age, race, professions or craft or trade, you know. There are, if you go through it, you can see there are rural women, there are city women. This is not a Washington book. This is a very, as big regionally, and in terms of these other demographics, as I could make it. It's not about lesbian sex, it's not

about coupledness, it's about showing people that lesbians look fat, they look skinny, they look, you know, black, white, whatever. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to say there's no one kind of type of person that's a lesbian. So if you're this type of lesbian or that kind of lesbian, somebody else looks like you.

ANDERSON: And did you find them through your personal network?

BIREN: That's the only way. There was no other way at that — by the time I got to the second book, there were other ways, but the first book was, you know, I would say to somebody, I'm coming to Boston. Who do you know who was working class? And they would say, I have a friend who has a friend who's a prostitute. And I would say, Perfect. I want to meet her. And then you meet her and you say, I'm doing this book and I want to put you in this book and she's like, Really? OK. You know, or Why? or What does that mean?

So it was a long process of — it couldn't just be people that I knew, because my own circle was too small and too alike. So I had to be very conscious about finding people outside my circle and knowing exactly what kind of people I was looking for and making sure I had them before I published the book.

ANDERSON: And did you have a contract before you did the book?

BIREN: The book is self-published. There was no contract. There was nobody who wanted to publish it, and it wasn't like, I mean, I suppose it could be construed as vanity press but it was the only way to get it out there because even the feminist or lesbian presses that existed didn't have the resources to do a photography book in the way that I wanted a photography book done. You can print — I knew at one point what the number was, but, you know, like seven textbooks for the same cost as a photography book, because the photography book, for the pictures to look good — oh, look, here's Barbara [Smith] and her sister — they have to be glossy. These are expensive paper.

So I found a printer in Baltimore who could do it but would not do it unless I got lawyers to indemnify the printing company against liability, because in the same way that the photo labs were liable, a printer was liable if somebody would say, Oh, my God, she said I was a lesbian, I'm not a lesbian, I'm gonna sue the pants off you. And they couldn't imagine anybody would be public. The reason I'm proud about this book is that to my knowledge, this is the first book with real faces of real people that has the word lesbian in the title. There were other lesbian pictures printed but not as a book and not with lesbian — so it was — it's a first I'm very proud of.

And to do it, I had to get a lawyer. As it turned out, the lawyer I got was Nan Hunter, who has gone on, you know, to be one of the premiere

LGBT lawyers in the country, but at this point, she was in law school at Georgetown and I said, Nan, you have to, these guys won't print the book — because we hadn't gone to the place where we could actually do that quality of printing, so I had to — they won't print the book. What are we going to do? Well, because I had in fact been so careful and had releases from everybody because I individually didn't want to put them in jeopardy, I wasn't worried about my jeopardy, you know, she made up some kind of legal document that calmed them down enough so that they actually printed it. But it wasn't easy. You know, it took a lot of doing, actually.

ANDERSON: What about the distribution?

BIREN: How did I distribute the first book?

ANDERSON: Were the women's bookstores afraid to carry it?

BIREN: No, the feminist bookstores were happy to carry it. You know, most of the feminist bookstores were run by lesbians. So at that time — this book came out in 1979 — at that time, I was just barely still lovers with Mary Farmer, who ran Lammas, which was our bookstore here, and she was part of a network, you know, we had Women in Print conferences. There was a very strong network among the publishers and the bookstores, so I think I distributed it myself, but through that network. I became Glad Hag Books, which was a takeoff from Mary Daley's work, also because we, at this point, I was a pagan and wiccan and a feminist witch and I had been in a coven. No, very seriously.

ANDERSON: No, I know. I'm just smiling because you need to break all those things apart and say more about it.

26:05
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BIREN: Yeah, but I had stopped being Jewish as much as I had ever been Jewish and I had become a witch, a practicing witch, which was totally fun, and very interesting. So the idea of being a Glad Hag was very, very, you know, in tune with where we were at that point. And there are a lot of sort of wiccany pictures in here, too, if you check it out. But what do you want me to say about that, because it's kind of off the career thing.

ANDERSON: It is, but maybe we'll save the last few minutes to talk about your journey through various spiritualities and I think 75 years from now, when they look at your tape, they'll have no idea of what it would mean to say wiccan feminist pagan.

BIREN: Right. Well, it was part of reinventing everything. We had to reinvent religion as well, and you know, it was totally part of anything patriarchal had to be rejected and you had to make it up and you had to

make it new and you had to make it woman-based. And so, we went back to find old religions which were, you know, goddess based. So we became goddess worshippers, and revived all the old pagan rituals and, you know, it was very serious work to figure out what they were. But it was totally fun to do these rituals. I mean, we literally, you know, danced naked around fire pits all the time. I mean, we did fire leaping. We did great stuff. And of course, we were smoking marijuana through all of it. So it made it — drugs is the other thing I should talk about later at some point, you know, when they stopped and how they figured in.

But, anyway, so I published my first book and decided to take a year off — because I had had, like, real employment, sort of, up until then — to promote the book. And I have a debt to Tee Corinne because she had already laid the groundwork here in terms of traveling around doing slide shows. And she told me very generously that that worked and you could make money that way and you could promote your work that way. So I put together a slide show called “Lesbian Photography from (some date in the 1800s) to The Present” and I did the research — because I love research. I think you’ll probably — you’ll see. I really like research, and finding in these hidden histories and making these hidden histories available and accessible. So I dredged up all these images which may or may not have been lesbian images in which I decided to talk about why I thought they were lesbian images from history. Because, again, you know, this void, this emptiness, this blank of history drove me crazy. So if you get — if we have time for you to go around my house, you’ll see I have a couple of them around.

And then I started collecting, because I told you I was doing these workshops, and I would collect images from lesbian photographers as I went and I would add them to the show because that would be a way for those women to get their work out and it would be a way for me to expand into the present [time.]

So, I was sort of this, you know, Chautauqua, this moving cultural vagabond, and I would go from town to town with this little one-projector slide show, going through these images and talking about them. And I did this show in some of the most awful places and I stayed in some of the most awful places. I was driving around in some beat-up vehicle and living in people’s living rooms with cats all over me and I’m allergic to cats and doing the slide shows in mostly, I would say, mostly church basements and feminist bookstores but also dusty garages and —

ANDERSON: Who was your audience?

BIREN: And we got the audience. Again, you know, it was the thing of teaching people, whoever the producers were, and it often was concert producers or bookstores, they were learning how to reach the lesbians in their community. And as soon as — we had good audiences, you know,

28:43

31:40

because people were so hungry, as I was saying before, for this. So even if it was in, you know, not a very elegant place, they came. It was harder to get people for the workshops, because of their fear of photographers, so it was a smaller place to draw from. But I remember it was really — even though it was sleeping on massage tables or wherever people could stick me and it was not like you made a lot of money — it was really wonderful work, because you were, like, carrying — people wanted it because it was so [crying] — it was so — nothing. It's so hard to explain to people how nothing there was, you know, how little there was. So if you brought something, even though it was a dinky slide show, that had these images, people loved you. I mean, I got so much that really was not about me, it was about — it wasn't even about my work. It was about this collection of stuff that I had put together and of course, I had developed my rap, you do the same thing over and over and it got very funny and it got — I was sort of doing a little standup and a little, you know, whatever, and I had a great time. I had a really great time.

ANDERSON: How long did you do that?

BIREN: Oh, I did that forever. I really made most of my money that way. You don't make any money from the books. And what I thought was going to be a year of promoting the book turned into the rest of my life. You know, I never went back to regular employment, not really. I mean, I would do a little temporary thing, very rarely, to supplement. But I spent a lot of my time on the road like that. And eventually, I stopped driving, and as the movement got a little bigger and people got a little more sophisticated, you know, I started doing it in better places. And eventually I started getting university gigs and then I started being able to take the train, or to fly, and really, really late in the process, you know, they started putting me up in motels and then hotels and now I'm at the point where my dog wants to go out. So, hold that thought. I know where I am.

So, you know, from those church basements with 20 or 30 people in them and a beat-up car, to, now my film is showing in multiplexes and I actually get to stay in very nice hotels, film festival multiplexes, but still, you know, there it is. And my latest film, *No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon*, just this week, just now, was — the TV rights were purchased by the Sundance Channel, which has 24 million subscribers. So —

ANDERSON: It's so exciting.

BIREN: It's really exciting that Sundance is going to show the film, but talking about it in the context of the whole thing gets me emotional. [crying] I'm very — I'm very proud, you know, that people are going to get to

see it, partly because it's Del and Phyllis's story and that's such an amazing story, and because, you know, I couldn't do what I did if they hadn't done what they did and I'm very — it's very nice for me to be able to thank them and acknowledge them, because even though at the time we thought we were inventing everything anew, we weren't, and you know, we were — we were standing on their shoulders, so that's important to me.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and the momentum of your career from the church basements to reaching that many people and telling that important story. It's really something.

BIREN: Yeah, [laugh] it's a good ending, isn't it?

ANDERSON: Yeah, but not an ending.

BIREN: But it's not — it's not an ending. It's an ending in terms of the tape, in terms of today. I mean, it's the latest thing. I hope it's not an ending, you know, I've been doing this about half my life, but I figure I've got another equal amount of time left. I'm about to be 60. I've been doing it about 30 years. I figure, take good care of myself, I'll be doing it another 30 years. So, more to come, hopefully.

ANDERSON: I want to talk about a couple of other projects that you did. I want to talk about *Making a Way*, because that's almost 8,10 years later.

BIREN: Right. From '79 to '87.

ANDERSON: Eight years later.

BIREN: Right.

ANDERSON: What was different about your motivation for *Making a Way*?

BIREN: *Making a Way* differs in a couple of ways. People suddenly have last names. In the first book, they only have first names. So, you know, it's that much more — I'm in love with my camera, I love being a photographer. This book is more about the fact that — the first book was to show that individual lesbians existed. The second book is to show that there is a lesbian culture, there are lesbian communities, there are lesbian institutions. It's very much about the alternative culture and institutions that we built. So, I went out to work almost more for groups and organizations than I did for individuals, although a lot of the cultural leaders are here and that was the difference, I think, between the two books.

37:45

Because we had grown a culture and I wanted to document the culture, whereas before it was just, like, Hey, we exist. You know, we are real, we exist, and then this book was, not only do we exist but, look what we've made. That's *Making a Way*. Making a way where no way was. Making it, you know, making it a lesbian way. And *Lesbians Out Front*, which is the subtitle, was really about, Oh, hey, all this stuff we call women's this and women's that, hey, lesbians were at the front.

ANDERSON: I thought it was interesting in *Eye to Eye*, some of your language choices and the various spellings of womyn/wimmin. And you chopped that in *Making a Way*. Could you speak about that for a second?

BIREN: Well, I think that all the women at the Y and all that was part of, you know, a reaction against everything, and it was also part of the spirituality, the women's spirituality, and my interest really always has been about communicating. You know, everything I've done really was more about communicating to somebody else or a lot of other people than it was about just expressing something that was in me that had to come out, you know, which is why I say it took me a long time to go from thinking of myself as a propagandist to thinking of myself as an artist. It was really Minnie Bruce who, living with her all those years, and her being such a brilliant poet and identifying, I think, more as an artist, that she convinced me that I was as artist. So that's a debt I owe to her, because it's good to think of yourself that way, although I'm still slightly more likely to think of myself as a documentarian and a dog owner. Come here, Rupert, come here, Rupert, come over here.

ANDERSON: Dog owner on the top of your list of identities or occupations.

BIREN: You know, historian or, even though I'm not a trained historian, or mostly as a documentarian. So using normal spellings, I think, at that point, was part of communicating more clearly.

ANDERSON: Uh-huh. So, is your intended audience different in those two books? Is your audience primarily lesbian or—?

BIREN: Yeah, I always did everything I did for a lesbian audience, but I always wanted it to be accessible to anybody. I never wanted it to be, like, jargony or something. But I always made it — and this is where I differ from a lot of people today, because I'm still this way, you know. I want to communicate to as many people as possible but my — the main people I think about when I'm making something are lesbians.

ANDERSON: The slide show and —

BIREN: The first slide show, because we were still in sort of a separatist period and the first slide show had a lot of nude images and for the protection — the protection, here we go again, remember what I said about protection — but because a lot of those women who were in the nude images felt uncomfortable about them being seen in mixed audiences, my slide shows were for women only.

ANDERSON: Your two videos about the gay and lesbian Marches on Washington —

BIREN: Yes, go ahead, ask the question.

ANDERSON: My question is about your work with gay men. Up until that march, there — I haven't noticed any record or documentation of your relationship with the gay and lesbian movement. It seems to be centered around women, so I'm wondering about what your relationship with gay men has been like and that movement. I realize it's a big question —

42:56

BIREN: Well, yeah, it's a big question. The gay movement, which became the gay and lesbian movement, changed because of AIDS. It's not a good reason to have it change, but it had to change. And there's a way in which a very horrible epidemic caused the movement to become more egalitarian, by necessity. And once that happened, it became easier for feminists to relate to the gay and lesbian movement, including myself. I still live primarily in a lesbian world. I have some very dear gay male friends, not many, really. I still wish, and do very little, but some work to make the LGBT movement more feminist. I think it's not. I think that where it has adopted feminist tactics and strategies, it does not even understand that. I mean, Act Up is so based on the kind of civil disobedience that feminists have been doing back to where I told you, you know, around abortion. You know, you have a system here where the suffragists in England were the first to really use it and Gandhi got it from them, and Martin Luther King got it from Gandhi, and we got it from Martin Luther King in the second wave of feminism and then the AIDS movement thinks they got it from — I don't know where, but certainly not from feminists. So, you know, this tradition of not being recognized is carried on, and not being recognized in the most fundamental ways of sitting in a room of people and not being heard because you're a woman and so on. Even though the major LGBT organizations have been mostly led by women recently, it does not mean in any way that there is any feminist consciousness throughout the movement, and that's still a problem for me.

But I live in Washington. The marches come to Washington. I complained or pointed out earlier that I was trying to document a community or communities that aren't visible. Well, the marches are one of the ways that we become really visible because huge numbers of people come from all over the country. So I got involved and, sort of

unintentionally became, like, one of the main documenters of these marches.

And the first march I went to was in 1979, the first major march, and I have what has become sort of the iconic picture of that march, which is — this is from '79, and it's been reproduced a lot, and the interesting thing to me about this picture, besides that so many people came when nobody thought anybody would come, is that the sign says "Gays" because that was enough. In 1979, if you said Gays, that was a big deal. Now, it has to be, you know, the Legal Caucus of Harvard University, whatever, you know, and it doesn't even end up saying lesbian or gay anywhere on the sign, you know, because if you're a visual person, you notice these things. The signs aren't good anymore.

So, anyway, I photographed mostly in black and white, '79. In '87, I photographed transparencies, slides, and then I collected slides from all the other photographers who I knew who were there, and then I collected tapes, audio tapes, and I put together a two-projector slide show on dissolves. And I was traveling around with that. And then eventually I transferred that to tape. Because when you're doing a multi-projector slide show, and I did several of them, that's a lot of equipment to drag around. And I had to get special boxes and all this kind of stuff. And at that point, it occurred to me that there was an easier way to make the pictures talk, which is what I always wanted, you know.

If you look in the book, in the books, you'll see I always asked the people to make their own narrative of themselves because I — it was part of my feminism that I didn't want to be, you know, have that old stereotype of stealing their image, capturing them, shooting them. I changed all the language. I used to give, as part of my workshops, talk about how you relate to the person that you're making the image of and how you give them their power and their say and how they're represented, because that was always a concern. So, by the time I had done all this other stuff, it seemed to me there was an easier way to let the people speak for themselves and that way was video or film.

So that's how, by the time we got to '93 and the March on Washington, the organizers, the executive committee of that march, invited me to be the video producer for the march, and I was so new to video that I said yes. Because had I any clue about what I was getting into, I would have been far too intimidated and far, you know, I would have known I was totally unprepared and had no knowledge about what I was doing. And it was, again, this is one of those moments in my life that was so wonderful. I mean, it was so great, because I put together a team of volunteers of people who knew everything and who were great, and this was, to me, for me, this was the time when working with gay men was, it was just wonderful. You know, lesbians and gay men working together around the video production for this march.

We were the first people who weren't the federal government to put the giant screens on the mall. The government had had the Jumbotrons

49:37

one time and then we were the second time to do it. And you know, now, every movement and every march has them, but it was really a big deal at the time, and my personal contribution was that I said — we had six cameras, and they wanted them all on the stage. And I said, No, no, no, no. Half of the cameras we're going to turn — you know, you have a little platform, and I said, They're going to be on the crowd. Because that's the story. The story is everybody who came. The story isn't just this talking on the stage.

So that was, again, that's a very feminist thing to say, it's not just the lead banner. If you look in my contact sheets, you will see at the marches, mostly I didn't worry about the lead banner, because all the press was jammed up around the lead banner. I was always about what wasn't going to be visible by somebody else. If somebody else had the picture, I didn't have to take it. Which meant I couldn't sell it later because that's always the one people want. But I was always about, you know, the kind of things I said in my other book. The people of color contingents, the youth contingents, the contingents nobody else cared about. So that was how I did my work. I was always at the end of the march and everybody else was always at the beginning of the march. So in a way, I was just carrying that over when I became the video producer.

And, like, a million people were at the '93 march and I was in this little tent in the back behind the stage, and it was — I say to people, it was like being the Wizard of Oz. All the Dorothies came from everywhere and then there I was, you know, pulling the switch up and putting the images out on the big screens. It was amazing, it was amazing, and like I say, I was totally unprepared for it.

I did a great job because I had great people helping me and we had, for instance, we had this guy, this gay guy who worked at the FCC who came on board and said to me, You know, I think we could get a satellite hookup and send these things all around the world. I said, What's a satellite hookup? And he drew me a little picture. Here's the earth, here's the satellite, here's how it goes. And I said, well, you know, and then we got people to pick it up. This thing went everywhere.

In my little tent, I had one little group back here editing the stuff as it was coming in. We had a camera from one of the networks that was up in the top of the Washington monument that we got hooked into our whole thing. I mean, it was fun. It was big. It was fun, and then I made this tape, the official tape of that march. So, yeah, no, I don't think I'll ever have an experience like that again. But it was definitely a highlight.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and your audience has become so humongous.

BIREN: Yeah.

ANDERSON: I mean, you're choosing and editing all these images for a much larger audience now. It's a lot of responsibility, I imagine.

BIREN: Yeah, well, you're sitting there and you're thinking, OK, here's some bare breasts. What do we do now? Like that, you know, because the mainstream media always had covered Pride events and Gay Pride is like Mardi Gras, I mean, people get a little crazy, but the media always chose the most outrageous drag queens and the most, you know, S/M, whatever, and it's hard for me, because I want to validate those choices. You know, I love drag queens and I love S/M dykes, I'm not going to not show them but it's creating a way of showing them in a context that includes everything. That has always been my goal.

ANDERSON: And the way it creates, like you said, a context and respect for those communities —

BIREN: Right.

ANDERSON: More than voyeuristic. We have five minutes left and I wanted to talk a little bit about what's next for you.

BIREN: Well, right now, I'm still — I just, a year ago, finished the Del and Phyllis film and I spent the last year traveling around with it to festivals and now, I'm finishing the deal with the Sundance Channel, and then my plan is to rest and... It's very interesting because right now, a lot of things are happening that are making me review my life and my past including this, and it just feels like a stopping place, a resting place, a place to — I have an opportunity I never had before because when my father died, it turned out he had actually saved a lot of money, because he was so unable to spend money, so for the first time in my life, I have the luxury of actually being able to rest. I've never, ever not worked. I've always had to overlap one project with another project to make sure I had some income of some kind. And because of the generosity of my father, I now am at a place where I can think about what I want to do without rushing into whatever's there. And I thought that this would be the rest period but the rest period hasn't actually happened yet. [laugh] I don't know that it ever will, but my goal is not to do something next. My goal is to think about it.

55:25

But things keep happening and, you know, I never was a person who made a plan, you don't take one of those little Kuder preference tests where you stick pins in things and it says, Oh, you'll be a lesbian photographer and filmmaker, you know, and I when I became a lesbian photographer, there was no way to make a five-year plan or a ten-year plan and I've always been very organic about what I was going to do. And I continue, I think, to be that way, so I kind of wait to see what the universe brings me and what's going to come into my life. I'm in a great

place right now and I'm very optimistic. I'm not worried about money for the first time in my life and that's truly a very strange feeling, and uh, I don't know what's next. And that's a good thing.

ANDERSON: Is there anything you want to add before we turn off the tape? I'm going to walk around with you in the house.

BIREN: Yeah, that would be fine. I didn't talk much about my lovers in my life, I didn't talk much about — I guess there are a couple of things I want to say about my personal life that I think are important. I showed you the picture of myself as a hippy in Oxford and I made remarks about drug use and, you know, I just stayed a hippy for a really long time, and to me, that meant continuing to smoke marijuana. I was very lucky that I could never really afford to do cocaine or crack, so I just stuck — your tape is going to run out.

58:38

END TAPE 5

## TAPE 6

BIREN: So OK, here you go, in 1989, I decided that the marijuana use wasn't good for me, and the way that I explained it to myself was that it was messing up my metabolism, you know, my energy. And uh, to stop, I joined Narcotics Anonymous, and that was a major dividing line in my life, I think, because I had to become clean and sober, because what happened was I stopped smoking marijuana and I started drinking and I've never been much of a drinker, and then I stopped everything and uh, I got very depressed, because it turned out that really I was sort of self-medicating a chronic depression with the marijuana but I didn't get any help. And if you were a feminist and a lesbian, the last people you ever wanted to go to in the 70s were psychiatrists or psychologists because they were the people who were basically locking you up and giving you shock treatments. So, even though there were feminist psychologists, you know, they were usually people I knew as friends and, you know, who were younger than me and I didn't trust.

So, you know, I had never been through any therapeutic, any kind of therapy. And so I had never identified the depression until after I got clean and sober and that was, a long process that was also sort of coincided, not coincidentally, but coincided with ending this eleven-year relationship with Minnie Bruce, deciding not to be a photographer and to be a filmmaker and just general midlife-crisis sorts of issues. And when the smoke cleared from all that, I was very depressed and suicidal, and finally was persuaded by some people who cared about me to go into therapy, and went into therapy, got antidepressants, and it's been great —

ANDERSON: You got your life back.

BIREN: Yeah, great since then. But I think it's important to tell that story even though it's sort of the cliché of the cultural worker now, because it is my story, and the fact that I was so close to, um, ending my life has had a profound effect on how much I value it, and I'm very, you know, I'm just very grateful. So, I wanted to tell you about that.

And I wanted to say that all the lovers that I've had in my life have taught me things, have been wonderful, you know. The idea of being a single lesbian now is — people say I was the one hand clapping thing, you know, how can you be a lesbian by yourself, but I don't — I don't have a problem with — I mean, first of all, I love my life. I have a lot of wonderful friends. I have my chosen family, you know, with these kids next door and I have been, you know, I'm not alone even though I don't have a lover. And I have very good relationships with many of my past lovers. Unfortunately, not with Minnie Bruce, but not by my choice, so, all of them, including Minnie Bruce, who I named because it was the longest relationship and went all through a lot of the time that we've

been talking about, from '81 to '92. All of those relationships were so valuable, and I learned so much, and you know, you asked me the first day how did I know I was a lesbian, and I said, I just loved women. And I still do, I do love women, and I do what I do because I do love women, and that's how I know I'm still a lesbian, even if I'm not, you know, and of course, if you're not in a relationship with somebody, it doesn't mean you're not being a lesbian sexually. I mean it doesn't mean you're not a lesbian in general but also doesn't mean you're not, you know, being sexual. And I'm saying that because you said we're an aging population.

And the other myth I want to do away with has to do with, you know, we did it in the 70s and we're doing it in the 00s, and sex has always been really important to me and I — you know, I'm not one of these lesbians who says, Oh, yeah, it's a romantic affectional, you know, and bed death is OK. I love sex and I think sex is really important and even though my work is not very overtly sexual, I mean, there are a lot of things I have that I haven't been able to publish. You saw *Out of Bounds*, which is sort of my — that was another one of these multi-projector slide shows I did that is sort of like my love letter to Minnie Bruce in some ways. And it's a little bit sexual, but, you know, even though my work hasn't been that overtly sexual, it's not because it isn't personally something I care about. That's a weird place to end. But, I was — I was never, you know, I think it's important.

The other — let me just say the other reason I think it's important to say that is, because there's so much focus on the Furies in my life and because the Furies really are — did not — made lesbian political, and I'm just saying for me personally, it's political and it's still political because we are lesbians, we don't have full equality and we don't have our rights and that makes it political. But on this other level, for me, it is sexual and it's about loving in every way that you could.

ANDERSON: So, this is the end our taping and we're just panning around JEB's house a little bit, just to give you some sense. Oh, look, there's the dogs. Big surprise. So, this is where we were. It's her living room, and we're going to your office?

BIREN: Yes.

ANDERSON: This is where JEB works.

BIREN: I spend an inordinate amount of time here. I'd rather be in my studio, but this is where I am, and this is — I want to show this to the Sophia Smith Collection. I have a really good library. These two shelves are all books that I have photographs in, and over here, other peoples' photographs of women books, so I have a good collection of that, whatever. And then, if you want to come this way, this room is what I call the media parlor. This is where I watch things, but, like, this

Sunday, which is tomorrow, I'm going to have a bunch of friends over for the Oscars, which is like a national holiday for me and we put the TV here, then we can do it. And this is also where we do screening for rough cuts. This is the kitchen and out back. This is the mud room and this is the —

ANDERSON: This is a beautiful day. This is referred to as Zoey's backyard.

BIREN: Right. And then, the other thing I want you to see, because it's my hobby, one of my hobbies — of course you know I'm a collector — what I call JEB's queer film museum, so you can start here and go down and I'll run down and put the lights on, and the slogan is "dirty pictures, clean laundry."

ANDERSON: OK, so we're going down to walk the Hall of Shame here.

BIREN: Downstairs.

ANDERSON: Yep, laundry. Then, this is your studio down here?

BIREN: No. This is just the museum. These are, wait a minute, so you've got to get everything, you know. These are parts from all the films that had a big impact on me, the early films that were my first images of lesbians on the screen, like *The Fox* and you know, these unfortunate things like the *Killing of Sister George* and then going right up to the modern, *Tipping the Velvet* and *Bound*. And this is all my festival stuff that I went to. So I have actually — oh, and the library, of course, the film library, the queer films, I have a good library for that and as it says, "See the curator if you want to see the actual films or DVDs." This is my studio, which is not ready for prime time.

ANDERSON: OK.

BIREN: It's still a wreck.

ANDERSON: But there's the door to JEB's studio.

BIREN: Oh, I'll show you one other thing that — this is all a big mess but these — you can't see them — these are where my negatives are stored, and they're two-inch thick plaster so the whole house could fall on them and the negatives would still be there, so I'm protecting them and all of this, you know, this is all books and this is all my archives that I haven't given anywhere yet. So that's it. Private. A big mess.

END TAPE 6

Transcribed by Luann Jette.  
Edited for accuracy and clarity by Kelly Anderson.

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