

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

**CARMEN VAZQUEZ**

Interviewed by

**KELLY ANDERSON**

May 12 and 13, 2005  
August 25, 2005  
Brooklyn, NY and Provincetown, MA

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## Narrator

The oldest of seven children, Carmen Vazquez (b. 1949) was born in Puerto Rico and raised in Harlem. She attended the City University of New York, earning a Bachelors in English and a Masters in Education. Vazquez lived and worked in San Francisco for almost two decades, becoming a seasoned activist and movement leader in causes ranging from immigrant rights to lesbian health. Vazquez was the founding director of the Women's Building in San Francisco, the Director of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and the Coordinator of Lesbian & Gay Health Services for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. She was also the co-founder and co-chair of Somos Hermanas, a Central American Women's Solidarity Network.

Vazquez returned to New York in 1994 as the Director of Public Policy for the LGBT Community Center in New York City. She has published in many journals, magazines, and anthologies and is a featured speaker at activist conferences including the NGLTF's Creating Change. Vazquez is currently the Deputy Director of Empire State Pride Agenda and lives in Brooklyn.

## 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, Vazquez describes her early childhood in Puerto Rico and growing up in New York City, first on the Lower East Side then Harlem. Vazquez is forthcoming about her personal life during this time and covers issues such as racism, family dynamics, religion and sexuality. Vazquez describes her political awakening and early activism, beginning with the student protests at City College and Puerto Rican independence. She describes in depth her movement from antiracism and socialist activism into the women's movement and then queer politics. Vazquez's interview is particularly strong and nuanced around issues of classism, racism, and sexism in social change movements. She offers keen insights into the successes and failures of these movements and an uncompromising vision for meaningful coalition building.

## Restrictions

None

## Format

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

## Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Kurka. Audited for accuracy by Kate Mitchell and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Carmen Vazquez.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Vazquez, Carmen.. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, May 12 and 13 & August 25, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Carmen Vazquez, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, May 13, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Vazquez, Carmen. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, May 12 and 13 & August 25, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Carmen Vazquez, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interviews conducted MAY 12, 13 & AUGUST 25, 2005, with:

CARMEN VAZQUEZ  
in: Brooklyn, New York; Provincetown, MA  
  
by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: This is Kelly Anderson and Carmen Vazquez on May 12th, at her home in Brooklyn, doing an interview for the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project at the Sophia Smith Collection. So, let's start by talking about your family background in Puerto Rico and what you know about both sides, as far back as you can remember stories for.

VAZQUEZ: Right. And as far as what I know is limited. I remember reading *Memoirs of a Race Traitor*, Mab Segrest, and there's this one section where she talks about, you know, ten generations, or I don't know how many generations she goes back that she knows, and I was stunned when I read that because I was, like, I know my grandmother and my grandfather and that's it. So, my parents are Carmen Vazquez, I'm Carmen Junior, and my father is Claudiver Jorge Vazquez, or Jorge Claudiver Vazquez, something like that. But nobody ever called him that. People called him Gole, and I have no idea why they called him Gole. They actually have sort of — they were second and third cousins, so they were both Vazquez.

My grandparents are Pepita, which is a nickname for Josefina, Archilla and my grandfather — I forgot my grandfather's first name, but he is Vazquez, Nito Vazquez.

ANDERSON: This is your mother's or your father's parents?

VAZQUEZ: That's my father's parents. My father is one of, I think, also seven children. He had five brothers and one sister, and he was born in 1920. My mother was born in 1929, and I was born in 1949. And my mom, her father died within days of her birth. He was killed. We don't — I don't know the story of why he got killed, but he was. And her mother, also Carmen, raised her, you know, pretty much alone. Oh — back. Actually that was my mother's aunt who raised her and her own daughter together as a single mom in Puerto Rico.

My mother's mother, Rita Melendez, actually gave my mother up within days of her birth, because she had, I don't know, four or five other children. She was alone. She couldn't figure out how she was going to take care of this little girl, so Mom went to Carmen and, you know, from what I know of my mom's story, the sort of being given up

at birth was, you know, just a huge part of her psyche and who she is all her life, and painful. And then she also grew up as the other kid. Her sister had lighter skin, blond hair, went to school, got all the sort of privileges of being the biological daughter and Mom got yanked out of school in seventh grade or something, which is something she still is not happy about, to work with her aunt in this — her aunt had a boutique. She made dresses. And so, Mom grew up with a sort of adopted-child syndrome kind of thing, but also in a more — for Puerto Rico, a more middle-class kind of existence, where, you know, she lived in a fairly nice house. Her aunt/mom had her own business. Her sister went to college, eventually.

And my father, he was — I forget what number son he was, but he wasn't the oldest. I think he was the third son. His parents were poor. They lived in a rural area in Vega Alta. Mom lived in Bayamon, Puerto Rico, both of them. And you know, they lived on a farm, which is actually the house that I have a first memory of, because after Mom and Dad got together — they never did marry — they had a little house, but eventually, when Dad moved to New York and Mom went to live with my grandparents and me and my sister for, I don't know, for about six months or a year — anyway, that's the first house I remember. And it was in the hills of Puerto Rico. It was a house that was actually on a hill. I remember it had, what do you call them, stilts, that I remember fondly, because on the porch in the day, it's hot, and it's hot in the house, no matter how many fans are going. So I used to love to go under the porch, because it was cool there, and play with my sister and my cousins.

And Dad, he did go to high school. He went, along with a couple of his brothers, they got drafted for World War II, and he actually was married and had two children when he went off to war, in 1943 or something like that, so he must have been 23 or 24 years old when he went to war, left behind a wife and two children. And he was out in the Pacific until the end of the war. And what he did, he was a driver, you know, a convoy truck driver, and when Armistice was called, he actually was driving a truckload of soldiers back to wherever the ship was stowed to take them home, and the truck went over a mine and blew up. And he was the lone survivor. He woke up in a ditch with, you know, body parts around him and his back was a mess and his wrist was a mess, and he was found by the Red Cross and it took six months to sort of sort out where he was from and what was going on. And people in Puerto Rico didn't know, they thought he was dead, blah, blah, blah. My grandmother tells stories of going on her knees house to house doing novenas for the safe return of her son.

Anyway, it really shattered him. I mean, my father, he had to have been a good driver to be assigned to drive convoys. I never remember my father driving. And it's interesting, because I don't drive. But he came back from the war, you know, a pensioned veteran, with a Purple Heart and all those kinds of things, but he never really recovered. He

went to work. Well, he came back from the war to find that his wife had given up on his return, so there was no wife.

ANDERSON: She had married somebody else?

09:39

VAZQUEZ: She had married somebody else, and you know, I don't know what he did for the — he probably drank a lot with his buddies and ran around and suffered the loss of his wife. Eventually, he met my mother and —

ANDERSON: Do you know how they met?

VAZQUEZ: They knew each other, sort of, from afar, and —

ANDERSON: From family?

VAZQUEZ: From family connections and stuff like that, and my mom had a huge crush on him. He was an incredibly handsome man. And when he came back from the war, she knew, you know, that he was now without a wife, and there was a dance that my mother and her sister went to and they danced and that started a romance that eventually led to a pregnancy. And I sort of, I guess — I'm trying to figure out — I actually don't know this, but I'm guessing now that maybe the reason they never had like a marriage ceremony is because he was married, and I don't know that they ever got divorced. I mean, from the other marriage. So —

ANDERSON: Yeah, I guess that could be why.

VAZQUEZ: And it wasn't — and it's also not uncommon in Puerto Rico, particularly among poor people, for marriage to be something that maybe you do, maybe you don't. And so —

ANDERSON: It would interesting to find out if the marriage to that first wife is still standing or if she ever filed for divorce. It'd be interesting.

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, yeah. I don't know that piece. And so, Mom got pregnant with me — and this is a fun story. You know, she got pregnant and they were living in a little house in Bayamon, which is in the northern part of Puerto Rico, not far from San Juan. And Mom was determined that she was going to have me in a hospital and it was going to be a modern birth. It was not going to be midwives in the boonies with herbal things — no, no, no, no. Her baby was going to be born in the hospital. And so it was. I mean, you know, she went to the hospital and had me.

The story she tells about her first memory [of me] — because she had drugs, I came feet first — never did anything traditional, including my birth. And so, they had to give her drugs, and she woke up pretty much hallucinating, and you know, looked around, and there was a ward of 30 beds or so that she was in, and she said, “Well, this is so strange,

because they were all men in gowns.” Mom, that should’ve been your first clue. And part of the reason she told that story is because my birthday for the first 27 years of my life, I celebrated on January 14.

ANDERSON: Because?

VAZQUEZ: Because that’s what my mother said, and she should know, she was there. And when I was — I think I was about 27, I lost my ID and I needed to get ID, so I wrote off to the department of health in San Francisco for a copy of my birth certificate, which was sent to me. And there, on the birth certificate, it said quite clearly that I was born on January 13, not January 14, that I was born on January 13 at about 6:30 p.m. And what my mother always said is that I was born on January 14 at 6:30 a.m. Now, what I think happened is that she, in this drug-induced state, you know, couldn’t figure out when I was actually born, so she said the fourteenth. And when I confronted her with this information, she said, “No, absolutely not. I should know, I was there. I remember.” And so then she told me this story and I said, “Well, I don’t think you were quite all there when you first saw me.” So, actually to this day, I celebrate both birthdays.

ANDERSON: Well, yeah, you get two days out of it.

VAZQUEZ: I get two days out of it. All my friends, and most of my friends in my life celebrate the thirteenth and my family celebrate the fourteenth.

ANDERSON: It’s like a Jewish holiday — sundown to sundown the next day.

VAZQUEZ: That is correct. That is correct. So, you know, I actually — it’s interesting because although my father is not the oldest — I guess maybe he’s the second oldest. His older brother never married and so, I was the firstborn of both grandparents, both parents’ families, and so I was a big deal. I was the chosen one. I was the firstborn. And you know, my first memories of Puerto Rico are mostly really happy ones. I mean, I loved that house. It was shaded. There was a big avocado tree. There was an old horse that my uncle used to ride around on and he’d take me for rides in the hills, and my mom was there, so I was very happy. And by then, there was a second daughter, my sister Ida, who’s about two and a half years younger than me.

And it’s at that point, after my sister was born, that my father decided to move to the States. This is, I guess, 1952 or something like that. And he came to work for an airplane parts factory. Another brother of his had moved to New York maybe six months or a year before and said, “There’s great job opportunities here.” There weren’t in Puerto Rico, so, they were part of this huge migration of Puerto Ricans from the island to the mainland in the ’50s.

And so, he came, and then I guess my mom and I were in Puerto Rico for about a year together, and then came my first heartbreak,



because he called for her and so she had to leave me. And I was three and a half, maybe, or something like that. But I have a vivid memory of my mother in the room and it's like this sort of cane furniture, tropical, sort of light furniture, a gas light, lantern thing, the night before she left, and my grandma combing her hair and me knowing that she was going to go. She told me and she told me everything was going to be fine and how mothers do with babies and all this kind of stuff, but I was not to be consoled, because she was leaving me.

And I remember the next day, she — the whole getting her in a car and all this kind of stuff and my grandmother — I guess my uncle took her away in a car. And my grandmother, she was a sweet woman, she comforted me with my first ever cup of coffee, but not — it was like warm milk with a drop of coffee in it, because I always wanted to have — you know, children want what the adults want, and I wanted coffee and she finally relented and gave me this cup of warm milk, which was real milk. I mean, we'd get it from the cow, with a little bit of coffee and soda crackers. It was fabulous. So —

ANDERSON: Did Ida go with your mom?

VAZQUEZ: No, Ida stayed. So, Ida stayed with me and my grandmom and grandpa and then there were two other children staying in that same house, my cousins and my Uncle Loline had two children, and he and his wife had also moved to New York and Evie — Yvonne — Evie and Joe were the two children. Evie's my age, about. Joe is her younger brother.

ANDERSON: A lot of kids for your grandparents to keep up with.

VAZQUEZ: It certainly was. There were four of us and we were four and two, and Ida was even younger than that. Ida was like one or something like that, one and a half. And I remember playing in that house with Yvonne and Joey and — well, Ida not so much. She was crawling around — and doing bad things like getting up early in the morning to go get the crackers — and really, uh, and missing my mom. I mean, a huge sense of loss that she was gone. I remember sitting on the porch, the same porch with the cool spot underneath, and my grandmother at night.

And I wrote an essay called "Moonsands" that comes from the notion that because the moon in Puerto Rico is really huge when it's full, and so you sit on the porch, and I saw a plane sort of flying and I thought he was going to the moon and I knew that my mother had gone to New York on an airplane. And so I thought New York was on the moon, and that my mother had gone to the moon. And no matter — nothing my grandmother said sort of could convince me that that was not the case, that New York was in another place. And anyway —

ANDERSON: How long was your mom gone? How long were you separated?

20:50
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VAZQUEZ: About a year.

ANDERSON: That's a long time.

VAZQUEZ: That is a long time, and the one really sad and awful memory I have of that time in Puerto Rico is waking up one night. My grandfather was not a nice man. My grandmother was sort of the traditional wife and mom and really generous and sweet and loving and my grandfather was someone who abused her physically, drank a lot. Part of how he made a living was to act as a loan shark and charge people ridiculous amounts of money, including his own children. But I remember waking up one night and hearing them arguing, and they — you know, you have mosquito nets and so I could see them arguing underneath the mosquito net. I could see shadows and hearing voices, loud voices, and then I saw him hitting — you know, lifting his arm to hit her and hit her several times. And then I guess he raped her. You know, it's not like I could actually see it, but I could hear. And you know, it just stayed. The image stayed forever.

ANDERSON: Did you ever talk about it with her?

VAZQUEZ: Not with my grandma. I actually — it's an image and a story that I completely forgot about until I was in my thirties and some therapy thing — and boom, there it was. And then, the detail of it really didn't come back to me until I wrote an essay called "Spirit and Passion," where I described the incident. And as I was writing it, I just — I really remembered all the details, my uncle in the night and the lamp and the whole — and so, she was dead by then. My grandma died, I don't know how many years ago. And so I never — no.

ANDERSON: So, do you think that next morning you were still thinking about it, and just didn't say anything to your grandmother about it? Or do you think that you'd already, by the next morning, sort of blocked it out.? Do you remember being around her and being afraid for her and upset about what you had witnessed? Or do you think you just really shoved it away immediately?

VAZQUEZ: No, no, I think I did. I think I did. I mean, I remember my uncle that night, because I was crying and upset, my uncle holding me and taking care of me and telling me it was going to be all right. My uncle was maybe ten years older than me, ten or 12 years older than me, so he was, you know, a child himself, just a young teenager, and he had probably witnessed stuff like that before. So, that's my uncle Hernan, who also never married — number of bachelors in that family. I wonder what that was about. Anyway —

ANDERSON: It must have been a terrifying night for you.

VAZQUEZ: It was a terrifying night.

ANDERSON: Because the woman that is your protector, is your parent at that time, is being hurt.

VAZQUEZ: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Did you ever feel afraid in that house? Did that translate to him, to you feeling afraid of your grandfather? Was he ever mean or abusive to the kids?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, because I think before that, we just sort of didn't have much to do with him. We'd avoid him. He was, you know, the gruff guy, whatever. And after that, I was afraid of him. Forever. For the rest of my life. And actually, he — there was an incident later in New York where he actually exposed himself to myself and my cousin Evie and, you know, we were, like, six years old or something like that. I mean, he didn't do anything, but that's terrible enough. But it was, you know, I really hated the man.

ANDERSON: And you loved this grandma.

VAZQUEZ: I loved this grandma, Pepita. She's very soft and, you know, she was the white one. I mean, in Puerto Rico, we're all shades. We're like blond and blue-eyed to African, dark skinned. And she was definitely of the blond, blue-eyed [type], and she had a couple of her children who were also very light skinned. And I actually — her family came from the Basque region in Spain and so, that's more north in Spain, I don't know, light-skinned people up there, closer to France. But by the time I sort of had enough consciousness to know and remember, she was, I guess, in her seventies, maybe late sixties, and gray, but strong. I mean, this woman could, like, you know, walk around with a big huge sack of potatoes and *yautia* and these root things they grew for food and worked all day long from sunrise to sunset. And I remember her hands were so incredibly soft from washing on a washboard. You know, she was great, and she smelled great. She smelled — she wore some kind of talcum powder that was just delicious.

And yeah, so I did love my grandma. She was incredibly sweet and very — what's the word? She knew her son, my father, who came to work in the United States, you know, sort of did well — not well, but was OK for a number of years. But he, in not too long a time, because he kept having disability and not being able to work, and I don't know, because of the war and because, because —

ANDERSON: Because the father too?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, and the father. He just deteriorated into alcoholism and, you know, wasn't working, kept churning out babies. We lived — I came to New York, to go to that part of the story, in I guess it was 1953, either

'53 or '54 — '54, because then I wasn't able to get into school and I was very mad about that, so it must have been, like '54, about this time of year.

ANDERSON: So did your parents come back and get the two of you?

28:50

VAZQUEZ: No, they sent for us and my grandma and my Uncle Hernan. We all came on the plane together, so I took my first plane ride, which I thought was going to the moon. I was so, you know, a plane ride for a child of four and a half or five is like, you know, a phenomenal thing. And I had to go to the bathroom. That's a whole other trauma, because, you know, in Puerto Rico, you learn to go to the latrine, but latrines are nasty. There's flies, it stinks, and you're kind of scared because there's this big hole and you're a little kid. So we mostly didn't go to the latrine. We went wherever we could go. It wasn't like — toilet training is not — does not compute.

So, I didn't know about toilets. I mean, there was not a toilet in the house and I don't remember ever going to a toilet. So on the plane, I had to go and my uncle takes me to this thing in the plane and I was just terrified. I was like, What's going to happen? I went and experienced the toilet experience. He put me on the potty. He held me. I went. It's OK. But it took me a long time, probably a year, to learn how to hold it, because those muscles had never been trained to do that until you, like if you're on a bus or you're in the street, you have to wait until you get to this closet. And it was, like, wow, big trauma. That led to actually years of constipation that I never quite understood why and it wasn't until some therapy session —

ANDERSON: God bless them.

VAZQUEZ: God bless the therapists. It was some deep-breathing therapy thing where I went back to, you know, my first memories of coming to New York and not being able to hold it and being yelled at and hit because — so then, what I learned to do is to hold it, literally, and I haven't had a problem with constipation ever since that memory returned. So, it clearly had to do with that.

So, I came. It was a beautiful day. I was, you know, euphoric to see my mom and dad. My dad put me on his shoulders and, you know, we went in a car, which was also a new experience for me. They lived on the Lower East Side, actually 5th Street, between Avenue A and B in a — I don't think that block is the same anymore, or whatever, because I tried to go back to it once and it was like something else. But it was a walkup. It was actually pretty much like this. It was a brownstone and we lived on the first floor and it was a studio. It was a rather large studio but a studio nonetheless, with a kitchen and a bathroom. And we actually did use the back yard.

Anyway, my first memory of New York is going to the airport, picked up, go in a car, and then drove to Manhattan. And I guess it was

somewhere around 14th Street or something, they stopped at a Horn & Hardardt's for ice cream, which I also had never experienced in my life, of having ice cream in Puerto Rico. So they got me the ice cream and they put it on the table, and it was very cold. So it was like steaming a little bit? So I blew on it. They all had a huge laugh, and then I had my first taste of ice cream — really fabulous. I mean, Horn & Hardardt's, what a concept, right, to build the little windows with food in them. It was fascinating. It's like, How do they do it? They make the food back there? You put money in the thing and then you get it — just really fabulous, this moon country.

And then I lived in that apartment — God, Ida and me. When my mom came to New York, she was pregnant, but there's a lot of dispute about when she became pregnant with my sister Mindy, and whether or not there was actually enough time for my father to have been the father, or perhaps there was a brother that — whatever. But Mindy was born in New York. So when I came, I came to a new little sister. She was beautiful. She was a little dark thing. My father asked me what she looked like and I said she looked like a *piojo* — *piojo* is a flea — because she was dark, little. Anyway, one, two, three, then my sister Nancy was born a year later in August, and then my brother George. So there were five children, Mom and Dad, in this studio apartment. It was tight, let me tell you, it was tight. And —

ANDERSON: So the uncle and grandma just came with you for the trip? They went back to Puerto Rico?

VAZQUEZ: No, no. They went to live on 110th Street in a huge apartment. My other uncle, Loline and — I don't know what Loline did for a living at that time. I think he was a medical technician. He actually had more education than my dad. And his wife was a nurse. So they had a really nice apartment in this place and then my grandfather, my grandmother, my uncle, two of my uncles, my Uncle Nito — no, Nito is the grandfather — my father's older brother and his youngest brother, Hernan, they all lived in another apartment on the same floor. And for us, that was, like, Oh, they're so fancy. I mean, they lived uptown, they lived on 110th Street, they got this fancy apartment. And actually, it was a beautiful apartment. It was one of these old, you know, pre-World War II wood floors, French doors —

ANDERSON: The classic six on the Upper West Side.

VAZQUEZ: Oh, nice apartment. You know, like now, I'm sure people pay through the nose to live in those places with a little maid's room and the whole nine yards. Yeah, so they were fancy but we were poor.

ANDERSON: So, describe the inside of the studio. How do you arrange sleeping and living?

VAZQUEZ: Well — boy. Mom and Dad slept on a fold-out couch. Mindy was, well, when she was the baby, she was in a crib. They had — you know those cots that you fold up? — that they had in a corner against the wall and they would open that up and me and Ida slept in the cot. Then, when Nancy came along, Nancy was in the crib. Mindy was — they took two chairs and made a bed out of it, and Mindy was in the chair and me and Ida were still on the cot. And then when George came along, I have no memory. They must have had two of them in the crib, because really, there must have been another chair that they got or something. It was a fairly large, I would say, you know, the studio was about the size of this whole living room and kitchen, and so it was a fairly large studio. So there was a couch that separated the kitchen from the living room, two big chairs, the kid's crib.

In a corner was a television, you know, those big console things. Oh, television — that was like, Oh my God, television. And baseball. The very first day that I came to New York, besides the ice cream, was television and baseball. I mean, it was black-and-white, you know, Dodgers, Giants, Yankees. They watched it all. These little teeny men, you know, hitting balls and running around. I can't tell you how many times I tried to go behind that television to take it apart and find the little men. But I was completely and totally enthralled, and to this day am a rabid baseball fan.

So the television was there. They did have, you know, a record player that was on top of the television. It was the kind that you actually had to put the needle on the thing and all that old stuff.

ANDERSON: And you said you guys had a back yard?

VAZQUEZ: Well, we didn't actually — you know, it was like a fire escape. You had to go down a ladder. But that back yard was also — fabulous memories of that back yard, and actually, my very first memory of a sexual experience was with this little German girl, Judy, in the back yard. The first year that I lived in New York, I was actually an incredibly verbal, precocious child. My uncle started teaching me to read and write when I was three. So by the time that I came to New York, I knew how to read, I knew how to write.

ANDERSON: Spanish only?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah. And I knew the sort of fundamentals of addition and subtraction and those kind of things. I was actually probably beyond the first grade level at that point, and I was, you know, totally, I'm going to school. Well, in those days, they wouldn't let you do — like if you were not five [years] and ten months, or whatever, you know, then you couldn't start first grade. You'd have to wait another year. So that meant that I actually had about a year plus — a year and four or five months that I lived in New York before I went to school.

40:41

And during that year, I think that first — this was the second summer that I lived in New York, when I was actually learning English by hearing it and watching television, and then my dad started teaching me how to read the *Daily News*. The *Daily News* was my first newspaper. So I started to learn English and then the second summer that I lived in New York, on that block, my dad, you know, would have me go get him the newspaper and cigarettes and so, I'd come out and it was just down the block and around the corner was a little place where you'd get the cigarettes and also a place where you could get ice cream. And every once in a while, I would get, keep the change and buy an ice cream. I'm still addicted to it.

And so, you'd walk there, and for a while, I was noticing this little girl who had blond curly hair, dimples — very cute. And, you know, I'd notice her but I wasn't allowed to engage in any conversation with her because, I don't know, I was scared to. And one day, this particular day when I was going out to get cigarettes and the paper for my dad, she was out there and she was sort of, whatever, primping or something, and so I mocked her. She started crying, and yelled up something to her mother. And they were German and so she was speaking, and then I was like, What are they talking? There's the English and the Spanish, but German I'd never heard. So, she yells up at her mother and her mother sticks her head out the window. This dog — this big dog, actually, it's actually a German Shepard dog — is barking and the mother's yelling.

And so I high-tailed it out of there, got my dad's stuff, and then walked around the block so that I wouldn't have to come by this whole scene again, and so I go into my building and open the door, and there is Judy, yes, who lit into me like nobody's business. I mean, you know, little-girl, drag-out, hair-pulling, biting, nasty kind of stuff. It was just a scene, and we were on the second floor, I guess, and my mother, so she comes out, she separates us, she dusts us off, she sees that I've been bit. So she drags us both upstairs and sits us down until we calm down. And then she asked who Judy was and Judy introduced herself. And Mom gave us both milk or I don't know. And then, you know, we were, like, best friends.

And we spent — I mean, it's children, it's summer. It's just every waking moment playing. They did have a back yard that they had access to — spent lots of time back there. We built scooters from milk crates and, you know, old skate things and put a lot of bottle caps on it, and we just like, rode those things till we were just exhausted. And really, it's the happiest, sort of completely carefree, the wind, the sun — it was gorgeous.

And there was a day like that that we were riding the scooters and she had a brother, Peter, who was four years old, who always tagged along, and he was a nuisance but he had to tag along. Anyway, we came back in late afternoon, and sent Peter home, because we didn't want to deal with him. And my mom was going to do some errands and stuff like that so she said, she sent us out to play in the yard.

And in that yard, Mom had set up a little sheet tent kind of thing so that we wouldn't get burned in the sun and so we went in there, and, to take a nap. And Judy was a year older than me, and I guess Judy had had some experience of touching herself and it was nice and so we laid down and Judy started touching me and, you know, on my breasts and on my vagina and it felt so good. And you know, if it wasn't an orgasm, it was pretty close to that. It just felt great. And then we went to sleep. And my mom found us there and took us back up home and there you go. It was my first [sexual experience.]

ANDERSON: Did it happen just the once between you and Judy? Or did you — were there other —

VAZQUEZ: Oh, no. Then we played doctor, you know, we played doctor, we played mom and dad, we did all kinds of things like that. And sometimes with Peter, too, although Peter didn't get touching. Sometimes maybe Peter got into the kissing, but never touching. He was not allowed. And that went on till we moved. We moved, I guess, in 1957 or '58. My mom — by then, my dad was completely not working. We were on welfare. My mom was doing sort of sewing work on the side to fill income, but we were, you know, pretty poor. And my mom applied for an apartment in these brand-new projects called the General Grant Projects on 125th Street and Amsterdam [Avenue] in Manhattan — General Grant because General Grant's tomb is right there. And we got this apartment. It was three bedrooms, a hallway, you know, living room and kitchen and different rooms. It was heaven. You know, we were uptown.

ANDERSON: You were farther uptown than the rich cousins on 100th Street?

VAZQUEZ: That's right. We were more uptown than they were uptown. We were just so ecstatic. I mean, even though my brothers — we had one brother, George, and Mom was pregnant, so they got a room, and you know, the four girls had to share a room. But still, you know, we were incredibly happy to have rooms. Mom and Dad had a room.

ANDERSON: It must have been hard to leave the neighborhood, though.

VAZQUEZ: The Lower East Side, yeah, it was, because — it was very hard, because, you know, this was my first home. I was totally used to it. I went to first and second grade there, and Judy, and I knew it. And there's also a huge race thing that happened, because on the Lower East Side then, there's lots of Italians, some German immigrants, and then we were, you know, the colored ones. We were light skinned. But we didn't — you know, race was not, like I didn't understand race. Everybody was sort of alike, right?

And what I understood — I understood that people were prejudiced against Puerto Ricans. I mean, I got into huge fights with kids in school because I wouldn't salute the flag because it wasn't my flag and, you

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know, then I was anti-American, and so, fights and all that kind of stuff. But the people that I knew for the most part and shared time with were like me.

And then we moved to 125th Street, and hello. This is black Harlem. So then, third grade, was about black kids. Not all, but a lot of black, Latino and Irish kids were the mix in school at that time, and I was completely, sort of, What is this? And kids — I mean, the stuff that kids do is really kind of amazing, the chance to sort of, “A fight, a fight, a nigger and a white” — that whole kind of thing, “Act your age, not your color.” What was I, eight years old? That was sort of my introduction to racism. And it also, though, meant that from about the age of eight till 21, most of my grammar school life, my high school life, and all of my college life, I grew up with black kids. And so, my sort of cultural life became Puerto Rican and black, sort of — the language, the food, the music, all of that. I really feel deeply enriched by it. But also I remember it as the time when I got introduced to racism as a living reality and not something that I understood or had a concept for, but that I saw and felt and experienced.

So, leaving Judy was hard. I cried and cried and cried. And we moved up to this beautiful new place on 125th Street, and third grade I did in PS 125, where I had many fights. It seems a blur of fights. I don't know why I got into fights. I got into fights because I talked back. And my mother, of course, was mortified. And you know, I was always a tomboy. I mean, I would fight with the boys, actually. That's mostly who I fought with, although sometimes there'd be girls involved. But so, for my mom, it was like, I got to get this child out of here. She's going to get herself killed.

And also, recalling some of Mom's more middle-class kind of background, she wanted a better education for us, and that meant Catholic school. So, she went, God bless her heart, to St. Joseph's school and talked to the principal and said, “I want to enroll my children.” And the principal said, “Well, this is X, Y, Z tuition.” And my mother said, “I don't have the money, but I want my children to get a good education and be good Catholics.” So they gave us scholarships, I guess. I mean, I have no — maybe she made another arrangement with them that I'm not aware of, but — she had to, like, make our uniforms with the little white Peter Pan collars and, you know, the pleated skirts. And I went to St. Joseph's for the rest of my grammar school life, in eighth grade. Catholic school does kindergarten through eighth, and then you do four years of high school.

ANDERSON: It was all uptown, too? St. Joseph's is uptown?

VAZQUEZ: St. Joseph's, I think, is still there. It might still be there. [Yes, it is.]

ANDERSON: It was in that neighborhood.

VAZQUEZ: Yeah. It's on 125th and Morningside Avenue. And St. Joseph's was the church that we went to, and I just loved that church. It was a really old — you know, churches, I love churches. I don't go to church anymore, really. I'm not practicing anything. But I love churches. I love the oldness of them, and they're cool. All those years of incense and people praying, sort of the hush kind of thing that happens when you go into a church — I still feel it. I love it. So, I loved going to that church.

In grammar school, God, it was fun. It was hard at first. It was — because I was ahead and they wanted to put me back in third grade, because I was Puerto Rican, you know, because I didn't — probably my verbal stuff at that point was not as sharp as my writing and reading abilities. But once again, Mother protested and they tested me, and they said, Well, no, actually, she belongs in fourth grade.

So, starting fourth grade with Sister Thomas — Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. They were an order — are, maybe, I don't know, still — of nuns whose mission began with teaching and proselytizing to Native Americans. And I guess when they moved, when they set up an order in an urban center, they decided that that would be Puerto Rican and African American children. They were great. They were interesting.

Sister Thomas was mostly fun, kind of stern, older — [used a] ruler [on us], you know, *whap*. But I enjoyed it. I loved school. Because I loved reading and learning and arguing and all that kind of stuff. And then I went to fifth grade with Sister Constance. Sister Constance was my first memory of a serious kind of crush where I sort of realized that it was a crush. You know, like Judy was innocent. Judy was play. But Sister Constance, I was totally crushed out. She was a young nun who sang like an angel. I mean, she did the choir. She was just — phew. And she was so sweet. I mean, she just loved me. I was just totally a teacher's pet. I would stay after and help her clean up and she'd take me to the convent and feed me. I was just in love. I was completely in love with Sister Constance.

And you know, towards the end of that year, there was another heartbreak. Sister Constance had to leave. I think she had lung cancer. She survived for some time. I don't know eventually what happened to her, but she was not able to finish the semester. I was so heartbroken.

ANDERSON: We're going to pause now.

57:09
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VAZQUEZ: OK.

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

ANDERSON: I'd like you to reflect on your parents and sort of how they were as parents, what kind of parenting did they do, and I also would like you to think about how they raised you as girls and boys. What were the messages that you received about being a girl, being female, at that time? You had said you were a tomboy.

VAZQUEZ: Always.

ANDERSON: And what kind of expectations did your parents have for the girls versus the boys in your family?

VAZQUEZ: Um — my parents and their parenting. Actually, it's an interesting question. They, in some ways, were very traditional and in some ways very nontraditional, particularly with me. As I said, I was always a tomboy, meaning that, you know, my version of play was get up on the back of the chair and ride the horse, or run around after my siblings. My father bought me a gun — you know, the cowboy thing? gun and holster and a hat, like, when I was five or six. It was like my first present from my father. They both knew that I was not enamored of the girl things. And this has just always been true.

Back to Puerto Rico. I mean, I have a memory of Puerto Rico, Three Kings' Day, you know, you get presents, they're under the bed. You wake up, blah, blah, blah. And I — Joe, my cousin Joe, got a truck, a fire truck, something like that, and I got a doll. And I was fit to be tied. I threw that doll away. Because I woke up right before the thing's supposed to happen and put that truck under my bed.

So people knew at a very early age, the child is not — she doesn't do things like other girls. And you know, they kept struggling. So my mother kept struggling to put me in little dresses. I mean, there's pictures of me in this little flowered dress and my hair — she'd permed my hair, because I wanted — I think at that point, I wanted to be like Judy. I wanted to have curls like Judy, and so she permed my hair. But, you know, for the most part, I was in shorts and pants and playing cowboys and Indians and riding horses.

And having a recurring fantasy [that] also inspired another essay, called "Captain of the Rocket Ship," which has not been published anywhere but should be. It's a great little essay, where my uncle used to tell me stories and make up things and maybe he read science fiction things, but he'd tell me about rocket ships, and I was fascinated by rocket ships, and I envisioned myself as the captain of a rocket ship. And that image was definitely a male image. It was never a girl. And I knew I was a girl, but I was the captain of the rocket ship.

And so, my father, either because he was a softie or because he really wanted a boy, I don't know — there were four girls first, so, he indulged my every sort of boy desire. He took me to ball games. He taught me to play baseball. He, you know, did the gun-and-holster

things. And, you know, it was never, like, he was upset about it, it just was the way I was. Whereas my mother kept trying to make me be more of a girl. But neither of them actually ever sort of talked, or made statements about it. It was just the way I was.

But they both had very, very strong messages for me at a very early age that I was to go to college. From the moment I stepped into school, I knew that I was going to college and that I was going to finish it, and that I was going to be the first child in this generation to go to college. And they also were very clear that I was going to be a doctor. And so, there were always, at a very early age, messages about succeeding in school, and high expectations. I mean, there were very high expectations. And if I did not perform well in school, that's when I got into trouble from them.

Dad was kind of schizophrenic. Dad was — he indulged my every fantasy around boy things, but he also was the disciplinarian and he was one of those fathers that used a belt. And it would be stupid shit, like I don't know, I'd go to bed with a wad of gum in my mouth, Bazooka gum in my mouth, which was, of course, bad for me, but children do things like this. And he would find it, or he would find — and there goes the belt. He had some pretty harsh kinds of other forms of punishment, like kneel in the bathroom, [on] the tile, put your arms out, until he said to drop them. Yeah. So he was like that. He'd be the person that I played with, but also the person that I was afraid of. And, uh –

ANDERSON: Were you more rebellious? Did you get more punishment than other kids, or was it pretty even?

VAZQUEZ: No, I was more rebellious. And because I was to set the example, that also meant that I had to be put in line more. I had more responsibility. I had responsibility, actually, from a very early age, of taking care of my siblings, because you know, I'm the oldest. There were seven of us, so I can't tell you how many diapers I changed in my life. I, in many ways, helped raise my sisters and brothers, and school was a joy for me because I loved going to school, but it was always very clear to me that it was a responsibility and that I had to do well. And both of them — they're both incredibly affectionate. So, there was the discipline and some of the cruel kind of stuff but they also were not stingy with hugs and kisses and an incredible amount of affection for all of us.

And the other thing that — and they were very proud of me. One of the things that I'm very clear about is that my confidence, and I have a great deal of self-confidence, comes from them. I mean, they raised me to expect success and to expect to be able to express myself and talk back and all of those kind of things.

And so I would say it was a mixed bag, and as I got older, the issues around my butch self, my tomboy self, became more accentuated and Mom became more worried about what that meant. And Dad, he left my mom, he and my mom broke up when I was about 12, so he was not — he actually stopped being a significant figure in my adolescent life,

except as the person I would sort of run away to sometimes, and he kind of — what's the word? — he continued, until I stopped having a relationship with him, to be more indulgent than my mother. And my mom, at some point, I think, sort of gave up trying to get me into dresses and stuff, except that I had to wear uniforms for school, which was mortifying. But she kind of gave up on that and sort of was content to continue to encourage me to do well in school and that kind of stuff.

And in the beginning of my adolescent life, all hell broke loose. Mom and Dad divorced, and even though I had, you know, this really strong love-hate relationship with him, he was my dad and I loved him and I hated this other man that my mom hooked up with, a man named Oscar, my stepfather, because he made my father go away. And —

ANDERSON: So your mom had an affair with Oscar and that's why your parents split up?

09:58

VAZQUEZ: Yeah. And you know, in retrospect, I sort of understand completely what was going on. My dad was a drunk and abusive and she had seven children and welfare was not enough and she needed someone who could bring stability, more money, um, and someone who was kind to her. And so —

ANDERSON: So did Oscar move into the apartment?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, Oscar moved into the apartment on 125th Street. Dad went to live with his mother, who still lived on 110th Street, and I was, for the first year that Oscar moved in, I was just completely out of control. I was smashing things that he would — figurines and things that he'd buy for the house. I was fighting all the time. I was cutting out of school. This was, like, sixth grade, so my mother, in desperation, not knowing what to do with me, took me to see a social worker, psychiatrist, I don't know what kind of person, and they determined that I needed to be removed from the family, from the home, and put me in a home in Chappaqua, upstate New York. I don't remember the name of the home, but I spent about four months there, something like that. I was 12, maybe. And it was actually there that I had my sort of first introduction to smoke, marijuana, and a lesbian — actually, a couple of lesbians — a girl who was a couple of years older than me and who taught me about some kinds of sex that I had never understood.

ANDERSON: Not exactly what your mom thought she was signing up to —

VAZQUEZ: No, no, no, no. Well, they sent me to this place that was like a mix of kids who'd — you know, foster homes and kids who were juveniles and kids who were just like me who were just having trouble at home. And so, they had a counselor and they had a program and the counselor, Roz Scurio, was the lesbian — redhead, ruddy, really sweet and loving person who invested a lot in me, and took care of me in that place. And

had me do the role of *Sound of Music*, the nun. Who's the nun? I forget. It's really priceless. Me in a nun's uniform.

ANDERSON: Sandy Duncan? (Vazquez laughs) You were playing Sandy Duncan?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah. And you know, eventually they decided that I was, whatever, calm enough to go back home.

ANDERSON: Was being there traumatic for you?

VAZQUEZ: It was totally traumatic. I mean, I was gone from home. I was in this world where there were strangers and bad kids and — I mean, I knew that I was doing angry and crazy things at home but I wasn't doing self-destructive things. So, to be in this environment, it was totally traumatic. And Roz made it possible for me to go through this period and feel protected and she really looked out after me and made sure that I wasn't, you know, being abused by some of the older girls, and kind of calming me down, you know. I'd do things like go off in huge, big thunderstorms, blah, blah, blah, come back soaking wet and she'd be, like, you know, grab me, throw me into a hot tub, and talk to me a lot. She spent hours listening to me, and took good care of me. So —

ANDERSON: So they sent you back home?

VAZQUEZ: So they sent me back home and I, at that point, did sort of calm down some and accept that Oscar was going to be in our lives, although I didn't like it and made no bones about it.

ANDERSON: Did he treat you guys well?

VAZQUEZ: Well, this is where it becomes like therapy. He did. He was a good provider. He was never the disciplinarian, because he couldn't be. But he also systematically ran through the girls.

ANDERSON: Starting with you?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, starting with me. And I was, I guess at that point, about 15, and my mom was — where was my mom? Oh, where was my mom? My mom had a breakdown. My mom — all this trauma sort of — finally, the stress was too much. She went through a depression. She attempted suicide. And, uh, I found her. I came home. I was younger. I was still in eighth grade. I came home early from school because it was the World Series. And actually, this is part of my creative rebellion. Me and some of the guys in the class knew that the teacher, Sister Pious, was kind of old and not too with it. So during lunch break, we set the clock ahead an hour. So that instead of leaving the school at three, we were leaving at two, which still gave us time to catch the game. And she dismissed the

class early and I ran home, and because I did get home an hour early, my mom lived. Another hour and she might have not made it.

So mom went to the hospital and you know, people — mental health services are still not what they need to be, and they certainly were not then either, and they put her in a hospital, in a schizophrenic ward, which is totally not where she needed to be. She was depressed. She wasn't schizophrenic. She had good reasons to be depressed. But they put her there and she was there for, I don't remember, three months, something like that. It was a long time.

Family members, older cousins, and whoever of my mother came to take care of us, and Oscar was taking care of us, and it was during that time that he abused me. And you know, I was 12, going on 13. There was no way that I — and I blamed myself for my mother's depression — so I wasn't going to, you know — I honestly have been through all this in therapy, but it's still hard to talk about.

ANDERSON: Did you tell anybody at the time? Sisters?

VAZQUEZ: You know, I told a sister who subsequently also suffered from depression. And actually, Mindy does too suffer from depression a lot. He also abused her, and my sister Ida. I think the only one he didn't get to was my sister Nancy, the youngest one. But I didn't tell my mother, and for — I didn't tell my mother for another couple of years. And what happened in those intervening years is that, like, 15, I was — a couple of things happened. One, I was so fed up with him and trying to live there —

ANDERSON: Was this still ongoing?

VAZQUEZ: Well, he never — yes, I mean, the attempt was ongoing. He never succeeded again, but he kept trying. And at 15, a cousin of mine — not a cousin, some friend of my mother's sister who lived at Rochester, a woman named Eva, came to live in New York, and she was my first real sort of sexual crush and experience. And it started out with Eva sort of — she was living at the house, she was working, she had an accident. She had to spend a lot of time at home. And my mother sort of started noticing that I was spending a lot of time with Eva. I was infatuated with Eva, and blah, blah, blah, and so, she asked me what was going on and I declared that I was in love with Eva.

ANDERSON: How old was Eva? Do you remember?

20:15

VAZQUEZ: About seven years older than me. And something else — there was somebody else, also about seven years older than me, who was a very close friend of the family, Toni, that I was also sort of attracted to, but Eva was the first. And what happened was, that my mother said — well, at first she was kind of calm about it and she said, "It's just a crush. This happens to everybody. It's a phase. It'll go away." Da, da, da. She

talked to me about her first crush for Carolina when she was 15. And I said, OK, and then, you know, a couple of months went by and it wasn't going away. I said, you know, this is not — eventually my mom and I had a really huge, blowout kind of fight about Eva and what was going on and not going on and da, da, da. And she said something to me, like, If that's the way you're going to be, then you need to leave. Go with your father. I said, "Oh, really?" So I went and packed my bag and I left.

And I went and lived with my father for about six or eight months. I remember it was over a summer, and spent lots of time with Eva, who actually was not a lesbian. I don't know what she was doing with me, but she actually was in love with my cousin Joe, whom she eventually married and went to live in Chicago. But there was definitely stuff that she was doing with me. She was teaching me how to dance and how to kiss and all those kinds of things. But I was in love. And I don't know, after about six or eight months of that, I actually was missing home.

ANDERSON: It must have been so nice to be away.

VAZQUEZ: It was very nice to be away from Oscar. But I missed my mom, I missed my siblings, and I — so, I came back and I had a long talk with my mom and agreed that I would — well, also during that year, that was my first year in high school, and there's all this trauma, and I was at a Catholic high school called Cardinal Spellman in the Bronx. It was a coeducational school, meaning they had girls and boys, but we went to separate classes. We had lunch together and stuff like that. So, Cardinal Spellman was a fairly prestigious high school and it was in the middle of that that all this happened, the middle of the first year.

So, you know, the second half of that semester, I was mostly not there, and so they summoned my mother and said, you know, She's out. So I started the second semester, I went to Washington High School, or some high school, and then that's when I decided I wanted to come back home. And I came back, and my mother said if I behaved, I could come home. And then she went to Cathedral High School. They had a branch in Harlem, say about 138th Street or something like that — Sisters of Charity. My other saving —

ANDERSON: I think Betty Powell taught there.

VAZQUEZ: Really?

ANDERSON: Yeah. Sisters of Charity Cathedral High School. I think she taught French there. She's not old enough to have taught you, but —

VAZQUEZ: No, close.

ANDERSON: She's a few years older than you, though.



VAZQUEZ: Close. I'll have to talk to her about that. So she got me — once again, got me into a school, and by then, it was the middle of the semester. So I had a lot of catch up to do, and it was my sophomore year. I was like, whatever. I was 16. Sometimes I went to school, sometimes I didn't. Sometimes I went to Coney Island. Sometimes I went smoking. Sometimes — whatever.

And the nuns kept trying to reach me. These are the nuns I said, really, just saved my life. They kept trying to get me to stay, but I was in — the other problem was that I was in standard classes instead of whatever, [with] the smart kids, and I was completely bored. And I could go to school one day a week and come back and, you know, pass the test. And so, I wasn't getting 90s but I was passing. And I would do things like not go to school, but then go to the convent afterwards. And so, I was troubled, I had all these problems, blah, blah, blah, and they listened and they were very nice.

And then there was this one nun — God, I can't remember her name now, it was probably something like Sister Mary — African American, a big African American woman, with also a beautiful voice — I guess I liked the singers — who, one of these times that I came back to the convent, sat me down and said, "You know what, Carmen? Sob stories are a dime a dozen in this city. There's lots of children like you with broken homes, sad stories, poor. And you know what? You, at least, are smart. You, at least, can go to college. But you're not going to go there unless you settle down." And she made me a deal. She said, "Come to school every day, you know, hand in a 90+ final exam thing." And she guaranteed me that I would be placed in the fast track for my junior year. This was in early April. School ends the first week of June. I did it. I had like a 96 average on my finals. And she was true to her word. I got placed in whatever the fast track was at Cathedral High School for my junior and senior year. And so then I was challenged. I could come back. I loved those nuns. They were so, so good.

And then, in my junior year, I met Angie.

ANDERSON: Who's Angie?

VAZQUEZ: My first real sort of love. Before Angie and in between Angie and Eva, there was this woman Toni, who's a friend of the family, who was a closeted lesbian, whom I slept with and partied with for probably a year. I was this little butch thing. She was a femme. She would take me to these women's houses who were, you know, lesbian-femme couples. We'd go to underground places. I was 16 years old, going on 17. And, yeah, I mean, that's really where I understood that there was — so now, I'm understanding, This is lesbian. I'm butch and I like the femme women.

And they were — Toni was seven years older than me and the women that she was hanging out with were older than her. So I'm talking women in their late twenties, early thirties, who absolutely knew that they were dead meat if they were caught with a minor, and they did

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it anyway. You know, they just did. They took care of me. They would let me have a beer now and then, but, you know, it's mostly Coca-Cola. You don't get the rum in the Coke until you're older. But they also taught me how to dance, how to dress, how to flirt, and it was fabulous. It was completely fabulous.

ANDERSON: Did you know the word lesbian before you met them?

VAZQUEZ: Uh, no, not lesbian. You know, I knew –

ANDERSON: Homosexual. Did you have a concept of it?

VAZQUEZ: Yes, yes, because *maricón* is a concept and I knew that my — I had an uncle who everybody had rumors about, Ito, which were true. He was a doctor, really also another important person in the family, and I knew about Ito and I knew I was like Ito. But I never talked to him about it. I knew his friend, you know, who used to come and have dinner with him and hang out with him and sometimes stay over and all that kind of stuff. And the other word is *pato* or *pata*. And so I knew that. It wasn't until I met these women that lesbian came into my language. And butch and femme and kiki. I gave a speech in Buffalo the other day where I talked about that era a little bit and people, some of the people in the room, remembered kiki. So, that was sort of my sexual awakening, was with these older women. My sexual and gender identity awakening really sort of came into being from 15 to about 17 with Eva and Toni and these women.

And then I went to Cathedral High School, to the main branch downtown, and met Angie, who was the first great love of my life. Fell madly in love — just, you know, as only teenagers can fall in love. We kind of knew it right away. First we were best friends for two or three months and like, you know, see each other first thing, leave school together, hang out at Needham's, which was Grand Central Station, hot dogs and soda and, you know, hang out at each other's house, all this stuff.

And then, one of those times, we had a sleepover and stuff happened. And actually, her sister was also in the room with us, so it couldn't be like all that stuff, but boy, it was on fire, so we knew. And so, then, we started sneaking off places and the kissing and the this and the that but, you know, we couldn't have sex because where were we going to have sex? I lived with my parents, she lived with her parents. So, it was just, you know, teenage kind of romantic thing.

ANDERSON: Did you bring Angie to meet your older friends and did she join that?

VAZQUEZ: No, no, I lost that world. It was like, no. Then it was just me and Angie. There was no room in my life for anybody else. And then, I guess, I'm trying to remember, when did Angie and I actually have, like, real sex. It was in our senior year and I can't recall it now. I mean, it must have

been some night that she came over to stay with me in my room, because by then, I did have a room to myself. We moved from the three-bedroom to a four-bedroom place in the projects and — it's funny: why can't I remember that? I can remember Judy but I can't remember — anyway, it was incredibly sweet and, you know, wild and just romantic kind of teenage thing.

In the second year, it had become abundantly apparent to both sets of parents that these children were doing it here. And so, her mother called my mother and said, blah, blah, blah, blah, your daughter, this, that and the other thing, because I was still clearly the butch one and Angie was a femme. And my mother was first indignant and then said, "And even if it's true, you don't talk about my daughter that way." And then she confronted me and I said, "Yeah, it's true."

And you know, I remember that conversation because she, once again, tried the whole, what do you call it, phase thing on me. And I said, "Forget it. I'm not going there. It's not happening. This is who I am. I love Angie. I want to marry Angie." Marry Angie — isn't it ironic? And she said, "You can't." "Well, whatever. We'll run away." And she just kind of accepted that this is what it was gonna be, and you know, and I remember talking to her, her telling me, "Look, if you're gonna do this, you're gonna do this and I don't want this, but I love you." And she made me promise that I would stay in school, that I would continue to try and succeed and all that kind of stuff.

And so, from then on, I mean, Angie and I were a couple and everybody in my family knew it. Her family continued to be like, I don't think so, but we continued to see each other. And then, we graduated from high school. Angie went to work for some insurance company or something in Stamford, Connecticut. She was doing secretarial stuff. I was the career girl, so I was going to college in CCNY. And then, Angie got involved with this Christian, young Catholic thing, where —

ANDERSON: What was her ethnicity?

VAZQUEZ: Puerto Rican. Angie, Angelina Rodriguez. Angie Rodriguez. And she — it was these things where there were, like, encounters, they were called. So, what they were, were like mini-brainwash sessions — that actually were deeply instrumental in developing my oratorical skills. Because what — she went first and then she came back completely psyched. It was, like, an EST experience or something, where you go and you spend Thursday night to Sunday afternoon together in an incredibly intense way.

People give these talks. People respond to them. And the talks were things like, know yourself. And people talk about, you know, what led them to God or to know themselves. And they talk about sin and redemption. And then, you have sessions with a group leader and people talk about whatever — you know, their lives, their traumas, their loves, their issues. So, it's this huge bonding experience.

Then from the group of the people that come, they choose people to come back as leaders, trainers, speakers. And of course, I became one of those people. And so I had to give these talks that were pretty intense kind of talks about myself, about my own journey to God, and at that time, I was still, like, a practicing Catholic and completely in love with Angie and, you know, I could not — the two things just sort of coexisted. They did. And —

ANDERSON: And you talked about that openly?

VAZQUEZ: Oh, yeah, well —

ANDERSON: About Angie.

VAZQUEZ: Not with the group as a whole, but with the priests. And they would say that I was sinning and that I had to stop. But they never stopped inviting me back to these things. It was like, you know, whatever. And I actually continued to do it for, like, two years or something like that. Listen: it was fabulous. I spend a weekend with a bunch of women, you know, my age, a little younger, some of them, who spend the night talking and crying and hugging and et cetera. What's not to love? It was fabulous for me.

Um, but by the time that this episode in my life came to a close, I could no longer reconcile the teachings of the Church. By then, becoming more aware of the sort of absolute rejection of homosexuality and that I knew I was never going to be anything different — and actually, my first public coming out was at one of those things.

ANDERSON: Did you plan that?

VAZQUEZ: Yes.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

VAZQUEZ: Totally. I knew it was going to be my last session, and I made a speech, called “Young Woman in the Church” or something like that and I said, “I can no longer be a young woman in the Church and this is why.”

ANDERSON: It was very courageous.

VAZQUEZ: You know, it was. Now that I think of it, it's like, Wow, Carmen, that was something else. And I left. I stopped that whole experience. By then, I was in college. Angie and I had then moved in.

ANDERSON: So you were no longer living at home when you went to college?

VAZQUEZ: Well, I was, but in the second year of college or something like that, I decided to — oh, this is actually not true. It was my first year of college.

The second year of college, I was still living at home. It was — when did I go to college, 1967 through '73. So, 1969, I was in my second year in college. It was in a war protest. It was wild, mad. We shut down the university. We called it the University of Harlem. It was really like my first sort of organizing experience, and a great thing. It went on for two weeks. I loved it. But I was still living at home. And Angie and I, during that year, were still seeing each other but we were then also seeing — we also had boyfriends, which I don't — you know, I think I was in this phase of, Well, I got to try it.

ANDERSON: You hadn't tried it up until that point?

VAZQUEZ: No. I had friends, and I had some attractions to a couple of guys that was mostly people that my family wanted me to hook up with and so maybe I went on a date here and then. But there was this one guy, Santiago Soto — I loved Santi. Angie and I met Santiago. And Angie's guy, I forget his name — didn't like him. And I liked Santi, and actually spent, I don't know, probably a year of seeing in some way, until the moment came when he wanted to have sex and we tried and I just wanted no — I said, "I just cannot do this. I cannot have that thing inside of me. I will not do this. I love you, but I can't do this." And he was heartbroken, because he really was in love, and clearly, I was in love with Angie. But I tried. I gave it my best shot. It just was not going to happen. And so Santi and I broke up but Angie was still seeing fuckface.

And so, then Angie and I broke up for like two or three months. I don't know what she went to do. And I spent the summer heartbroken and blah, blah, blah. And then, I was coming out of — I was walking on 125th Street to go do an errand and who's across the street, walking up her bike up the street? Angie. And I just said, "Fuck." And she crossed the street, you know, and we hugged, and it was all over. So, she had gotten an apartment — that's when I moved. She had gotten an apartment in the Bronx. It was her first apartment and we went back to her apartment and, you know, that was the hottest sex I've ever had in my life. It was totally fucking fabulous. The woman was double-jointed. It was just — and so, Angie and I lived there for — this was like, I want to say 1969, 1970, until I left New York in 19 — until 1974 or something. We lived there four or five years. And she had started college at that point. I still had another year to go. So, we lived there. We got a cat.

ANDERSON: What'd your neighbors think of you guys? I mean, did you feel like you were out or visible in that neighborhood or were you just two friends?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, no, we were two friends. It was very interesting. This is the Bronx on 174th Street and Grand Concourse, conveniently close to Yankee Stadium, and so we were just, you know, college kids who were roommates, so we were not really out to the neighborhood. We were,

however, totally out to both of our families. And at that point, her siblings had reluctantly sort of said, whatever. Her parents not so much, but her siblings had accepted it. And our best friends were a heterosexual couple, Lucy and Jay, who we spent all our time with, you know, shopping — they had a kid, Angie was the godmother, you know. We took care of the baby. This was for three or four years, Lucy and Jay were just absolutely our best friends. Had dinner together. We had (unclear) weekends together, rum and Coke. By then, I was old enough to be having my rum and Coke and probably too much of it — all weekend long. And they were going to school, too, Lucy and Jay.

And, you know, the interesting part about all that is, this is 1971, '72. Gay meant nothing to me. I mean, I knew I was a lesbian and I knew that Angie and I were in a lesbian relationship, but there was no gay movement. Stonewall was, you know, a general in the Civil War. I had no understanding of that. I had more of a sense and some attraction to the women's liberation movement because I was talking to women in school who were into that, who were, like, burning bras. I wasn't wearing them, so it was, like — but I knew about the women's movement. I didn't know about the gay movement.

But Jay and Lucy and Angie and I were this quartet that did everything together. And Jay and I, you know, would go to ball games and do all the guy things, and Angie and Lucy would do all the girl things, and it was just fine. That's just the way life was. And I didn't — this whole sort of gay thing happened to me in graduate school, really.

ANDERSON: So just rapidly, in like ten minutes to wrap up some things, how did you and Angie end?

VAZQUEZ: Oh, heartbreak, just fuckin' heartbreak. We broke up in the final year of — I went to graduate school, which I'll talk more about tomorrow, this graduate program called the Consortium for Bilingual, Bicultural Counselor Education, where I got a Master's Degree in Education and then the project hired me as an instructor and then Angie came into the project. In that year, you know, it was a bunch of things. Angie and I started being attracted to other people. I was a teacher, she was a student. We fought a lot, and then towards the end of that particular — the end of her graduate thing, which was actually the end of the program, I decided that I had to leave, and that I actually had to leave the city. New York was just not big enough.

And my sister Mindy had moved to California, to San Francisco, and told me, "Oh, how beautiful it is and you can live here the whole year without worrying about the weather," and this and that and you can be poor here. And so we broke up because I really, I don't know, wanted to do other things.

And also because — oh, now it all comes back. We didn't break up because — I wanted to be out. Fuck. That's what it was. Oh, God. You know, for all the wild sex that we had, we still — we had two twin beds in our bedroom and Angie was worried about her career. Angie was

willing to be out to family but she didn't want to be out in the program. And when she was — so there was this level of like, I wanted to be out. I wanted to tell the world. I wanted to not, you know —

ANDERSON: You guys were really isolated, it sounds like, in terms of any cultural life. You weren't going to lesbian bars, you weren't part of organizations, you weren't going to parades, you were — yeah, and you wanted more.

VAZQUEZ: We started to have some of that, you know, and in that graduate experience, I met other queers who did have more of a connection to the community. And so, part of what led me in a direction of wanting to be more out was a desire to be a part of that community. And there was — you know, the interesting thing is that a lot of those people are like either in Puerto Rico and very closeted themselves. Some of them were from Albany, because they had gone to school in Albany and had come out and there was some sort of gay thing happening in Albany. And so I started to go to that. So a lot of why we were fighting and why we were — and I was being attracted to other people and stuff like that — had to do with being in really different places.

Ultimately, eventually, after we broke up and I moved to San Francisco, Angie did come out and did whatever, but it was too late. And I adored her and, you know, the sex was still phenomenal, but I needed to move on.

ANDERSON: And we'll start with San Francisco tomorrow, but since we just have a few minutes left, could you just talk a little bit about City College and what it was like during those years? And you just mentioned a little bit of —

VAZQUEZ: City College, 1967 to 1972, was fabulous. I loved virtually every minute that I spent going to CCNY. Probably the only thing I remember that was like a bad memory, were statistics classes at 8 o'clock in the morning, but I loved it. I mean, it was a combination of an incredibly rich faculty — and, you know, I started out being a psych major because I was going to be a doctor, until I actually took psych courses and went, No fuckin' way am I sitting around doing this. And I remember reading in some of those courses, you know, of course, my interests was drawn to what people were saying about homosexuality, and this is still when, like, homosexuality was sickness and this and that psychotic, whatever.

ANDERSON: It was still in the *DSM* [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*].

51:06

VAZQUEZ: Yes, it was, and I was, like, I don't want to do this. And so, I switched majors to English. And I had the privilege of being taught by Adrienne Rich, by Joseph Heller, by the guy that wrote *Clockwork Orange* [Anthony Burgess]. And so, I had an incredibly rich intellectual life.

Because I sort of spent the year doing mostly psych stuff, it took me a little bit longer and I had to catch up. So, the last part of my life at Community was almost all American literature, philosophy, and Spanish literature. I was in heaven.

So the intellectual stuff was fabulous, but the political stuff was also. I mean, it was the Vietnam War era, it was, you know, civil rights stuff, it was the coming into being of black and Puerto Rican studies. I mean, the protests I'm talking about in 1969 was about A, retaining open admissions, and B, creating black and Puerto Rican studies departments. The other demand was to have education majors learn Spanish. And we negotiated and negotiated with the principal — didn't happen. And so we said, You know what? We're going to shut this fucker down. And we did.

I mean, there was a group of about, I don't know, 50 students that formed some ad hoc committee for whatever — socialists, all of us, because I didn't really know communism at the time. And we did. We organized so that during the Easter break, we came back onto the campus and we shut the gates and we shut ourselves in. And for two weeks, we were the University of Harlem. And we — it was actually a big to-do. I mean, you know, the mayor and Mario Pochino, who was the attorney general or something at the time, finally, you know, broke the strike up forcibly. There was lots of news coverage. But in the end we got our black and Puerto Rican studies department. I don't know about the Spanish, with the education majors. But we also kept open admissions going for some amount of time, until finally in the '80s or whatever, it changed.

But it was the beginnings of my understanding that organizing work to create some kind of policy change is something that I loved doing — almost as much as I loved American literature. And actually my life from then on has been this sort of split love of writing, reading, you know, the intellectual life, and the activist life. The activist life sort of assumed dominance but it wasn't because I didn't love the other stuff, and still do.

ANDERSON: Was that, in terms of your political awakening — did that happen on the campus? Was that the first time that you were aware of the protest movements, and civil rights?

VAZQUEZ: You know, in early college, the Puerto Rican — the Young Lords and the Black Panthers were a thing, and so I got drawn to that. I got drawn to studying about Puerto Rican independence and the Puerto Rican Independent and Socialist Parties, and I went to study groups. And this was, I think, where I met Santi, Santiago Soto. And so my political life revolved around that, until I became utterly and completely fed up with the sexist dogs that these men were and until, you know, my homosexuality became an issue — because, of course, this was like, We're not dealing with that. And so, that was early in college, and then



the Vietnam War and then the development of black and Puerto Rican studies, sort of — that was the trajectory.

ANDERSON: Right. So you went into City College with some political motivation?

VAZQUEZ: I did. And in my family, there was never a lack of talk about politics, you know, presidential politics, Republicans, Democrats, all that. We hated the Republicans and we loved the Democrats. Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy were heroes and everybody, all those other people, were terrible. My mom actually was an *independentista*. Lolita Lebrón was a huge hero, and Albizus Campos were heroes. They were heroes. And I grew up, you know, thinking of them that way. And there was never any question that what we preferred was Puerto Rican independence and the United States was a colonizer. And so, that was all growing up. You know, those discussions and those politics were in my family.

So that by the time I got to high school, and, you know, the death of Kennedy, Kennedy, King, and Malcolm X were hugely traumatic for me and my generation. And to this day, I say [to] each man telling me that the four are the most prominent men in the country with a huge influence on civil rights in this country all got picked off by some lone whatever, Go fuck yourself. But it just sort of devastated me because when I was in high school, I really had this vision of like being involved in political work. I loved the writing but I loved politics and I saw that — and those four assassinations pretty much ended that for me. No way was I going to be involved in this system. And eventually that changed, but for most of my twenties and thirties, I was completely alienated from the political process. And it had directly to do with disillusionment of having those four men assassinated.

ANDERSON: You and most of your generation.

VAZQUEZ: Yes. Absolutely, absolutely.

ANDERSON: OK. I'm going to turn it off now.

VAZQUEZ: OK.

57:53
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END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

ANDERSON: Let's start today with California. Kind of plug in your mind what you're open to say, but I just want to ask one question about New York, I guess, before we jump right in to San Francisco that I'm not clear about from yesterday, which was your awareness of the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movement. You talked about being involved with the student activism and about some of the Puerto Rican independence stuff, but we didn't — and it sounded like you were fairly removed from both.

VAZQUEZ: From both.

ANDERSON: From both. But what was your awareness of their existence in the city, if any?

VAZQUEZ: OK.

ANDERSON: And then we can start talking about California. Were you aware of the women's movement or of Stonewall, gay and lesbian anything in the city up until the mid-'70s?

VAZQUEZ: I was not aware of Stonewall at all. I had no knowledge that it happened. It had no impact on me. I knew nothing about the Gay Activist Alliance or whoever the other group was. But the women's movement I had more familiarity with — one, because of media coverage of it, and two, because there were women on campus who identified themselves as women's liberation activists. But that, too, is fairly removed from me in my daily life. I mean, I certainly did not, while I was in college, identify as a feminist. I had no idea what that was about. I thought it was about being feminine, and so, it didn't apply to me.

ANDERSON: And would the women's liberation label, or activism, did that appeal to you?

VAZQUEZ: The liberation label appealed to me because, you know, the world was in the midst of liberation struggles and I was aware of them, and so the concept was interesting to me. But I had no theoretical understanding, hadn't read any books. And the women who sort of claimed a women's liberation label, to my knowledge, were not involved in things. They just said they were for women's liberation, which I thought was a great thing.

ANDERSON: So how did you acquire those analytical tools or that lens?

VAZQUEZ: The analytical tool for both lesbian/gay liberation then and women's liberation really all happened in San Francisco, and over a period of

time. I mean, when I got to San Francisco in 1975, I did have a much clearer consciousness of myself as a lesbian.

And this is a bizarre story, but it's absolutely true. On the way to San Francisco, I stopped at the airport book store, as many people do, to get a book to read on the plane. And I was going there with my new lover at the time, a young woman who was a friend of my sister Nancy. So all my lovers have been "ees" of some kind: Angie, Cathie, Leslie, Marcie, Carlie. I don't know what that's about, but it's true. And so I was looking for a book to read and I saw this book by Patricia Nell Warren, *The Front Runner*. And I saw that it was about gay something. I said, Well, that's great. So I bought the book and I read it, pretty much, cover to cover on the plane on the flight out there.

And so, there it is, in the book about this gay scene in San Francisco and la-de-da, and I was, like — because my sister had gone out to San Francisco with a man named Richard Townsend whom she fell madly in love with and he got a scholarship, quote unquote, to study at the University of San Francisco, so she went out there. And I was going to initially stay with her until I found a place of my own. They lived on 17th and Noe, right, so it's, like, a block away from the Castro Drag. And you know, I asked a few questions about what did they know about this gay thing and they were, like, Oh. They were not forthcoming.

So, the next [day] — that was like a Saturday. We didn't spend time much in the neighborhood. We went to Muir Woods and he made dinner for us and, or maybe it was a Sunday. And on Monday, she went to work and he went to school, I decided to call and find out where was the gay thing. And so I called the Switchboard, the Lesbian-Gay Switchboard in San Francisco and I asked, Where should I go? And it was a gay man and he said, "Well, honey, what do you want, boys or girls?" And so I said, "Girls." And so he directed me to the corner of 18th and Castro. I was near Market and so he directed me to 18th and Castro, where — the Blue Moon Café? There was a café, a women's café, I think it was called the Blue Moon, and I said, "Where's 18th and Castro?" "Where are you?" And so I told him, and I couldn't believe it. I was a block, I was literally a block and a half away from this place.

So, I mean, that was my honest-to-God real introduction to the gay world in San Francisco. And you know, the Castro itself was, and still is, overwhelmingly a gay male place. And I wasn't used to — I mean, almost all of my experience — NY, almost all of my experience was lesbians, lesbians of color. And the gay men that I knew were Latino gay men. So this was, like, Wow, like Mars. But I went to the café and I started trying to figure out where people went to hang out and where the bars were and stuff like that.

And, you know, I still had it in my head that the direction of my life was to be an antiracist activist who worked in the Latino community. And so I found a job with the League of United Latin American Citizens, where I was hired as a director of counselor education. And it was in the LULAC building, which is on 26th and Folsom, and it pretty much functioned as a Latino community center, which is another thing

I've had connections to all my life, it seems — community centers of some kind or another. And they were managed by LULAC and I worked for the counseling service, but lots of other things happened in that building.

And about three months into the job, the director quit and I was immediately promoted to acting director, which meant that among other things I was part of this council that managed the building. And one of the things they did was they rented space to other organizations. Well, one of the organizations, and I told this story last night — actually just remembered it also for the first time in many years because of the afternoon session — one of the groups that applied for space in the building was a Latino gay group, I think it was GALA, Gay and Lesbian Alliance, or Gay and Lesbian Latino Alliance, something. I don't remember the whole name but it was a gay Latino group that applied for space and this was, like eight men and two women or something like that. And these guys are sitting around just ribald with, like, *maricón*, and jokes and laughing.

And I was just — I was overwhelmed with rage and it wasn't fear, it was rage. And so I listened to it for a while, and then I finally couldn't stand it anymore, and I said, "You know, you're talking in front of a lesbian." And I basically gave them a huge lecture about, How could you do this? I mean, how could people that understand what it feels like to be called a fucking spic and a wetback and everything else, sit here and behave the way that you're behaving about another group of Latino people? At which point I started crying and left the room.

That was my first ever sort of — besides the thing with the Catholic encounter thing — it was my first ever public professional instance of coming out, and of challenging people. And of course, I thought, Well, there goes the job. But it didn't happen. I mean, you know, not all of them were apologetic, but several of them were embarrassed about their behavior, I guess particularly the ones who had begun to be friends. And so it began a process in that agency, of having an open conversation about, What do we do? They eventually rented the space to the group, by the way.

ANDERSON: Did they make it an uncomfortable place for you to work after that?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah. I –

ANDERSON: I don't think you were there very long.

VAZQUEZ: No, I was there for like nine months or something. I didn't last very long. So this was like late '75 into '76, and I decided to quit, is what I decided. And there was also –

ANDERSON: Around this issue?

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VAZQUEZ: Well, it was around this issue and then there was a whole ton of stuff that happened. In fact, my family, my sister was already there. And several months after I moved out, my brother Pete moved out, too. And then George followed, although George only stayed for a little bit. But Pete came and he went to work in one of those residence hotels where you get room and board if you help. And at some point, we decided, you know — there was Pete, there was me and Cathie, my sister Mindy was breaking up with her boyfriend, because it turned out boyfriend didn't have a scholarship in San Francisco. Boyfriend had a boyfriend in San Francisco. Yeah.

ANDERSON: No wonder they didn't offer up too much information.

VAZQUEZ: No, no. And that, I mean, I had just come out to Mindy before I went out there and so then I realized she's going through this with this asshole and you know, it was just — it was weird. So they broke up. And we decided, all of us, to move into a large apartment in Noe Valley on, like, near 24th Street or something like that. Oh, and I think my girlfriend's brother came out, too, Dominic.

ANDERSON: Who was your girlfriend at this time?

VAZQUEZ: Cathie. So Dominic comes out, so it's like this whole family scene. So we move in and you know, it all sort of worked for about, I don't know, two or three months. But, you know, Pete got fired. Mindy quit for God knows what reason. Cathie never did have a job. And all of a sudden, I'm sitting there, like, I remember sitting there at dinner one day, looking around the table, going, What the fuck am I doing? Am I going to take care of five people? I don't think so.

ANDERSON: You already did that.

VAZQUEZ: I already did that. And they were all, like, between 21 and 17 or 18, or something like that. I really was ready to throw up and just like that I said, "That's it, guys. End of the month, everybody out. We're all moving. I'm not doing this anymore." And they're, like — No, seriously. So me and Cathie moved into a studio apartment and my brother went back to wherever, and I don't know what the other people did. But the combination of that and being homesick and in turmoil about being out and what did it mean and I still had no real connection to the gay world because I was busy taking care of family. And so, we decided to go back to New York.

ANDERSON: All of you? Who's we? Do you mean you and Cathie?

VAZQUEZ: Me and Cathie. And I was here for, I don't remember, maybe about three months. Did not work. Because I didn't want to be here and I certainly didn't want to be with my family and, you know, so I went to

— I stayed with my sister Nancy, who lived in Queens at the time. And I went down to Bonnie and Clyde's and, you know, the bars, and sort of had one-night stands with people and was, like, What is this? You know, [what] this gay thing is — I don't understand it.

And I decided, I got to go back to San Francisco. So I got on a Greyhound bus, went back to San Francisco. And the second time that I went back to San Francisco, I actually went to live at the same place as my brother and worked for room and board. And you'd get, in cash, about seven dollars a week or something like that, which gave you enough money to buy a carton of cigarettes and if you pooled your resources, a big jug of bad wine. But you know, we had food and I didn't have to go anywhere. Wherever I went, I walked.

And then, I sort of, over a period of two, three months, really started to lose it, because I — you know, I didn't know where I was going. I didn't know what I wanted to do. You know, I had a master's degree. I was not working. I was waitressing in a hotel, and a city one at that. What the fuck am I doing? So I got progressively worse. I mean, I guess it was depression but it was also sort of a disassociated state where I would walk out the door and go down a block and all of a sudden not know where I was. And at that point, I realized, I really need some help.

So I called the Switchboard again — thank God for the Switchboard — and asked for information about where to go for counseling. And they sent me to the mental health clinic in San Francisco, Operation Concern, which Carole Migden was the founder of. It's been around forever, since at least 1978, '77, '78, which is when this was happening. And I went there and I, you know, I was interviewed. Somebody did an intake interview and they said, "Well, you need some counseling." And I said, "No kidding."

And they said they would set up an appointment with me and I honestly don't remember why I was so insistent but I was, that I wanted to see a lesbian of color, or a third world lesbian. They were not lesbians of color then. They were third world lesbians. And so, they happened to have one. Pat Norman was practicing, not at the clinic but she took referrals from the clinic. She was at the Center for Special Concerns and working for the health department. And I went to see Pat. And you know, Pat's another one of the people in my life that saved my life, because she took me in and she did some fairly traditional one-on-one counseling with me, I don't know, for about four months or so. And I was feeling better.

And I, at that point, by that time, had gotten a part-time job and was collecting unemployment benefits, so I had a little bit more money. I found my own studio apartment, which I loved. I so loved that apartment. It is still my favorite place in San Francisco. It was on Bush Street and you could see the Drake Hotel, the little star from the windows. It was just a great place.

And after about four months or so of doing that fairly traditional kind of counseling, Pat started to schedule my appointments like at 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock. And then after the appointments, she took me out.

She took me to bars. She took me to meetings of community groups and all the third world things that she could think of, and –

ANDERSON: And so you found the gay and lesbian community.

VAZQUEZ: I found the gay and les — she took me to it, and within two or three months of that, I was cured. Really.

ANDERSON: You were isolated.

VAZQUEZ: It turns out I was isolated, and isolation does terrible things to people. And she knew that. And so, I really then quickly began to meet people and to have friends. And Scott's Bar was a place that I spent a lot of time in and sort of through that process, began to meet a group of women of color: Jay Castleberry, Jacque Dupree, Alli Merrero, Sue Rodriguez, who was a boxer. And these girls, they were serious. They were tough, hard-drinking, hard-working, hard-partying tough girls. Alli — motorcycle. And it was interesting, they all had white girlfriends: white, working class, femme girlfriends, which I didn't have one at the time, because at that point, Cathie and I had broken up. Cathie had gone back to New York.

19:10

And back then, I identified as feminist. I mean, this was the interesting piece. And I finally began to have conversations with people who identified as feminist who looked like me and were like me and came from working-class backgrounds and who had a political ideology and way of thinking about themselves as lesbians and as feminists. And two or three of whom totally also identified as butch. So, you know, I was in heaven. They called themselves the Family and they adopted me and I was just fine.

And, uh, and it as through them that I eventually came to be acquainted with Women's Centers — because you know, in my journey to find the women's movement, I kept [saying], like, Well, where is it, you know. And I went to Women's Centers when it was on Brady Street. It was on a small street, Butler Street in San Francisco, in the Mission, and it was two small rooms with like a big stack of newsletters and information, but the phones were ringing. There was one person in the office, nobody's really talking to you. And I'm like, What the fuck, you know.

And so, that clearly wasn't the women's movement. But Dianne Duke and BG — Barbara Nabors-Glass, she was actually the ringleader of this family who was a black lesbian with a child, a butch black lesbian with a child — Nicole, she's just so sweet — who had been caught with like a gram of cocaine and of course spent time for it. And she was –

ANDERSON: What happened to her child, do you know, when she was incarcerated?

VAZQUEZ: She stayed with her friends and they took care of her. I don't know how long how she spent in jail — six months, a year. But she came back and never left her child again. Her child went to college. Her child is an adult now. So they introduced me to feminist thinking, feminist ideas. You know, I actually taught a [class] to white lesbian feminists. [Lesbian Life and Thought] You know, at the time, I was, like, really leery of some of these girls because they went by names like Cedar —

ANDERSON: You're talking about the white women?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, yeah, yeah, the white women. Or Yohembé, which is an African name. I'm like, You know what? If you call yourself Susie, I know who I'm dealing with. But if you're white and you call yourself Yohembé, I don't know what to do with that. Don't do that to me. And they wanted to give me a name and I'm, like, I love my name. What are you, crazy? And I went out with some of them. Cedar: tall, woman of English-German descent, who I had a great time with, I loved her, but she — she was probably the first white lesbian I met that had more sort of lesbian feminist separatist kind of [attitude] and was into this whole sort of nature androgyny kind of thing that I didn't particularly care for.

So that started my involvement with the community, with feminism, and my first sort of activist thing in San Francisco was in 1978. It was, you know, the year of the Briggs Initiative. Harvey Milk had finally gotten elected to office. And, you know, just a huge moment in San Francisco history. And Sally Gearhart was big spokesperson. And I went to a meeting of a political group called Stonewall, and they were among the groups that had stage time, and so they had to pick a speaker. They had this very intense political discussion about who it should be and who it shouldn't be and they all came to the conclusion that it should be a person of color and then, of course, a lesbian of color.

And they agreed that it should be Alli Marrero, who was a Puerto Rican activist that was involved with the club, except that Alli wasn't there that day. [I was] sitting there going, How do you decide to elect someone who isn't here? Who knows if she wants to do this? It's like, you people, you got to think a little bit about what you're doing and what kind of na-na-na, another lecture. And they all agreed, and then they decided I should do it. So, then, I was, like, Well, all right. I actually said, No, I'm going to call Alli. And I called Alli and I said da-da-da-da. And Alli and I agreed that that was a great thing. You go do it.

And so I did. And I had no concept. I had never been to a gay pride thing. And so, there I was. I'm in San Francisco and it's, like, I don't know, half a million, a million people, and I had all my little notes and I'm back stage and, you know, I'm anxious, I'm nervous. I had done speaking before, and I had actually spoken to a fairly large audiences, but never anything like this. And so I'm waiting, and who precedes me on the program are Harvey Milk, followed by Sally Gearhart. I was, you know, 28 or something at the time. I had never been involved in anything like this. I was, like, you know —



ANDERSON: What'd you talk about?

VAZQUEZ: I talked about myself and why it was important for people to be in a place like this and to be out. And I talked about school and kids because a lot of what I had done professionally, in my graduate degree program and in the year that I worked for LULAC, was advocating for Puerto Rican youth and youth of color in general, and education and the importance of all that kind of stuff. And so it all sort of made sense to me. And I don't know what else. I remember those pieces but I don't remember much else. It was incredibly well received but I was literally shaking by the time that I got off that stage. And, you know, I loved it. It was a great moment.

And then, after that, I sort of — the Women's Building thing happened and they bought the building in 1979. I continued to work odd jobs. I worked in the food co-op in the Haight. I lived with some lesbian feminists in some bit apartment in the Haight. I remember a little woman who called herself Blue: Jewish, you know, big red cheeks and curly hair, and she loved to cook and she'd say things like, Food is love.

ANDERSON: Was that a big change for you culturally coming from New York to San Francisco? How did you find that in comparison? You don't get Cedars or Blues —

VAZQUEZ: No, no. It was a huge cultural shift, and some of it I was really intrigued by and I thought it was fun. But some of it I completely distrusted. I mean, I — because, you know, like I said to the woman named Yohembé, you know, I can deal with you as Susie and I sort of know where Susie comes from but I don't know what this Yohembé business is about, why you have to have an African name that belongs to my people, and yet you people are out there doing drums and stuff like that. That doesn't come from your place. What are you doing? I'd rather know about wherever you're from, your Scottish heritage or your whatever heritage, than this. So I mistrusted it.

And it was also largely cultural. There was nobody really talking to me about theory or politics except for my gang, and that didn't happen until the Women's Building got bought and it opened and Jay and Jacque got jobs there. And they got jobs in the Women's Building because San Francisco Women's Centers was the legal entity that bought the building and they were a collective. They were a lesbian feminist collective of mostly white women.

There were two women of color. Tatiana — gosh, I can't remember. But two women of color who were involved with the collective and the rest were white, and two of them, Roma Guy and Dionne Jones, I in time came to adore and became really, really solid friends, allies, family, to each other. But I was, like, Well, whatever, and I didn't have much to do with the building. But Jay and Jacque worked there. Actually, BG also rented a space there and was part of the council that

ran the building and they all said, You need to get a job here. I'm, like, OK, if there is one, let me know.

Well, the job that opened up was not in the building. It was in Women's Centers. I said, "Guys, what do you think about this? I'm not so sure. It's a lot of white women," et cetera, et cetera. They said, We think you should take that job and go spy on them. Just go spy on them and tell us what they're up to, you know, because they're the landlords. And I thought, Well, that's OK, that's a good idea. And I joined Women's Centers as their — actually started working a little bit with them, teaching them Spanish, because they had moved to the Mission and the collective decided they should learn Spanish. They were good white girls.

ANDERSON: Is this the same Women's Centers you went to —

VAZQUEZ: No. Well, OK, yes, it was the same organization. They're the ones who were in that little ratty place. They formed a consortium of women that, in 1978, there was the huge conference on Women and Violence in San Francisco. The process of trying to find a space that could hold that conference was so hard and so difficult for people that they had the conference, but they decided out of that experience that it was really time that there be a women's space in San Francisco, and they set out to create one. So their vision was that Women's Centers would raise the money to put a down payment on the building and do some basic, immediate kind of renovation work, but that people who moved into the building would form a management council that would also function as a collective and Women's Centers would be *one* of those voices, not *the* voice.

ANDERSON: How did they raise the money? Do you know?

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VAZQUEZ: A lot of individual fundraising. I don't think they got much foundation — they may have gotten one or two foundation grants but it was mostly donor work. And, you know, Marya Grahms, Roma Guy, Tracy Gary, the three of them were really the founders of the Women's Building. They led the charge to figure out how to get the money and bring a capital campaign together.

And so they opened, and Women's Centers — the intent was that the building was to be a sponsored project that would eventually spin off on its own. And Women's Centers had a history of doing that. There's virtually no women's organization in the Bay area that doesn't trace its history back to a sponsored project of Women's Centers. That was their primary program and why it was called Women's, apostrophe S, Centers. That was the name of the organization and they're the ones that sponsored the Women's Foundation, the building, and like I said, virtually any women's organization in the Bay area can trace itself back to Women's Centers. And so, they wanted to stay in that business.

I mean, they wanted to continue to sponsor women's projects that would, you know, foster and grow and do their own thing. Except it didn't work. You know, when you have a physical property that becomes a symbol of the community, and people come there for connection and culture and whatever, space, they get attached to it. And so, in the public's mind, in our public's mind, the Women's Building and the Women's Centers were synonymous. So, raising money for two distinct organizations became an issue.

And the other thing that became a huge issue was the Women's Building was predominantly women of color staffed. Women's Centers was predominantly white. We're talking major power struggle — major, major, major power struggle. I was hired as the membership coordinator or something like that at Women's Centers, but as I told you, my lesbian of color feminist friends were in the Women's Building. So there was this huge sort of tug back and forth about the problems of being the, you know, the Women's Centers' white women landlords and here were the peon workers and they didn't have any real power.

And we, in my first year with the Women's Building, we almost didn't make it. We had a fire by arson in like January or something of the first year. We had a bombing. A pipe bomb got thrown into the lobby of the place, went *kaboom* and some Neo-Nazi group claimed credit for it. Who knows who did it, but that's who claimed credit for it. And then we had a month-long bomb threat.

And this is another sort of seminal moment in Carmen's history. We were in the process of trying to figure out what to do about the two collectives. There was movement towards merging the two groups and forming one collective, which meant a new mission and a new set of, you know, whatever, board objectives, and we were in that process while all this violence was also going on. And we decided, all of us — I don't remember at what point we were in the merger — but we decided that we needed to respond, that rather than just kind of whatever, being quiet about it, that we needed a community event to which we invited the press, that said very clearly and very unambiguously that we were there to stay. And no amount of scare tactics was going to, you know, push us out of that place.

And so we organized a community meeting, and what we did is we went and invited as many gay and women's and immigrant and Mission-based organizations, even some of the merchants, to come to this building, the Center, same thing, and show their support for us being there. I don't remember, 200 people, a lot of people showed up to that meeting, and I gave my first speech — first of many, many, many, many. I said, "Women's Building is a family," I think, or "Women's Building a family place." And in it, I talked about the many ways in which women are violated — physically, emotionally and economically and sexually, and this is just another violation that we have to stand up to. And John Lennon had been killed, and I referenced John Lennon and his dreams, and I referenced my father, because he also was a man who had experienced an enormous amount of violence in his life and — and

I don't know. The speech — it was published in *Coming Up*, which later became *Frontiers* or some other magazine in San Francisco — but it really sort of set a tone for the Women's Building and a progressive set of politics, and me as a leader in that mix.

And so that was the beginning. And you know, Dionne and Roma Guy, Dionne Jones and Roma Guy from what was Women's Centers but eventually became just the Women's Building Collective, became good friends and they really began to introduce me to feminist theory and thinking and politics and it was a critically important part of my political development, both of them. But also there was an organization called Third World Women's Alliance that was a tenant in the building which eventually became the Alliance Against Women's Oppression after a long sort of political analysis of what they were doing and an understanding that women of color and white women needed to be allies in every conceivable way, and so that struggle had to be an alliance of all women.

ANDERSON: And you became involved in that organization?

VAZQUEZ: Well, Roma and Dionne had friends and they talked, and that organization sponsored — they were part of the Line of March. You know the Line of March?

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ANDERSON: Explain it.

VAZQUEZ: The Line of March was a communist organization whose primary program and project was to train activists in Marxist-Leninist analysis. And the Third World Women's Alliance, later the Alliance Against Woman's Oppression, was sort of their women's cell. They did similar kind of teaching and training but with a sort of feminist — incorporating feminism into it. And Roma and Dionne knew them and they must have been involved in some early study things that the Alliance did.

But then, it was about 1983 or something like that, Roma and Dionne were actively involved in the MLEP, Marxist-Leninist Education Project. They were taking a course, and the course was a — they had a six-week course that was sort of crash intensive in Marxist-Leninist theory (unclear), and organizing. And then, if you passed and were interested, then there was a year course. And the year course was fairly intensive little bit of business where you spent probably six hours in a class setting on Sundays and then you spent about another four hours in a study-buddy group thing during the week — for a year.

So, this, then, is where my analytical skills [came from], in terms of thinking strategically about, What's the problem? What are the material conditions that created and sort of fester that problem? What are the forces out there? Who's for? Who's against? That kind of thinking. At some level — my experiences in New York and with the Puerto Rican independence people and with the Young Lords and campus activism — I'd experienced and done some of that, but I'd done it more organically

as part of the organizing work, not as something that was actually political theory.

And so, I became involved with the Third World Women's Alliance and took the MLEP course. In my capacity as the — oh, they didn't have directors in those days, they had coordinators, and I was coordinator of fundraising and administration for the Building, but it meant that I was out a lot and that I was a spokesperson for the Building a lot, and you know, doing a lot of rabble-rousing and speeches, but beginning to put out an analysis of race and class and sexuality and gender that was formed, really, and that was the crucible for — a lot of my thinking and writing and speaking got formed in that place. I mean, I was involved with the Women's Building for 11 years, from 1980 to 1991, four of them as a staff person, seven of them as a board member. That was a long, long involvement with a core of women. They weren't all the same women. Some people left and came, but there was a core that remained involved and I really grew tremendously from that involvement.

And we had crazy conflicts. It was a collective, you know, you had to make decisions as a collective, which I never was happy with.

ANDERSON: Why?

VAZQUEZ: Because there's an authoritarian streak in me. I'm the oldest daughter. I'm like, You know what? I don't believe in whatever. But I lived with it and I came to know and value the importance of bringing a group of people who were working together to consensus — or at least with as much unity as they could attain.

And I remember that the times when we tried to break away from that really felt terrible, because — and there were two — one instance in particular was huge. It was an SM group, Samoia, Gayle Rubin's group wanted to meet at the building, and you know, there was an awful lot of people in the community who felt this was anti-feminist, that they shouldn't be there. And the collective met for I can't tell you how many hours, and we could not come to consensus on this, because there were some of us in the room, myself included, who felt like, You know what? I don't know what you're talking about. This is sex. This is not — this is like what people decide to do in the privacy of whatever. And if people, you know, if people want to have an opportunity in a public place to talk about it, they should have that opportunity, you know? This is a democracy, for God's sake. What are you talking about?

Even though I completely and totally related to and understood the feelings that some people — and I shared some of those feelings — of walking into a bar and seeing a black woman with a collar on being led around by a white woman. It's like, You know what? I don't think so. This really — I can't go there. And could I go into — you know, could I engage in sadomasochism, particularly if there's that sort of a racial difference? I don't know.

But intellectually and politically, I felt that the collective had no business saying no. And we couldn't come to a consensus and then at some point, somebody said, Well, can we at least try and do a majority thing here? And we did, and the minute we did it we were like, Oh — and we undid it, because we couldn't live with it. And I think, in the end, they didn't meet there, or they didn't meet there then.

ANDERSON: Did you also feel — I mean, that brings up the issue of the sort of the sex wars. I mean, this predates the sex wars?

VAZQUEZ: A little bit.

ANDERSON: We're in the later '80s, but did you also then feel, in terms of feminist collectives like that one, any hostility around butchness, and gender expression?

VAZQUEZ: Well, yeah, totally. I mean, it was a mixed bag in the building, because the people in the building were pretty much on the left end of the spectrum. And on the left end of the spectrum there was a lot of support for whatever. I mean, people being more masculine than not. But in the sort of more middle-class, I don't know, Artimus Café world, there was, like, you know — and to actually present as butch was not a happy thing in San Francisco.

48:27

It was like, you know, emulating the patriarchy, being a man. Why do you want to be a man? In the meantime, they were all walking around in flannel shirts and combat boots. And I'm like. So your version of it is OK but because I actually tie my ties, you know, and wear men's suits and men's garments, undergarments, then somehow that's different? Why is that? You know, and I actually, in order to survive in that context, I changed. I mean, I sort of moved away from the suits and ties and their more masculine presentation and adopted a more hippie sort of presentation — vest and jeans and shit like that. Every once in a while, I'd put on a tie, but —

ANDERSON: Did you grow your hair?

VAZQUEZ: A little bit, yeah, down to my neck, although it was short on top. But I was unhappy, and I was incredibly unhappy with what I felt were real dictates about how I had to be and, you know, in the midst — the other thing that happened to me is that I began to be aware — I mean, I knew femme from New York but it was hard to know femme in this sort of context. But at the Women's Building, one of my coworkers, Jamie Campbell's sister, Leslie Kirk Campbell, became a volunteer to edit our newsletter, and then I knew femme. She's like, oh —

ANDERSON: Describe her.

VAZQUEZ:

Oh, my God. About five foot four, brown, like reddish-chestnut hair, hazel eyes, thin — just gorgeous. She was a knockout, and you know, I remember people going, Shit, Jamie, where have you been keeping your sister? That kind of stuff. And she was straight. And so, you know, people kind of like, you know, that's that. And I was not convinced that that was that, and I went out with Leslie and just fell madly in love.

I mean, she, to this day, is someone that I really have a particular and special relationship to, because Leslie was the person in San Francisco that I could reconnect that sense of femme and butch to again. And because she's a writer, so she really stoked the creative part of me as a writer, but also sexually, I mean. I have never in my entire life had a more creative sexual life than I had with Leslie. It just was — because she incorporated fantasy into our sex lives, I mean — and danger. Just kind of — it wasn't, like, always, but there'd be these moments up in, oh, Serenisea. We had rented a cabin in the winter and it was cold and raining, but it was terribly romantic at the same time. And we were making love and she took a knife and asked me to, like, sort of, you know, caress her breast with it. And I was, like, Fuck. It was just a huge turn-on because, you know, the woman just basically gave me power of life and death. I mean, she was — and those are the kinds of things that happened with Leslie. And so it was a lot of magical realism, almost. We'd be going up to Napa Valley in the fog and the goats are bleating, and you know, it was just really magical.

She's also who, for six months, when I resigned from the Women's Building, she and I were living together at that point and we swapped our apartment for a house in Navarro for six months. And for six months, I was, for one thing, not working, responsible for anything. I was — for three of those months, I was there alone and Leslie would come back to the city to work. It was — I mean, the openness that happened during that time and the creativity that welled up — and also, the confronting myself and being alone and trying to figure out who am I when I'm not taking care of someone, when I'm not leading someone, when I'm just kind of here with music and dogs and I have freaking loads of acres and a goat named Ranunkula —

A goat named Ranunkula who got attacked by some nasty weasely dog and got a huge puncture. And this is an old goat, and we called the vet and the vet came and the vet said, "Oh, she's going to get an infection." And so, we said, "Can't you save her?" And he said, "Yeah, but it's going to require some nursing." We were like, What? He said, "Well, basically, you have to give her a shot twice a day in the rump." So Leslie and I had to learn how to talk to this goat, how to love this goat, how to stroke this goat and give her her shot. It was really — and she survived and she lived for another two years, that old goat.

So I adore Leslie and, and broke up with Leslie when I met Marcie. But — do you want to stop?

ANDERSON:

Yeah, well, you can finish that sentence.

VAZQUEZ: Well, but, I mean, Marcie was like the vehicle for getting out of the relationship, as it always is. But the thing that Leslie and I could not overcome was class. I mean, you know, there was always this other stuff that was phenomenal, sex and fantasy and creativity, but she came from not a middle-class but a very upper-middle-class [family]. Her father was the son of a banker and worked for the State Department. Her mother was a working-class Jewish woman but the money came from Dad and, you know, and Dad and Mom didn't particularly care for Leslie hanging out with this butch, this Puerto Rican working-class butch. And so, the class things were huge between us, and Leslie also — this was her first relationship with a woman. She couldn't make it. She just could not get to a place of making a commitment. Of course, the moment we broke up and I got involved with Marcie, she wanted to have my children and live with me forever, but that didn't happen, so.

ANDERSON: Did she remain with women, do you know?

VAZQUEZ: She did for a while and had actually a long-term relationship with another woman. Immediately after me, she went to Nicaragua, met a guy. They did it. She got pregnant. So she had a son, and in her book, she talks about being in Nicaragua, heartbroken and — dusty and heartbroken, having lost the love of her life. Go on, Leslie. And meeting this guy, and [her son] Orlando is now 16, maybe even going on 18 — 16, I think he is. And so, that was Leslie.

57:39
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END TAPE 3



## TAPE 4

ANDERSON: So, let's just go back and talk a little bit more about the Women's Building. And it doesn't even have to be so confined to just the Women's Building, but just with its community of San Francisco in the '80s [and] in the Women's Building particularly, what were the conversations around race and class? We talked a little bit about the gender expression and the hostility that you felt — I'm assuming it was from white — you said it was more middle-class.

VAZQUEZ: More white, middle-class, lesbian feminists.

ANDERSON: So, I guess there were two questions. One is, Did you also feel that from women of color, the antagonism towards butchness or butch-femme?

VAZQUEZ: No, I did not. Women of color — with very few exceptions, the women of color that worked at the Building were largely working-class women. The exceptions were lesbian feminists from other countries, from Peru and Argentina, who worked at the Building, who did come from more middle-class backgrounds but had an analysis of race and class in their take on feminism that was different. I mean, because — I don't know why — because third world women had a different analysis that they brought with them to the experience at the Women's Building. But even they, who were more — I don't even know that I would say androgynous, they just had their own kind of unique styles — but they also were not hostile towards a gender expression that was different. And you know, some of them were clearly identified as femme and liked it, and some were more in the androgynous mode. I was probably the most butch-identified of all of them, but I did not — no, the hostility definitely came from white feminists.

And the race and class conversations at the building, they were continuous. They really were. They imbued just about everything we did. You know, the discussions that we had around Samois were a lot based on the different perspectives that people had based on their race and their class.

The other huge controversy I remember at the Women's Building was when policewomen who had formed a support group, I guess, asked to meet at the Women's Building. And you know, it was interesting because even though they're very different examples, there was some consistency in what the conflict was about. And the conflict was about a fundamental kind of vision of the Women's Building as a safe haven, as a safe place for women to come, all women to come. And in the case of Samois, people felt that having women in there who embraced sadomasochism made it unsafe for people who saw sadomasochism as a sort of emulation of slavery. And in the case of the policewomen, people felt, You know what? They may be working-class women and maybe even most of them are women of color, but how are you going to

have people who are illegal immigrants come into the building and see SFPD meeting on the second floor and feel safe?

So that was the nature of the controversy and the conversation that we were having. You know, it wasn't about, Oh, they work for the police department — we didn't care, necessarily. It was more about, What's it going to say to the safety of immigrant women who come here seeking a safe place to stay? And Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who obviously were huge champions of women being out in their professions and figuring out how to create greater visibility for lesbians in everything — in politics, in the police department if that's where they were — just could not see that. They just could not see that. They were aghast at the notion that a women's organization, many of whom were lesbians, for whom it took great courage to be out, should not be allowed to meet in the Women's Building. And you know, the discussions went on for a long time.

I think, eventually, they did meet in the Women's Building, but it took a lot of struggle to get to a place where we could create some comfort around it. And I forget what the actual resolution was. Maybe they didn't say SFPD, maybe they said something else and knew that it was, you know, this support group for lesbians in the police department.

ANDERSON: What was your position on it, do you remember?

VAZQUEZ: Oh, I was on the side that they shouldn't meet there per the reasons that the rest of us, the other lesbians of color, were saying, we couldn't have this — which was different from my position on Samois. I guess at some level, I — the Samois to me was about sex, and not about — I don't know, not about slavery. Whereas the policewomen's situation, I really felt and knew the experience of being — not an immigrant, because I wasn't an immigrant, Puerto Ricans are citizens, but a migrant and an experience like an immigrant in a new country and how scary that is and how much you crave places where you're going to — you know, safe houses. So, those are some of the discussions.

And then there were other discussions in the process of trying to merge the two organizations, there was overt discussion about the power that white women had, that Women's Centers as the sort of owning entity had, that we did not have. And you know, the decision to merge meant that the collective of Women's Centers would then expand and that the women working at the Building, that we were all the owners. And that was actually a great decision. It took many, many, many meetings. Actually Roma Guy bet me that people would not move their desks from one place to the other — bet me a dinner. And I won.

ANDERSON: It really diversified that board, didn't it?

VAZQUEZ: It completely diversified that board and changed the direction and history of the Women's Building completely. I mean, the Women's Building increasing became a place where women's solidarity, Central

American solidarity organizations met, where, you know, forums on Palestinian women and the conflict between Palestine and Israel could be discussed. You know, and before that, I mean, (unclear) were the staple, not discussions about what was happening to Palestine, in the Palestine-Israeli conflict or what was going on in Central America. So in terms of the kind of programming that the Building itself did, the cultural events that happened at the Center, the Building became imbued with a diverse multicultural life that didn't exist there before that merger.

ANDERSON: Did you also make it mandate that the board, for example, needed to have at least 50 percent women of color?

VAZQUEZ: Seventy-five percent. Yes, we made it a mandate that 75 percent of the people on the board had to be — or employed, not necessarily on the board — had to be women of color. And it was so for at least for as long as I was there. And you know, when I retired from the Women's Building in 1991 from the board, they decided to turn it into a celebration and a fundraiser and a community celebration. And first, they had a small kind of private event where they did mean things to me and whatever, roasted me, and that was a lot of fun. But then they followed that with a community celebration that actually took place not at the Building but at Mission High School, because they had a big auditorium and it was a huge celebration of women of color. And it was in my honor, but it was in celebration of women of color. It was just a tremendously beautiful event, where Jay and Jacque sang and Barbara Nabors-Glass came back to do a little testimonial and they had other cultural things.

It was just — and I got to do this big good-bye speech that is still one of my favorite speeches. I remember talking in the speech about the role of women of color in the women's movement and the necessity of the leadership of women of color to a progressive women's movement, because I have no illusions that all of the women's movement is progressive but the progressive wing of the women's movement is one that needs to be led by women of color, but not because we're innately born to lead, although some of us think that, but because of the lived experience of race and class that so many of us bring to feminism that enriches feminism.

And certainly, the Women's Building experience was that, a lot that. You know, the Women's Building was the reason for Somos Hermanas, which is the Central American solidarity organization that existed for, I don't know, about six or eight years and did a lot of great work, material aid work and political education work. The Women's Building was the reason for Dynamics of Color, which was a series of conferences that — first there were two conferences that were just for women of color that spawned women of color groups, an API group and an African American group and a Latino group. Coming Out and Coming Home, those things were called. And they were great, and provided women of

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color an opportunity to come together as women of color that didn't happen, or happened very rarely — and have an analysis and have cultural celebration together. And that led to a conference called Dynamics of Color, which was a conference for all women, but focused on racism and really took a long, hard look at the ways in which white women understood their own racism, trying to figure out how to create alliance between white women and women of color.

The Women's Building spawned a silly thing called LAFA, Lesbian Agenda For Action. There as a conference either called Lesbian Agenda For Action or I forget what the name of it was, but the conference was specifically created, and LAFA existed for whatever it did to figure out how to support the involvement of lesbians in political life. So, you know, Carole Migden and Roberta Achtenberg and Barbara Cameron, and a ton of people who eventually did wind up in public office were a part of that effort.

So it was, for all of the '80s and into the '90s, a really critical site for the development of the women's movement in San Francisco that had a strong foundation in a progressive race-class analysis, and that's a good thing.

ANDERSON: What about the question of lesbianism? Was it ever a conflict, or was it ever a similar mandate, in terms of staff report, that certain representation had to come from the lesbian community?

VAZQUEZ: No.

ANDERSON: There was never any tension or conflict between straight women and gay women around the Women's Building?

VAZQUEZ: Not really. I mean, straight women — there were some straight women that worked at the building, very few. And straight women were largely either tenants or, you know, groups that met on a regular basis, like Solidarity groups or, you know, Salvadorian women groups or Nicaraguan women's groups. I don't really recall that there was a whole lot of tension between lesbians and straight women. The tensions were between white women and women of color.

ANDERSON: So, what do you think — you were director for which years?

VAZQUEZ: 1980 to 1984. I left in 1984. I actually laid myself off.

ANDERSON: Because?

VAZQUEZ: Well, because we going through an economic — a really difficult economic time, and that wasn't just me, but a number of us just opted to go on unemployment and continued working. But like halfway through that, I decided I really just needed to *leave* leave. I was tired and I needed to leave. And this is when I went to Navarro with Leslie and

found a goat and all of that. And I just was tired. It had been a long haul, I guess, and I needed a break and I took it.

When I came back from that break is when I was invited to participate in Somos Hermanas. The Alliance Against Women's Oppression put together a delegation of — I think it was 18 of us, and I was invited. Marcie Gallo was a part of that delegation, Loretta Ross, Linda Burns. It was a great, great bunch of women and, like, not half and half but maybe ten straight and eight lesbian. I mean, it was a really well-integrated group of women — predominately women of color, but some white women. Roma Guy was a part of that delegation.

And the point of the delegation was to go to Nicaragua and experience firsthand what feminists in Nicaragua were doing, feeling, thinking about the revolution, about the Sandinista government, and the campaign that was underway in Nicaragua to educate — you know, the literacy campaign, the inoculation campaign. There was an enormous amount of work that had to be done in a very poor country to bring it up to some sort of decent standard of living and they were fully engaged — women were fully engaged in that work. And —

ANDERSON: What was the impact of that trip on your life?

VAZQUEZ: Oh, my God. Many, many, many-fold — deep impact. On a political level, first, it finally brought the sort of Latina activist part of me, the socialist, communist part of me and the lesbian part of me all together. It just integrated all of that in a living, joyful, experience. And you know, and that was about being in a country that had had a successful revolution, where women were leaders. I mean, Comandante Dora Maria Tellez — oh, my God. She did not come out to us as a lesbian, but several of the women came out after the meeting wanting her baby, I'll tell you that. You know, it was just phenomenal to be in an environment like that and to be embraced by them.

And it was interesting to me because they embraced us as allies, you know, as American allies, as women, and I really — I had long conversations with some of these women about being a lesbian and what it meant and they were curious and they were — their framework was often about, Well, of course, we don't, you know, discriminate against homosexuals. We don't discriminate against drug users or prostitutes. Wait, wait, wait — not exactly the same thing.

ANDERSON: Any of you sickies.

VAZQUEZ: Yeah, any of you sickies are welcome in the revolution as long as you work. So, I mean, we were having those discussions, but we were having them in a context of deep respect and you know, lots of rum and dancing, and so that made it easier, for sure. But they were wanting to learn and they were wanting to know, Well, how isn't it like prostitution, or whatever. And so, on a political level, it was just a huge leap for me, that integration of all of those things.

And on a personal level, this is where I met Marcie and it is the wildest, most romantic kind of scene you can imagine. We were in a country at war. We were, you know, up 18 hours or more, 20 hours a day doing visits and learning and hearing all this stuff. And I — she presented as bisexual. She also presented as living with a roommate, someone who was actually well-known in San Francisco, Esta Soler, who was human rights commissioner or something. She was a big deal in San Francisco. And you know, Marcie said she had a roommate named Esta and I said, “Well, that’s nice.” And, you know, lesbians have roommates. It’s not, like, why should I not think that this was anything but that.

Of course, I was involved in a relationship but, you know, I was smitten pretty much immediately when I met Marcie — her passion, her Italianness, her — all of it. She was immediately drawn, too. And given the class struggles that I had with Leslie, this was like, Oh my God, there’s somebody I can — you know, that talks my language, that — you know, Italian/Puerto Rican — not the same thing, but very close, you know, big families, lots of passion, lots of oomph, working-class. And so I fell in love, and I kind of — I mean, I knew that but I sort of had to lead up to it somehow.

And I remember, the thing that sort of finally turned it over for me was we were — our Nicaraguan host, one of those nights, had a party. They thought it would be a good idea to invite another delegation of Cuban musicians, men, to come and we’d have a party, and we did. You know, Nicaraguan rum is among the best in the world. We were just having a great time, and Lucrecia Bermudez, who worked at the Women’s Building when I worked there and was on this delegation, and I decided to dance together, and the men thought, Well, that’s just wrong, and came to offer to help us out here. And Lucrecia and I looked at each other. I mean, Lucrecia’s a butch, too, but whatever. And [we] said, No, thank you. And we danced. And so, then, it was clear women were going to dance.

I went over to Ms. Marcie and said, “Would you dance?” and she did and we danced right off the floor into the woods and had wild, you know, making out sessions that just didn’t stop for twelve years. And you know, I was very much still under the impression that I was dealing with someone who was single. And so, I just pursued the thing to the hilt, and you know, we had a wild time. It was just — there was one night where on another visit, we were sitting out in a garden of sorts on a bench making out and all of a sudden, we felt this tap on our shoulders and it was this guard with, like, you know, an MK thing, rifle. It was, like, Oh God. And he said to us, “You know, it could be dangerous out here. Perhaps you want to go inside” — or something like that, he said in Spanish. Whew.

There was a night when we went to a village and we were actually hosted by families in the village and they, you know, gave up one of their beds. It was a single bed. There were bed bugs in that thing, but it was the first opportunity that we had to consummate the relationship, so

to speak — I mean, within the limits of a single bed and a whole family that's listening. It was very quiet. And so we did. And you know, I was laying there in bed and there's like, gunshots outside.

Talk about loving in the war years. It just doesn't get more intense than that. And so, it was an intense coming together. All comings together are intense, but on this delegation, you know, in a war zone, it was just unbelievable.

ANDERSON: How long was your trip there?

VAZQUEZ: About ten days. And on the way — when we came home, I did not want to go to Leslie. I did not want her to go, and I didn't think she had to go to Esta. And somebody — we didn't even plan it — somebody had planned to pick us up and take us to our respective homes, and we declined the ride and we took a cab. And we had been drinking the whole flight. We were dirty. We had been going for I don't know how many hours, and we didn't even know where we were going.

ANDERSON: Yeah? Where'd you take the cab to?

VAZQUEZ: He took us to some hotel. We just said, Take us to a hotel. And he did. And you know, after ten days of cold showers and not a whole lot of amenities, it was heaven to be in a king or queen bed and a big bathroom with as much water, hot water, as we wanted. And then we really —

ANDERSON: And then you had to go home.

VAZQUEZ: And then we had to go home, and we did. And it was wild — those kinds of things are. It was painful for both of us, actually. And this was the fall of 1984, '85? Yeah, fall of '85. And it would be another year before Marcie and I started living together, maybe more than a year. You know, her relationship with Esta was a longstanding one. I think they'd been together eight years. And then, so, finally, when I got back, I realized, because she had told me at some point — I went, Ah, fuck — you know that roommate? Not exactly. And so, so it took a year of whatever, going through the very, very difficult process of breaking up.

And in the middle of that time, I was invited to go to another delegation. I was invited to go on a Ford delegation to the Women's World Conference in Nairobi. And I went. And did not fall in love again. I guess twice in year would've been much, although it was a phenomenal, another sort of mind-boggling experience of — so, twice in one year, I was outside of the United States context. We're talking about feminism and race and class and all the rest of it, and it really, it was great for me to be exposed to the women of the world, who — you know, for whom, by the way, class was elevated way above race. I mean, in Africa, African women would look at us like, You're crazy to talk about women of color. What color? And race was understood

within the context of colonialism. But the central conflict was class, you know. And that was a very different sort of way for me to look at and understand my own struggle and the women's movement and –

ANDERSON: And you were already thinking of yourself as a socialist by this time?

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VAZQUEZ: Yeah, yeah. Well, I had been thinking of my — I actually thought of myself as a socialist since I was in college, but I now thought of myself really more as a communist, and I still do. I mean, I've never — McCarthy would've appreciated this — I've never formally been part of the Party. The Line of March dissolved as an entity before I formally became a member, but how I work and think and my political vision of economic justice and a more equitable distribution of wealth and the necessity to change governments so that government is actually a vehicle for ensuring the survival of people rather than a vehicle for stealing money out of their pockets, is something that's been with me for a very long time but got honed and deepened by the experiences of the Line — by the training of the Line of March and by the experiences of Nicaragua and Nairobi.

I actually went back to Nicaragua another, a second time, with just a couple of people to do follow-up, material aid work, and remained involved with Somos Hermanas as a group doing education in the United States, probably for about six years.

ANDERSON: Was that ever employment for you, Somos Hermanas?

VAZQUEZ: No. It was just — no.

ANDERSON: OK. So, after Nicaragua and Nairobi, then you began working with Community United Against Violence [CUAV]?

VAZQUEZ: That is correct. You've got the chronology right. After 1986, I got involved with — well, I needed a job, and I — the experience, now it had been two years since I'd been at the Women's Building. I sort of knew that I did not want to be the primary person responsible for fundraising or administration — not what I liked. I liked program work. I liked organizing work. I liked political work.

So, a position came open with Community United Against Violence in San Francisco and I grabbed it. And spent — how long was I with them, two years? Two years, I guess. I went to the Health Department in 1988. But the two years at Community United Against Violence were another evolution. I mean, I went from working pretty much exclusively in a women's movement, sort of, environment to working in the lesbian-gay, what was then the lesbian-gay, starting to become lesbian-gay-bisexual — still not transgender — but that movement. And that was another sort of rude awakening, because now, I'd gone through the struggles with white feminists and had some measure of, not comfort,



but ability to sort of deal with that. And now I was in an environment where I had to deal with white men, white gay men.

ANDERSON: Up until this point, is your social cultural world really oriented around women?

VAZQUEZ: Yeah.

ANDERSON: So that you're not even socializing with gay men?

VAZQUEZ: No. Every once in a while, you know, there'd be some sweet gay man that was, I don't know, connected with the Building or we'd meet somewhere, or who were personal friends of Leslie's, but for the most part, my social and political work life up until then was women. So this was my first, sort of, foray into the world of mixed genders. And it was hard. I mean, Diane Christensen is a young dyke who ran Community United Against Violence and was savvy in the political — you know, in the electoral politics kind of sense, and I wasn't quite so much. I think I said yesterday that the deaths of the Kennedys and King and Malcolm X sort of really took me away from electoral politics as a place where I saw any possibility for hope or change. And so, that was also new. I was beginning to — I mean, I had to deal with electoral politics because CUAV's funding came from the city, so we had to figure that out.

And also, at that time, my friend Barbara Cameron — may she rest in peace, Barbara passed away a couple of years ago — Barbara was deeply involved in the parade thing, the Lesbian, Gay Freedom Day Parade and celebration. And she was also deeply involved in the Alice B. Toklas Club. So Barbara — oh, God bless Barbara. I loved Barbara Cameron. Barbara Cameron and I became friends, I don't even know how we met, but we loved each other right away and we became friends. And she's her own Indian version of butch. And she had a girlfriend, Robin, who was very much a femme. And Robin and Barbara, you know, I got to know them. They were crazy. They had, like, 50 million cats and dogs and it was just like, Oh, Lord — because I'm allergic to cats.

But anyway, I got to be friends with them and we hung out for a year and Barbara started to involve me in the Alice B. Toklas politics business and in the parade business and I got an award from Alice B. Toklas. Of course, Barbara made that happen, but you know. So anyway, we were friends and Robin and her then drifted apart, broke up, and, I don't know, about six months after they broke up, I was in a bar and there was Robin and, I don't know. She was nice. And I was in this period of transition between girlfriends and whatever.

ANDERSON: Marcie still trying to leave Esta?

VAZQUEZ: Marcie's still trying to leave Esta and I'm sort of trying to figure it out and trying to be patient. And Robin and I — nothing really happened

between Robin and I and nothing of a sort of sexual nature, but it was a huge sort of flirtation and attraction and maybe some making out. Anyway, I didn't think much of it. I figured, Well, they broke up.

Well, Barbara was beside herself. I mean, she was really hurt. She was furious. I had betrayed her. And so she wasn't talking to me. I'm like, Barbara, we're going to talk. I mean, you left her, or she left you, what? And so, Barbara had a dinner party. One of the things Barbara Cameron was very famous for was fabulous big old sprawling dinner parties with lots and lots of food, fried bread, and lots and lots to drink. Anyway, so I went and I went with my friend Carlita Martinez, a butch carpenter out in San Francisco, and you know, and at some point, finally Barbara challenged me. I said, "To what?" I said, "I guess Carlita's going to have to be my second," because she's stronger. But she just wanted to have it out, and we sat there and had it out, and you know, she accused me of this, that, and the other thing. I had to explain, Look, nothing happened. I mean, it was just — whatever. So, anyway. Barbara Cameron. We got over it.

And fortunately, Barbara met Linda, fell in love, and that was the end of that. And Barbara and I remained really close friends until she died. I mean, when I moved from San Francisco, I wasn't in touch as much, but in the years that we lived together in San Francisco, it was an awful lot of time that I spent with Barbara. Football games — we went to see the 49ers together. I mean, it doesn't get much better than that. And Superbowl parties.

And politics. A lot, lot of politics. You know, those years at CUAV and with Barbara — because, I mean, the Alice B. Toklas Club obviously also was a milieu with some lesbians but a lot of white men, and you know, I have to credit Barbara with sort of not only introducing me to that world but insisting that I had to come there and help her, and that you can't change the movement if we're not in there changing it and participating in it. And even though it was hard — and it was harder with the men than it was with the women — that this is what we needed to do, that if women were going to get anywhere politically, we somehow had to work with the men.

ANDERSON: Describe then one of those meetings at CUAV, Community United Against Violence, or the Toklas Club. What kind of conflicts would happen?

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VAZQUEZ: Well, here's an example of Community United Against Violence conflict. There was a mayor's race. Art Agnos-[Michael] Hennessey and the board of CUAV was in Hennessey's pocket. I guess he was a sheriff and I think the funding for CUAV came to the Office of Criminal Justice and anyway — which meant that the director had a big investment in sort of supporting Hennessey. And I was a political activist with the Alice B. Toklas Club. This was wrong of me to have done but I did it anyway. I gave my name in a political ad in support of Art Agnos and I — it was my name as an individual — there were all

this sort of disclaimers about — but I worked for Community United Against Violence, and so that put the director in an awkward position. And she damn near fired me over it.

I actually quit Community United Against Violence not too long after that. But I had to have a discussion with not only her but members of the board. And it was just the most arrogant, you-don't-know-what-you're-doing kind — I mean, it was a discussion that really had no starting point, because I didn't know what I was doing. I was wrong. How dare I? That kind of a discussion. And, um, I was angry enough that I quit before I could be fired — which completely freaked Marcie out because, you know, it meant that I had no income, and maybe not even unemployment. It was, like, You what? I fuckin' quit. That's what I did. Anyway, so that's one example of it.

And then, there was also sort of, in terms of program, I'm trying to figure out — one of the things that I did at Community United Against Violence was, there was another project called, um — let me back up. Part of my job was to figure out what kind of violence is happening, who's doing it, and then, based on that, what kind of responses, what kind of community organizing responses do we come up with to deal with it. And the statistics were overwhelming. You know, they were, like, 80 percent of the assailants involved in anti-gay and lesbian incidents were under 18 and the overwhelming majority of them were black and Latino kids.

ANDERSON: They were the perpetrators?

VAZQUEZ: Perpetrators. The majority of the victims were white men. So, what kind of a program are you going to come up with to counter that? And so, there was another program called, I think the Human Rights Campaign? It was the Human Rights something. Hank Wilson and Tom Ammiano, actually, both of whom were teachers, I think, created a project. And Hank was also one of the founders of Community United Against Violence — both white men. They created a project that trained volunteers to go into the high schools to talk about lesbian, gay — just existence, to sort of barely start to humanize us and to give kids an opportunity to know us, to talk with us, et cetera. That project, because it was all volunteer-run and Tom — you know, neither of them had the time — was about to shut down.

And so, I talked to the director about the possibility of taking that project on and developing it as a CUAV project and developing a speaker's bureau, training people, sending people into the schools. And it was a great project. And you know, I felt strongly that I had to figure out how to recruit people of color into this project. And it's never easy to recruit people of color into anything, especially when it's a white-identified organization. But it's harder when the people you are working for are like, What do you need? We've got a hundred volunteers here. Let's just send them into the schools. And so, those are the kinds of

things I faced at Community United Against Violence that made it difficult. (to her dog Bailey) Excuse me. Go to your place. Go. He's just going to whine.

ANDERSON: Will he understand that we'll break in ten minutes? Ten minutes.

VAZQUEZ: Ten minutes, Bailey. Go, go lie down. Look, he understood.

ANDERSON: And yet, your trajectory from this point on really is in the gay and lesbian movement. So, despite the fact that this posed a lot of challenges, it becomes your new home?

VAZQUEZ: Right. It did become my new home because, you know, at Community United Against Violence, when I resigned, it was another sort of crisis moment in my life, because I went, OK, it's been, I think at that point, nine years or so that I'd been employed and working in a gay world. And now, it was 1980 whatever it was — '88? or '87 or something like that, and I was on a job search, and what was I going to do? Was I going to go be a lesbian? Was I going to go wear a tie? Was I going to go — I was certainly never going to put on a skirt, but you know, how was my résumé going to look? What kind of jobs was I going to look for? And I was actually pretty freaked out. I thought, I don't know what other kind of work I can do. I don't know if I'll be invited to do any other kind of work.

And it was a really interesting process, because in the end I decided, You know what? If I can't be out wherever it is that I am, I'm going to be so miserable that I probably won't want to be there. So, I made a decision first that I would list my, you know, work and community history for exactly what it was and not doctor it and let the chips fall where they may. And I set out to find work. And what happened was that Gray Panthers offered me a job, the National Network, National Immigrant Rights Network offered me a job. These were all, you know, completely straight organizations. I came very close to a job with the American Friends Service Committee. And my sexual orientation was not an issue in any of those scenarios. There was actually another job where I was brought back for a second interview and it was a job working with kids, because of my counseling background and stuff like that.

And so I realized, Well, you know, I can do this. And I decided to take the job with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. And it was a challenge, because it was an ED job. The first ED — you know, they had a volunteer board and so they had to be developed. I had to organize a conference and I had to raise money. And you know, about six months into it, I was, like, Oh, I knew I didn't want to be an ED.

ANDERSON: Yeah, two years ago, you said —

VAZQUEZ: I knew that. Now, why did I want to do that again? So I was unhappy and looking, but in this process of looking for work, Pat Norman, who had saved my life several years before and had moved on to become Coordinator of Lesbian/Gay Health Services, resigned. So then several people said, "Huh." And they called me and said, Why don't you think about this? and I said, "Really?" And so, I eventually applied and then they said, Oh, we didn't have a big enough pool — blah, blah, blah.

So, you know, I went on to do the work with the Immigrant Rights Network and about six months into the job, I got a call from the health department. They were ready to open the position again. So I went and applied and had some political strings pulled. I mean, I got a letter of recommendation from Harry Britt and political people that mattered, and I got the job.

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And so, then I was back into the lesbian-gay mix. I didn't really have a health background but I had an education background, which included a good amount of training and planning and in doing trainings, which was a big part of the job because the health department was doing trainings on homophobia and sexuality and I was intrigued by all of that. And the other part was really advocacy work. It was about figuring out what the community's health needs were, whether they were being met or not, and how to meet them.

And I was tremendously intrigued because it gave me an opportunity to figure out, to learn policy and to learn budgets and to learn, you know, the political machinations of San Francisco. Because when you work, basically, in the director's office in the health department, you have to understand the politics across the street, because that's how it all happens. And funding from the community wasn't going to happen without me becoming really smart really fast about the politics of the budget in San Francisco and how that all sort of trickled back to Sacramento and all that kind of stuff. So that became my entrée into the world of policy and politics of a different sort. Not like community club, democratic club politics but insider kind of politics.

ANDERSON: What was that like, even in a daily way, going from outsider activist advocacy nonprofit world into being a part of government, with the bureaucracy?

VAZQUEZ: It was not easy, I'll tell you. I mean —

ANDERSON: You don't even have a board of directors, let alone the fact that, okay, so maybe they're white gay men, but at least you have a structure you're used to and you have some control.

VAZQUEZ: Right, and here I didn't. I was an advisor to the director and to the other directors and to the commission, and I didn't have a staff. I mean, this position was a one-person position. I had a committee. I had a great committee of people from throughout the department who gave a lot of time to a committee as part of their job. So, in a sense, I had staff, but

anyway, it was — it was a bitch. It was a bitch for the first year. I mean, I had to learn the system, the politics. I also had to learn how to be. Now, just back to my gender identity and all that, because — so now, I'm not doing this Building. I'm now a professional. And I had to figure out how to present myself.

ANDERSON: How to dress?

VAZQUEZ: How to dress. And, you know, perversely, the health department became the place where I adopted a butch professional public persona. Because I decided I just — that I wanted to be myself, that the effort to sort of camouflage that, or whatever, was taking away from being able to work and being able to be creative. And I don't know, I just was tired of it, and I decided, You know what? I can wear better ties than those guys. So I did. I started coming to work in suits and ties and these shirts and ties and blazers and developing really the persona that I am now.

And you know, I'll never forget going to my first hearing before the Health Commission, because part of my job entailed writing an annual report that detailed the existing state of health services for lesbian/gay people in San Francisco and they made recommendations about gaps in services, identified gaps in services and then recommendations about what needed to happen, including funding recommendations. Which was a big job. Just doing that was a big job.

And so, my first one, um, was obviously a huge deal. I mean, it was just little me going before a nine-member — I don't know how many members of the commission — and that's when I decided I would just go wear my best suit and tie and, you know — and nobody blinked an eye. Well, maybe a couple did. But there were also enough people in the audience and a couple of members of the commission who were queer that I felt I had enough support to do that, and so, then I just did it. And after that, I didn't care. After that, you know, I just went as I pleased.

ANDERSON: Was it an all-white work environment?

VAZQUEZ: Not at all. I mean, the people I reported to were actually — the top management of the health department at that time was pretty diverse. I mean, they had several people of color who were heads of divisions or the hospital. And the line staff really depend[ed] — it was, like, department by department. You know, like the health hazards or safety environmental department was almost all white. The public health planning department was very diverse and very integrated. So it just depended on where you went. Because it's a civil service system, there's a lot more diversity in the work force than in the private sector. And there's some really terrific people of color, health advocates, that were involved at the time.

And I, after a year or so, I decided that I really needed to prioritize health services to people of color, youth, and lesbians, because white gay men had a lot of services, because the AIDS epidemic was raging

then. You know, it was difficult to get the health department to pay attention. It was like, AIDS was all-consuming. And I understand that. But there's still all these other populations that needed services that weren't getting services.

And so, actually, San Francisco had a fairly sophisticated network of health service providers for mental health, substance abuse, much more so than anything I had experienced in New York, already in place. So it wasn't like I had to invent those things. I just had to make sure that they continued to get funded, weren't cut, organized them when cuts seemed to be looming, so that really, where there was a paucity of service and funding where youth people of color and lesbians — and that's, for the remainder of my career as the Coordinator of Lesbian Gay Health Services, that's really where I put my energy, is in the Department of Health in San Francisco.

ANDERSON: We're going to pause right there.

58:49
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END TAPE 4

END INTERVIEW 1

## INTERVIEW 2

ANDERSON: OK. This is our second taping. Kelly Anderson and Carmen Vazquez, but this time we're in Provincetown.

VAZQUEZ: Yeah! (laughter)

ANDERSON: That was a really good call in late August. So, let's just go back a little bit to what we were talking about three or four months ago, which is probably kind of hard to remember, but you had talked about all the different positions that you had in the organizations in San Francisco. And one of the threads that got lost was your introduction to feminism. I know that your first movement work was around the Women's Centers and the Women's Building. But how did you find feminism and what was interesting and exciting to you in terms of the ideas, the writers and the thinkers? Can you kind of retrace how you discovered it intellectually and politically?

VAZQUEZ: How did I discover feminism? Well, it was a combination of — people first. Roma Guy and Dionne Jones and the other members of the Women's Centers collective who did the organizing work to purchase the Women's Building: they were really my first introduction to a sort of formal understanding of feminism. And you know, I was drawn to the very, very early works of feminism, to Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back*, to some of the writings of — who's the woman — God, it goes out of my head now, but an American writer, feminist. It won't come to me.

ANDERSON: OK.

VAZQUEZ: It will come later, I suppose. Radical stuff — Jill Johnston, Sally Gearhart and *Wonderland*. And so, those were the beginnings, but really it was in the lived sort of conversation and experience of working with feminists from Argentina and Peru, who came to work at the Women's Building and with people like Jay Castleberry and Jacque Dupree, who are musicians and who identified as feminists, although they were very clear that their understanding and experience of wanting to be and living as feminists was very different from the white women. And I sort of had the mix of both, I mean, I worked with Jay and Jacque and Barbara Nabors-Glass, and they were my friends, so I used to socialize with them. And Roma and Dionne, who also eventually did become very close friends but they were more work acquaintances, were among the people that really began to introduce me, theoretically and practically, to feminism. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon were huge supporters of the Women's Building and Women's Centers people. So their early work was something that I read and, you know, was attracted to and loved, but them, too.



So I guess what I'm saying is there was some amount of introduction to feminist theory, but more what I remember is the lived experience of conversations and dialogue and debate, endless debate, with Del and Phyllis and Roma and Dionne and all those women. Tracy Gary, who was hugely instrumental in raising funds for the Women's Building but also for a slew of women's organizations, and notably the Women's Foundation in San Francisco, was also a part of that mix.

So I had this very rich mix of women that eventually led, by, I don't know, 1984 — earlier, '83, '82 — also to the Third World Women's Alliance, who eventually became the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, and they then took me along this whole other intellectual journey to understand feminism from the perspective of women of color or third world women, as we called ourselves at the time, and socialism, and to really have a class-based Marxist analysis of sexism. And that was very rich too because it was not the traditional Marxist-Leninist sort of way of thinking. It took the women involved in the Line of March, which is the organization that Third World Women's Alliance — later the Alliance Against Women's Oppression — were a part of, and so I began to dialogue with them and to do work with them and to organize political forums at the Center that looked at the role of women in the Palestinian struggle, for example.

And so, there came into my analysis an international and very rich, I think, class perspective that has informed my thinking ever since, really. I mean, my formal political training, truly, was begun at the Women's Building and with the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, who then also invited me to participate in the World Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. And that — I mean, that was huge, because then I got to meet feminists from all over the world and take that thinking into account.

Over the years, you know, I really think that the people that have most deeply impacted me have been lesbians of color. There's no question about that. You know, Barbara Smith and Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe have really been the people that fed my thinking about feminism in a way that I could understand, could live with, could take in. And so — so that's the answer to that question.

ANDERSON: Have you ever hesitated to call yourself a feminist? Was there a time when it felt like an uncomfortable label?

VAZQUEZ: You know, early on, very early, when I first got to San Francisco, I didn't even know what a feminist was. Seriously, I really thought that people were talking about being feminine, which is not something I was interested in, so I was like, I don't know what these people are talking about. And also, you know, what I understood of the feminist movement in 1978, '80 and even into the early '80s, when I really got involved in San Francisco politics, was very white. And so, you know, Gloria Steinem did not speak to me. I mean, I sort of admired what she did. I

was glad that somebody was doing stuff to sort of stand up for women in the world, but she didn't speak to me.

And it wasn't until the experience of working and really learning and struggling with other women of color and reading other women of color that it became OK for me to accept a feminist identity. And part of that is about gender stuff, too, gender expression, because the late '70s, early '80s women's movement, and probably still today, didn't take kindly to a butch-identified person. And I didn't quite know what to do with that. I felt pushed to a more androgynous expression of myself and you know, nobody that I was attracted to was remotely androgynous. They were all femmes and, you know, I had a hard time with that. I had a real hard time with it, and some of it was actually pretty deep-cutting kind of stuff.

And once again, the place I did not experience that was among women of color, who were — at least the women of color I was hanging out with — perfectly content to have butch-femme couples. And where there was more of a sense of androgyny, it still was not expected that everybody be that way. And the other thing around gender is that people did not equate a masculine femininity as somehow a betrayal of anything. We didn't think of it that way. We thought of it as, Well, you know, if feminism is about being who you are, well then, this is a good thing. And so there was that, too.

ANDERSON: I asked Cherríe Moraga, who I interviewed after I saw you last, about — something about the sex wars, I can't remember what it was about exactly — and she said, Oh, that had virtually no impact — in terms of her world and lesbians of color, women of color in general — that that was really a white women's struggle. That it was really located, for the most part, in the Northeast. What's your thought about that? Did you feel impacted by it, or were those kinds of debates happening amongst your peers, or really was it a white women's debate.

VAZQUEZ: It was much more a white women's debate. It did affect me and my peers because of the centrality of the Women's Building to the feminist movement in the Bay area, and so there was no way that some of that didn't filter in — that, you know, Gayle Rubin was treated as a pariah, and we actually had to face deep, hard discussions at the building about whether or not the Samois, I think —

ANDERSON: Yes you did. You talked about that in March.

VAZQUEZ: — could meet, you know. And so there was [debate] and I think this was early, but [Andrea] Dworkin and — you know, the censorship thing and the pornography — and all that stopped — did have to be talked about and debated because of where we were located, but then outside of that in our lives, nada. Didn't have anything to do with us. We were perfectly happy to, you know, look at pornography (laughs), to get off on it and, you know, to understand that there was a real difference

between the objectification and abuse, sexual abuse of women as we understood it.

So for us, you know, what was much more real and interesting and impactful was to figure out what could we do about the sex trade in South Asia and other parts of the world where women and young girls were being treated with such utter, horrible abuse, and that was much more meaningful to us than whether or not people wore dresses or pants or — you know, and what kind of magazines people got off on. It just —

ANDERSON: Right. Did you call yourself a lesbian feminist? Is that a white women's label? How did you feel about that term?

VAZQUEZ: I called myself a dyke but I also did call myself a feminist.

ANDERSON: But a lesbian feminist, I mean the two together.

VAZQUEZ: Oh yes.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: Yes. Lesbian feminist was the more public term and then the dyke is what I am and what we all were.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm.

VAZQUEZ: And particularly among lesbians of color.

ANDERSON: I have a question about sort of language and terminology, and I'm wondering if it — what was the impact on your sense of self to live through all these changes in language, from third world women to women of color to lesbians of color, versus — I'm going to assume that when you were still in New York, you probably thought of yourself more as Puerto Rican than a person of color, a lesbian of color or third world woman, et cetera. So I'm wondering if you can just sort of describe your relationship to those different terms and, when they changed, how that impacted your own sense of self.

VAZQUEZ: Well, I have lived through a whole lot of language that describes the same person, which is fascinating to me. And my early experiences in the United States were decidedly of myself as a Puerto Rican because that's who I was. I didn't understand color and I didn't understand third world. I had no concept of that until — I really don't remember. I guess high school, college, when I started to become politicized. And I understood the term really to be about — I didn't like it particularly. Something about it made me feel less, you know. The third world was sort of like, Where's the first and the second? And I really didn't have an explanation for that. But I also understood it to be a term that

described colonized people and so it was OK. And I did identify as a third world dyke person.

And then when I moved to the Bay area, that was still the term in use, actually for a while yet, and I remember some beginnings of a shift in I guess mid the '80s or something, because I was involved in helping to organize a conference for people of color, and there was enormous amount of talk and discussion and debate about whether we would be calling this a third world gathering or a people of color gathering. And I think — I don't remember exactly — but I think if we go back and look at the records, that we wound up calling it both. And the discussions were fierce and intense around the concept of color, because we understood oppression to be about — I mean racism, you know — to be an expression of privilege based on skin color.

But for those of us who were not dark, it was like, I'm not sure I understand, because what about language and what about the ways in which Latino people and API people have been racialized in this country that has not to do with their skin color but with their cultural heritage and with their language and with the fact that they come from colonized places in the world. And so the whole black and other thing was huge, and actually painful. And some of what happened — there were two conferences like that — some of what happened at those conferences is that people had big discussions about this and I actually remember leading a workshop that dealt with not so much the language but what the language reflected in terms of cross-racial hostility and our sort of trying to come to terms with what does it mean. But eventually, so I moved through — I don't know, about four years ago — this transition from third world to people of color, women of color, and I finally felt comfortable with it.

And then I went to the world women's conference in Nairobi and I was back to third world. And you know, the women of Africa were like, What color? What are you talking about? (laughs) You Americans are very strange. So it was fascinating because sort of all the discussions we were having in the States, people of color [were] having in the States about race and class and what is it — you know, racism — really about. Is it just about skin color? That really manifested in Africa, particularly with women from the third world whose framework for understanding their oppression was clearly much more articulated around class and colonialism than it was around race. And it was an eye opener for me and for the other women, and a real learning curve for me.

And then the other language that's been perplexing and fabulous to be involved with is the language of gender, because butch and femme and kiki I understood back from being a teenager, but transsexual, transgender — you know, gender queers, gender defiance, gender transition — all that was totally new to me and to many of us in the late '80s, '90s. And I didn't know where I fit in that. I mean, I've known myself not to be a transsexual person all my life and I really love the masculine expression that doesn't have to be about transitioning gender, but I also loved the room created by the transgender movement for

gender expression of a million different varieties. So it didn't take me very long to feel that that's a movement that I needed to be a part of and understand and appreciate. And so, I still don't identify as a transgender person but I love the movement and I appreciate the opportunities and the space it has created for myself and other people whose gender expression is not quite what the world wants it to be.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm. What year did you leave California?

VAZQUEZ: I left California in 1994.

ANDERSON: And so you were there for the '80s and the early part of the '90s, I guess.

VAZQUEZ: Yes. I was there from 1975 until '94, although I left a couple of times to go — I don't know — do my Saturn return, find myself, et cetera, et cetera.

ANDERSON: Right.

VAZQUEZ: But I was there consistently from 1979 to '94.

ANDERSON: So, just sort of looking back and reflecting and on the larger scale of those 20 years, can you talk a little bit about how the women's movement and the feminist community, including the little pockets that you were most closely allied with, changed over that time? I mean, when you left in the early '90s —

VAZQUEZ: Oh, Lord.

ANDERSON: — how different did it look than when you arrived in the mid '70s?

VAZQUEZ: Man, that's a great question.

ANDERSON: And what happened to the movement and your community over that 20 years, in other words.

VAZQUEZ: Well, when I arrived in San Francisco, there decidedly was a lesbian community and a lesbian part of the whole scene but what was visible was much more male. I mean, the Castro, the Polk area, Harvey Milk, those were the — I mean, that was the movement. And although lesbians were decidedly there and involved — I mean people like Sally Gearhart is a huge part of why Harvey Milk was Harvey Milk and became successful. And the Briggs campaign and, you know, people like Amber [Hollibaugh] were there doing stuff for years and years but, you know, it wasn't seen, and certainly it did not have political power or did not have significant political power.

21:45

And by the time I left, that was just not true. I mean, the involvement of lesbians and lesbian feminists in the entire fabric of San Francisco's social-political life just was tremendous in those 20 years. And I was a part of that, but it was — I mean, the Women's Building conferences that we put together, the thing called lesbian — what was it, God, LAFA [Lesbian Agenda for Action]. It was an ad hoc attempt that was very successful, actually, I think, for a couple of years, to bring together lesbians with a particular and conscious desire to be involved in political life — to get lesbians elected to the board of supervisors, to get them appointed to the Board of Health or the Human Rights Commission as EDs of agencies in the cities. And Jean Harris, Barbara Cameron, Roma Guy, myself, Donna Hitchens, Roberta Achtenberg, Mary Morgan were all a part of that effort. And you know, by the time I left San Francisco, God dammit if we didn't have lesbians on the board of supervisors, and Donna Hitchens was a judge. You know, Roma Guy was on the Board of Health and Barbara Cameron was on some other commission. I mean, we actually accomplished what we set out to do, and LAFA sort of ceased to be needed.

And then, also towards the end of that time that I was there, lesbians of color began to organize in a more conscious way politically to get lesbians of color into the political mix in San Francisco. And I know that, you know, all the foundational work that Phyllis and Del did with the clubs and the police department and other agencies in the city, really had a huge impact on that being able to happen then, in the late '80s, '90s, because there had been an entrée and there had been the active involvement of lesbians, including lesbians of color, in the Alice B. Toklas Club and in other clubs in the city. And so that's the biggest difference. I mean, we went from underground to most definitely front and center in the political spectrum of San Francisco.

ANDERSON: Including your position with health services.

VAZQUEZ: Including my position with the health department.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: And Pat Norman's position and —

ANDERSON: Right.

VAZQUEZ: Yes.

ANDERSON: And you're — I mean, we talked at length about it in March, about your work with Gay and Lesbian Health Services, but why did you decide to end that? That was a long — right?

VAZQUEZ: It was six years.

ANDERSON: Six, seven years, yes. So what ended that –

VAZQUEZ: Well, for a couple of reasons.

ANDERSON: – job for you?

VAZQUEZ: The job and the move to New York were motivated by two things — ending the job and the move to New York. One is that in the last couple of years that I was in San Francisco, even though I had an enormous amount of autonomy in my position as Coordinator of Lesbian and Gay Health Services and did good things, I think, I was really frustrated with working within the confines of government. I wanted — back out. It was like, Enough already. I understand the budget process. I understand the politics of how all of this happens, and somebody else should do it. And I didn't know what to do. I mean, the truth was — and part of what I just said about, you know, putting lesbians front and center in your political life in San Francisco is that it became — and probably this is still true, that in San Francisco, political leadership is tied up with elected office and/or appointments, and there is not a whole lot of room from the grassroots or community perspective to sort of play a leading role, unless you have the executive director[ship] of an agency, which [is] not exactly my cup of tea and I didn't want to do that. I was bothered by a lot of people to run for office, and I didn't want to do that. And I also didn't particularly see myself as an effective — not really effective. I just don't like administrative work and being the person primarily responsible for fundraising.

And so I wanted to do something different. I really wanted to be in a situation where I could affect change by creating programs and doing community organizing. And there is something about San Francisco where all that sort of accumulated political power gets people really, really lazy. And by that I mean that, you know, it's very different when you're going door to door fighting the Briggs Initiative to you think you can just legislate homophobia out of existence. You live in this bubble that's not anything like the real world, and the last four years that I lived in San Francisco — actually, because of my job and the uniqueness of that position and because I was on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Board, I got to do a lot of traveling around the country and speaking to different communities. And man, you know, I knew Spokane was a whole lot of big difference from San Francisco. San Francisco was Mars.

You know, the '90s is also the beginning of the right wing's sort of more conscious and orchestrated assaulted on us via ballot initiatives, and so I spent some time in Oregon and saw what was happening there. And I was in Colorado, talking to people about the viciousness of what they were experiencing, and I really felt like I wanted to do something outside of that — the lavender bubble, that is, San Francisco, and –

ANDERSON: And what were your political priorities, in terms of — you said you wanted to find a different way to affect change, but was it coming out of this 20-year history with activism? Was it around race, primarily? Was it around LGBT stuff? Was it around women's stuff? I mean, how did you decide where your political priorities were in the early '90s?

VAZQUEZ: I think I — well, I know that I came to a point where I made a decision that my political priority was going to be the LGBT movement, for two reasons. One, because I felt that it's a movement that's enormously in need of some more political sophistication. (laughs) And two, because it's a movement that needs to unravel racism in a way that it has not. And I felt, you know, I can make that contribution, or I can be one of the people that makes that contribution and that I wanted to do that work. And I — I love queers. I mean, I love queers and wanted to spend the rest of my life trying to figure out how do we organize a movement that is more diverse, inclusive, progressive, that really can speak to, you know, not the David Mixners or the Matt Foremans or the big hooahas of the world and — they are both great men. I have an issue with them, but that's not the movement. You know, the movement is much more about the people in Spokane, you know, who fight ballot initiatives, or in Arkansas.

30:09

I mean, I was at a meeting in Kentucky just a couple of weeks ago, after I came back from England, where I met two women, both of them just recently — like within the last month — returned from a tour of duty in Iraq, who were at a queer political gathering at risk of losing their pensions, because they felt compelled to figure out what they could do to organize queers in Arkansas. Yes, I love that. I mean, and you know, I loved them. I thanked them for their service, even though I hate this fucking war and I hate this fucking president, but they were very brave women. And that's the queer that I want to have a conversation with and do have opportunities to have conversations with. Or the queers, you know, who work for Make The Road By Walking in Brooklyn. You know, it's a little community center totally radical and progressive that has done a lot of work for poor and Latino and African American communities in Brooklyn but has recently taken on the struggle around homophobia and developed an LGBT program. And so, that is where the movement needs to be bolstered and needs support.

And finally, I feel, you know, after 30-some years, I'm a bridge and I'm a translator. I can move between communities and try and facilitate dialogue that hopefully moves us all forward.

ANDERSON: Mm-hmm. Were you also, at that point, frustrated with the gay/lesbian, as it was called then, movement around issues of gender and feminism, or do you feel like race was their Achilles heel and the only —

VAZQUEZ: I think — yes. Forever I have been frustrated with the LGBT movement's inability to really come to grips with gender and sexuality, and I've talked about it and written about it a lot. But I feel most deeply



that race is its Achilles heel, that race is the reason that we're in the mess we're in, in terms of the whole marriage movement, which is a whole other (laughs) –

ANDERSON: Well no, say more about that.

VAZQUEZ: Well, over many centuries it can appropriately, I think, be said that marriage is the sort of stage upon which huge battles over sexual and gender rights have been fought. It also has been a stage where huge battles around family and the definition of family, including the right of African Americans and Asians and other people of color to have families, to marry whom they want, all of that, has been fought. And so, it makes complete sense to me that, you know, we move into the twenty-first century and now there's this big battle over whether or not people of the same sex should have this right and to have marriage be the stage upon which the struggle is fought.

But the reason I say racism has been the Achilles heel is, in this most recent battle for marriage equality, is that the very people that have the authority to speak to this as decidedly and profoundly a human rights issue and an issue of justice and equality and economic injustice are the people that have had virtually no voice, no leadership in the LGBT movement. So now the LGBT movement wants alliances with communities of color, wants spokespeople and messengers who have the authenticity to speak to this. And you know, it's hard, because racism has really inhibited the capacity of people of color to play meaningful roles and leadership roles in this movement and/or it has sort of forced us to create autonomous movements in communities, and so, you know — so now we're in this place.

And the other thing that is true is that the civil rights movement, the white — I'm sorry, the white leadership of the marriage movement have stubbornly sort of embraced the civil rights language imagery and just shoved it out there. And the truth is that for a whole generation or maybe a couple of generations of people of color, particularly black people, the civil rights movement is history, and you know what? A failure.

The Civil Rights Act was not a failure and certainly *Brown v. Board of Education* is sort of the attainment of formal, legal equality on the basis of race and gender, [and both] were huge advances for all of us politically. But the rollback of civil — of what that movement brought — I mean, when you look at the 2000 elections in Florida and other parts of the South where, you know, people were really disenfranchised, when you look at the rollbacks of affirmative action, when you look at the level of poverty and incarceration that black people are still faced with, I think it becomes hard for a young person of color to say, Whoopdido, you know, I'm just going to go out there and celebrate the civil rights thing. It doesn't resonate. And so we're taking a term in a history in a framework that actually doesn't work for whole communities of color themselves and we're saying, Well, this applies to

us and it just doesn't work. And so — I mean, marriage is the example de jour, but in any sort of effort to sort of move ourselves towards that place of legal equality, no matter what you call it, and protection for our families — if there isn't a really strong and working alliance with communities of color, it just will fail.

ANDERSON: With — I'm just going to jump ahead to ask this one question and then we'll go back, but I'm just curious in terms of how this gets talked about at the Pride Agenda, because I think of the Pride Agenda as sort of a mainstream —

VAZQUEZ: Yes, it is.

ANDERSON: — a status-quo organization that probably put a lot of effort behind the pro-marriage stuff.

VAZQUEZ: Oh.

ANDERSON: A lot of resources.

VAZQUEZ: A lot of resources.

ANDERSON: So, are you the only person —

VAZQUEZ: A lot of my time.

ANDERSON: — who is complicating the debate within the organization, or are there other people who share your [perspective]?

VAZQUEZ: I am the lead person complicating the debate within the organization, but staff, several board members, the executive director and my director of public policy, who takes a lead on the marriage stuff, are all much more aware of the complexity of the discussion that we're having. And they also — I mean it's why, at Pride Agenda, we've made a decision and I came to implement the development of Pride and Action, which is about really not talking to the gay world but talking to the straight world and figuring out how to reach communities of faith and people in unions and people in workplaces, and organizing specific people of color discussions about the place of marriage and where people understand it and where they don't.

39:10

The other thing that's true about Pride Agenda and marriage and family — although I'm only now being paid by Pride Agenda, I feel like I've been working with them for ten years — anyway, I used to tease them that they should just put [me] on salary and so they finally did — is that they have always placed marriage within the context of winning equality for our families. But this is about a family issue. A couple of years ago when Alan came on and I came on, the organization actually shifted its mission to reflect a broader understanding of what our

struggle is, beyond equality as individuals to equality for our families, but also to bring justice into the picture and to understand that, you know, the struggle for formal equality can and will be won, maybe tomorrow and maybe in ten years, but that justice is a bigger, bigger, much bigger struggle that has to do with economic justice and has to do with gender and sexual rights and has to do with, you know, the quality of people's lives.

And so Pride Agenda went from being this statewide advocacy organization to win equality for lesbian/gay people or something like that — civil rights, actually, I don't even think it said equality — to being a statewide organization to win equality and justice for LGBT New Yorkers and our families. There's a very different framing of what we do, and our programs, I think, reflect that. I think we have a long way to go in terms of effectively involving communities of color in the work that we do but that is decidedly a huge piece of what my agenda there is for the next two or three years. And I think it's shared — I definitely think it's shared by the staff and by the executive director.

ANDERSON: So let's back up. I think we have time, probably, for one more story on this tape and talk about how you ended up back in New York.

VAZQUEZ: All right. So, I needed to get out of San Francisco for all of those reasons that I said and then I was actually sitting in the backyard of the home that I shared with Marcie in Berkeley, and we were looking at ads, because for a while I had been looking for possible job things, and it was Marcie who saw an ad for a director of public policy at the LG, then — not BT — LG Community Center in New York City, and I went, Really? Give me that. So, I saw the ad and it sort of — the job description suited me to a tee and I thought, you know, This is a perfect job but it's in New York. And so then that started a discussion between Marcie and I that sadly ended in divorce two years later, but initially at least, we sort of said, Well, you know, I should try. And my family, my biological family, still lived in New York. I was watching my nieces and nephews kind of get older without my being a part of their lives and I — that was another pull back to New York for me, a sort of personal family pull.

And so I applied for the job — and I applied and I loved it. I loved meeting Richard Burns. I love the Center. I mean, I've had a relationship with community centers of some sort forever. And I thought to myself, you know, They're going to offer me the job and break my heart because they won't be able to afford what I need to be able to move to New York. But they didn't. They met my request, and so I came to New York to meet up with Amber and Marge, there you go, who lived in New York at the time. And really, when I moved back, Amber, Marge and Katherine Acey, were the people that I sort of had friendships with.

It was fabulous to be able to come back to New York as an out queer and as a fairly notorious one, and be in the middle of all the queer stuff.

I mean, the Center was the perfect place to come to because in the matter of a month, I knew I had met everybody there was to know or meet in New York. And my introduction to my work at the Center was during the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall — '94, yes, it would have been the twenty-fifth, and my first week back, I was standing in the auditorium at the Center, the CLAGS Center [Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at CUNY], on a panel with Marty Duberman and Joan Nestle and, you know, Cheryl Clark, and it was bizarre. It was like, How did that happen? Here I am back at the school where I graduated so many years before to take a new position and be an out queer and be here with all these famous folk. It was really fabulous. I was completely like, knocked out. So.

ANDERSON: And what — describe the dailyness of your work at the Center.

VAZQUEZ: At the Center — I came to the Center to be the director of public policy, which eventually evolved to be the director of public policy and governmental affairs. And it was in two parts, and the frustration that eventually led me to leave was always there in the two parts. One part was develop programs, policy programs, like Center Kids and later the Causes in Common initiative and the voter registration project that would involve the community in policy and political advocacy work around specific issues. And that part I loved because that's what I love to do. And then the other was to be the Center's representative in efforts to secure funding from government. So there it is again. I can never quite escape it. And you know, I did a great job. I developed a team, you know, our development director changed over time but our development director and our director of mental health and social services, who could speak to the programs that we could get funded — and off I went to Albany and D.C. and city council to, you know, put together the development of a relationship-building effort with elected officials that would lead to funding.

And in that work I really loved being partners with Empire State Pride Agenda and development of The Network [The New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network,] because to me that wasn't just a funding thing. That really was a community organizing thing that still exists and it's very successful as a project of Pride Agenda. But the rest of it was really, really old-fashioned lobbying, you know, wear the leather out, tell the story, tell the story, keep coming back and telling the story, and it's bizarre. When you ask for, you know, a million dollars, two million dollars, and you eventually get it you sort of feel like great, but it's a bottomless hole, particularly when it's an organization like the Center that has huge capital needs always and forever. And so I grew weary of that piece of it. I was always sort of going back and forth between the program development work or supervision of staff and the government work.

And then the other role that I played at the Center is a role that I played in many organizations, is to be the nudge around diversity and

race issues and, you know, being more inclusive. And I was very much part of the discussions that led to the creation of a policy on the death penalty that really looked at the unequal and racist application of the death penalty as its lead argument, although there are some queer ways in which there is a case to be made about the death penalty being applied, you know, in a discriminatory manner against us. It's not the overwhelming thing. And so, I was a part of that and I was a part of Causes in Common, which is the reproductive rights LGBT liberation project at the Center — really, you know, a significant effort to make the case that these are movements that should naturally, politically be in alliance with each other and figuring out how to do that. And I was also very much a part of bringing Betty Powell & Associates to — Achebe, not Betty — to the Center to do a diversity initiative with us. And finally, [I've been] a part of the really strong advocacy efforts by transgender people at the Center, and Barbara Warren, to include bisexual and transgender in the actual name of the organization as well as to have our programming and advocacy work be reflective of that community's needs. So —

ANDERSON: Did that have momentum and so it felt like it sort of was an organic process, or was there a lot of contest —

VAZQUEZ: The bi and trans?

ANDERSON: Yes. Was there a lot of contest over that?

VAZQUEZ: Listen, that was a seven-year process and it really — the culmination of it came together with the renovation of the Center, and we were off-site and we had to come back. And before we came back, we had to think about a marketing plan for the new Center. What was it going to look like? You know, kind of revisit the vision in the mission statement and then our core competencies. Anyway, the friend of mine who's on the board's partner is president of a marketing branding firm and so they did this elaborate new-look marketing thing for us and in the process of having that discussion, several of us said, Well, now's the time. If we're — you know, what are our core values? What are the things that define who we are as an organization? We had long discussions with the staff and with some of the board members about those core values. Betty Powell helped lead those discussions, where, you know, inclusion and a vision of antiracist work and sexual liberation and all of that were really central to who we understood ourselves to be as an organization. And so then it begs the question, Well, why wouldn't we, for God sakes, have bisexual and transgender in our name, so —

50:25

ANDERSON: Were there bisexual and transgender people in those conversations?

VAZQUEZ: Yes.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: And so, at the end of the day, yes. Carrie Davis and Roz Richter, who are staff with the Gender Identity Project at the Center, were very much a part of those discussions. Bisexual people? Did we have bisexual people? I'm sure we did but now I don't remember the names, but I know that some of them were there.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: And the focus really was on transgender, because the resistance was to transgender. I mean, I think people might have been a little easier to go to the bisexual add-on and not the transgender add-on, and there was an enormous amount of education that, you know, that went on for seven years before we got to that final place. But that final place, I knew, when we entered into the discussions about marketing and branding, that this was the moment when we would finally move and change our name to reflect a more inclusive view of the movement.

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

53:02

END TAPE 5

## TAPE 6

ANDERSON: One of the things I want to go back to is for you to talk more about Causes in Common, and my question too is about your political framework, because I'm noticing sort of the connections around health issues. You did the anti-violence work. You did work with the health services, AIDS, and then into reproductive rights, that project. So can you just talk a little bit about your framework and the connections between all those issues in your career over that time — did you feel any connection to a women's health movement or a health movement? I mean, did you come from that kind of a framework in working around those issues?

VAZQUEZ: Well, yes and no. The health framework really got developed towards the end of my time at the Women's Building, certainly during the time that I was working at the Anti-Violence Project, because I really had to delve deeply into the impact of homophobia on our lives. And in the health department, obviously — I was working for the health department so I had to have a health framework, but I really looked a lot at the connection between homophobia and healthcare and got to know some really terrific researchers, Pat Stevens and Joanne Hall, who were doing important work around trying to understand what particularly lesbians experience in healthcare, wherein how the often hostile, if not just negligent, but often hostile, encounters that lesbian women have with health providers that leads them to not seek healthcare until it's too late. And the economics for a lot of lesbians is also that, you know, if you're not covered, if your partner's not covered, somebody doesn't have health insurance so you just don't go for routine healthcare like Pap smears and mammograms and you know, annual physicals and all that kind of stuff, and the stress of living your life under the daily assaults of homophobia then means that people live with a whole level of stress, like people live with racism that doesn't get picked up automatically. So there has to be, you know, a way of figuring that out that's unique and particular to lesbian women as well as to gay men, and so — and then there was AIDS.

I mean, AIDS was so huge that there was no way of not understanding that the work we were doing politically was both about repairing the damage of living in a homophobic world, the emotional, psychological and sometimes physical damage as well as the AIDS epidemic and sexually transmitted diseases that — obviously AIDS made — and then before AIDS, syphilis and gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted diseases were all about men. But clearly that was also happening for lesbians, even if AIDS wasn't the killer for lesbians that it was for gay men. All of that led to, OK, we need a particular focus on lesbian healthcare.

And at the time, the '80s and into the '90s and still, there was a growing movement of lesbians addressing this issue from Washington, D.C., Helen Mautner. Amber was a part of that when she was at the Gay

Men's Health Crisis and the Lesbian AIDS Project — many of us. And so, I was a part of that sort of group of people, maybe a dozen or so of us on a national level who wanted to figure out how to create policy changes at government level and how to increase resources at local levels specific to lesbian healthcare. And in San Francisco, that took the form of the Lyon-Martin Women's Health Clinic as well as some groundbreaking studies on women's sexual behaviors through the AIDS office in San Francisco, and the continuing sort of support of community-based efforts to address lesbian healthcare.

In New York, Center Kids was a project of the Center when I got there. It was a volunteer-run thing that was really — the impetus for it was the burgeoning number of lesbians, mostly, but also some gay men, who were making decisions to have children in the late '80s in New York, and they came together really as a support group for themselves and that's what it was. It was a support group for parents. So sort of a little bit of a misnomer because it wasn't about the kids as much as it was about the parents and/or people who were seeking to become parents. And that work, which eventually we hired a staff person for — Terry Boggis was still the director of Center Kids at the Center — really opened my eyes to the phenomenal lack of resources available to lesbians and gay men, and the impact on their health in terms of reproduction.

So, for example, because gay men can't donate to sperm banks, people were, you know, consenting either to sex or to donation of sperm that wasn't tested — you know, enormous potential for risk in that, because assisted insemination costs an arm and a leg, as I well know, and in-vitro fertilization is even more out of the stratosphere. The reproductive technologies available to heterosexual people, fertility treatments and — you know, you can diagnose infertility in a heterosexual couple and get some insurance relief for it. You can't do that with lesbians and you certainly can't do it for gay men. The whole question of surrogacy and the ethics of that and the amount of money involved in that. The amount of money involved in adoption.

So it all — it became clear to me that this sort of thing called the reproductive rights movement identified in the United States more as an abortion movement and not a reproductive rights movement — had real impact on lesbians and gay men and bisexual and transgender people just on a practical, economic and health level. The other thing that was always clear to me, way back from 20 years ago, is that reproduction — the link between sexuality and reproduction is absolutely key, the linchpin of the political attack against queer people and I knew that, some feminists knew that, but I assure you that this movement did not know that and still doesn't know that, not in a big way.

And so, politically, the link between sexual and gender rights and reproductive rights and LGBT liberation was always clear in my mind, but it wasn't until 20 years later that I saw a possibility for a sort of practical expression of that political understanding tied to the more



practical economic issues of, and health issues of people seeking to become parents that led to the creation of *Causes in Common*.

And *Causes in Common* — first of all, it damn near killed me. I mean, it was an idea that we had for a while. We didn't call it *Causes in Common* at first. We were just calling it our reproductive rights, LGBT liberation coalition thing and we kept trying to — we did some workshops, Terry [Boggis] and I did. We wrote some things and finally got funding from the Ford Foundation to actually develop a project. And the project involved inviting reproductive rights leaders and LGBT leaders together to come and have a conversation about what we understood to be the political and policy links between the two movements and what sort of common ground could we agree on as places where we could support each others' work and really understand that reproductive rights are intimate, I mean, deeply, profoundly about sexual and gender rights and, therefore, about LGBT liberation.

The whole history of privacy rights in this country is written legally about the reproductive rights movement. It's about women's right to privacy and, you know, being able to use contraceptives in the privacy of their homes. The *Lawrence* decision in Texas — when you read that decision it reads like a treatise on reproductive rights. And so, it was very clear that there needed to be, you know, sort of a philosophical/political overview of the legal history of privacy, how that's the foundation for the arguments that we make about our own right to sexual freedom and equality, and so we had that discussion. We actually had written a very preliminary draft. We had spent about, oh I don't know, two summers worth of poor little interns researching all over the world for cases and links, so that, you know, it wasn't just a rhetorical argument but one really based in legal history and documentation of that history.

And so we brought people together and gave them a draft of something that they might consider, and then we had the discussion, we took the minutes and we sort of incorporated what they said into the draft, sent it back to them and said, Please critique this. And then I spent — me and an intern, Jenny, from CUNY Law — an entire summer, eight weeks, ten weeks, rewriting that document and putting it together as one document, which is now the pamphlet called *Causes in Common*. And [it's] really a challenge to take 27 or 30 voices and opinions and thoughts and put it together as one sort of coherent document, which I think it's fairly coherent. And that's the project. It still goes on. More people are involved. There's a significant number of LGBT organizations who have officially signed on to *Causes in Common* and now more and more reproductive rights organizations are being asked to sign on.

And what the project seeks to build is a nationally, actually, coalition of people who have signed on to *Causes in Common* who will do work together to lobby Congress and state legislatures, to increase the amount of dialogue that exists between the LGBT movement and the reproductive rights movement on things that we have in common.

ANDERSON: What were some of the biggest challenges that you remember in finding that common ground? Do you remember some of the initial conversations and the debates over –

VAZQUEZ: Yes, well, the biggest challenge comes from gay men — that's just the truth. I think lesbians, although, you know, are at different levels of articulation, depending on their political history and sophistication — at least get that my right to reproduce as a lesbian is challenged, threatened, et cetera and you know, the body thing. We get the body thing about the state intervening in our bodies, whereas I think that's a much harder link for gay men to make and more of them are less interested in reproduction. They also — I mean, there's even a fairly conservative wing of the gay world that says either this is not a gay issue, what are you talking about, or — and I say, Go read *Lawrence* (laughs) — or they actually think that it's wrong, you know, that abortion is wrong, that we shouldn't be involved in that, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So, I mean, that's where most of the resistance has come from. I also think that it's part of a larger debate about what's a gay issue, what's not a gay issue, and we should be focused and our agenda has to be about non-discrimination and the basis of sexual orientation. So anything that seems extraneous to that gets dumped.

13:40

And finally, there is — some of the debates centered around feeling that actually people in the gay movement, at least the progressive wing of the gay movement, has taken steps to stand with the reproductive rights movement. For example, part of our screen for candidates is a question about choice and — for candidates who want our endorsement. And that had been true for a number of years, we just didn't add it. We didn't just add it. But the same was not true for reproductive rights organizations, right. So, part of this dialogue is about, All right, if we're going to do that — you know, if Planned Parenthood was going to go endorse a presidential candidate, are you just going to do it on the choice screen or are you also going to do it on the queer screen? And NARAL and all those other people — and so, that was a lesser piece of the argument, but it's definitely there and some resentment around — we've stuck our neck out for these women, guys, people involved in the choice movement, and they haven't reciprocated. So those are the general areas of resistance.

ANDERSON: From the reproductive rights end of it, did you find resistance in terms of what do — we already have enough problems, what do we need to be –

VAZQUEZ: Absofuckinlutely.

ANDERSON: – gay and lesbian-baited. Why cause more trouble for ourselves?

VAZQUEZ: Yes. From the reproductive side of the discussion, the biggest obstacle was the sense that we already are, you know, painted with a dark tar brush. We don't need to take this one. We certainly don't need to get mixed up with the marriage discussion now with, you know, pedophiles and — queer people with children, how weird is that, you know. And that's also a part of some of the conservatism and mainstreaming of the reproductive rights movement that sort of wants to present the choice question as sort of more wholesome, more just about women. You know, women being able to make choices in their lives and lead productive lives and la la la la la.

And all of that is true but, you know, the piece of it that has to do with the messier side of what this is all about — you know, pregnant teens and the need for better prevention services and dealing with kids and drugs and the poverty issues and forced sterilization of women of color. That is not the sort of — you know, that's all beneath the iceberg, in terms of the reproductive rights movement. And so, to bring this unsavory kind of element into the national discussion about choice, it's hard for some people. And we say, So what, get over it. I mean, there really fundamentally is a link here and if we don't make it then no one else is going to out there and, you know, political candidates — the right makes — finally, the other element of this discussion is, for 30 years the right has made a direct link between the choice movement and the gay movement, and we keep saying, No, I don't know, where is it? (laughs) I don't know? What are they talking about? So —

ANDERSON: In addition to your paid activist work, you've also sat on a lot of boards, which I assume you consider part of your activism.

VAZQUEZ: Would that I were paid for all of those.

ANDERSON: So talk about doing activist work in that context, of board member versus an on-the-ground person, a service provider, a staff person. And which ones have worked and which ones have been more of a struggle?

VAZQUEZ: OK. My activist life has encompassed every possible road imaginable — volunteer, staff person, director, board of directors. And you know, I've liked it all. It's been good to play different roles in organizations. The places where, I think, I've both enjoyed it most and been most challenged have been the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force board of directors. I was on the board from 1990 to 1994. Urvashi Vaid was the executive director. Eric Rofes, Deborah Johnson, John D'Emilio, myself, were all part of the same board. It was a fairly, you know, star-studded cast of very opinionated, very articulate, very passionate people — Elizabeth Birch — which made for some very, very interesting board meetings and hard discussions. And I was on the exec actually, of the Task Force board at the time and — Deborah Johnson and myself, Eric Rofes — I don't remember if Eric was on the exec or not, but — and John. We were all clearly identified as progressives or to the left of

whatever, and so we played a very key role in continuing to steer the organization in a more progressive direction

And you know, the Task Force, although it had been around since forever — '74 — it wasn't until '86 that it sort of began to kick up, in terms of its level of influence and organizing capacity. And it wasn't until Urvashi came on as director that it actually had the potential to grow into something more than a thorn in HRC's [Human Rights Campaign] side. (laughs) And she was a volatile, exciting, passionate leader, and so it was a very exciting and challenging time. I mean, the discussions that we had about things like whether or not to protest the first war in — was it Iraq, or Iran? — whatever, you know, the first Gulf War, which eventually the Task Force did take a position opposing that war. And let me tell you, it was not an easy decision to come to. We pressed the rest of the organization really hard on understanding economic justice as a queer issue that had to be addressed in our programming and in our conference, annual conference. And so, it was a challenging and rewarding experience.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: And actually, I have been a fairly permanent faculty on the Creating Change conference, which is the Task Force national conference, every year since I joined — since 1990 — and have presented workshops, done institutes on institutional racism. I did an institute with Amber and others on race, class, sex and gender that was mind-blowing. Did a couple of institutes, actually. I keynoted the darn thing in '96 and that was wild, because — and I actually have written another essay — I wrote an essay four years ago that really amplified on what I talked about at the keynote in '96, which was a call to action for — a call, always, to more progressive action on the part of this movement, but it focused on the '96 elections and it focused on marriage and family. And you know what? Nine years later, there we still all are.

And so, I'm going to give a speech at Sarah Lawrence [College] in October and I thought, why don't I update — “Wounded Attachments” is what the speech was called. Marcie is still mad about it. (laughs) Why don't I update “Wounded Attachments,” and then just before I came here, to Provincetown this week, I was cleaning out stuff at home and I found this essay that I wrote four years ago that is an update, you know. I still have to update it some more, but it's a great piece on family.

Family is the place where we first get loved but also where we first get wounded and how, you know, most hetero — that happens irrespective of your sexual orientation but most heterosexuals get to go back and we don't. And so, there's a particularity about our journey towards the creation of family, whether that's family with children or not. But the formation of relationships, committed relationships that may or may not include children, that I think is really unique and really special to look at — you know, what does it mean personally, then also what does it mean politically.

And part of my criticism of the movement then, around marriage, is that it was not framed by family, that it was a couples thing — that it was about the wedding cake and whatever, and about the license from the state, not about the day-to-day living realities of families and our struggle to create family, which is not just our struggle. I mean, the state has done this repeatedly to people. Part of the way that state controls people is by controlling how they create those very, very fundamental units of support and love and protection. And so, for us not to see our overriding struggle towards liberation within a family frame is really self-defeating. It's what I was trying to say at Creating Change — some people heard it, some people didn't — and what I'm still talking about and doing a lot of work on.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: And so, so the Task Force board was the most challenging. I also served on the board of the Women's Building. After being their staff person, I served on, on that board for seven years, and that was great because I got to transition from a staff role to a board role. I got to continue those conversations but I got to mentor other activists and leaders in the movement by staying in that place and providing some continuity of thinking and support over many, many years.

26:58

There's three current roles that I serve as an activist. One is as a member of the National Advisory Board of the National Center for Lesbian Rights [NCLR], and I love that. I mean, what's not to love? Kate Kendall, be still my heart. I love her so much. But also, you know, it's one of two national lesbian organizations, and so, how could I not help them out. Plus, I've been an NCLR supporter since they were the Lesbian Rights Project, way back in the day of Donna [Hitchens] and Roberta [Achtenberg], and because it's not a formal board role but an advisory role, I sort of get the best of both worlds. I get to follow what they're doing, get all their information, help them raise a little bit of money locally, but also literally advise. I mean, there's a number of times when I've just been in the Bay Area or have been asked to come to sit with the board and talk about whatever — you know, the future of NCLR, racism, challenge them to think about what they do, about their work as the work of gender and sexual rights, not just sexual orientation, and even told them they should change their name and become the Roberta Achtenberg, Donna Hitchens Institute for Gender and Sexual Rights. And they all fell down and went, Ha! They are not ready to give up the lesbian identity yet, but they will one day. (laughter)

I'm also currently on the board of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies [CLAGS] — another fun, fun, fun thing to do. I mean, there's some work but it's not a traditional board, and so, it's great fun to sit around with academics and scholars and community intellectuals and think about providing programming that will capture some of that work for future generations. And I just got elected — agreed to run for a

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second term, and what I want to do in that second term is really pay attention to the community intellectual piece of what CLAGS is about. I want to help create a fellowship for a community intellectual that is actually a living stipend, not a little token thing but something that allows someone like me — I wouldn't, of course, be the one because I'm inventing it, but someone like me to take a year off and do a project, write a memoir, create a roundtable — I don't know, you know, do a movie about the work of organizing and being in the community, and being both an organizer and an intellectual, which is a rare thing in our movement.

You know, organizers tend not to talk to intellectuals and vice versa, and also people don't like each other terribly much. So I think that when you come across people like Alan Berube or, you know, Amber or myself or Colin Robinson — those are very, very valuable people and they deserve both recognition and a chance to do something with their work, which is hard for us to do, because we're working all the time. We're organizing and there's 50 million things to do and meetings to go to, and who has time to sit down and write or create a film or do a project around your work. So, that's what I want to do with CLAGS for my second term.

And finally, I am also now on the board of directors of, God help me, Equality Federation, which is the national federation of [LGBT] state advocacy groups and that's a new board. It's very much of a founding board, a working board, and I actually get to do it as part of my work at Pride Agenda, which I'm grateful for, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to do it — it's too much. But there my goal is always, as usual, to bring a voice of an antiracist, gender, sexuality perspective to the group, but also to help move it — you know, I really think the movement needs a federation, and it doesn't need to be a federation of state advocacy groups. It needs to be a federation of queer advocates, national advocates, and state advocates and local and regional advocates — to come together, you know, at least twice a year and say, hello, what's going on? What's the right up to now? How do we assess and strategize, and more importantly, collaborate on our responses to what the right is doing but also on more proactive sorts of ways of developing allies in the country who will support our perspective.

And so, I don't envision another national organization so much as I envision a place to create collaboration, and I don't think that it's shared exactly by all of my fellow board members. I know it isn't, but I think it's a logical direction for this effort to take. And so, I want to spend, I don't know, another year or two trying to do that.

ANDERSON:

In addition, obviously, to being an activist, you are a writer, as you just alluded to, and a wonderful thinker and a public intellectual, and you've created some really important pieces about all these topics that you've talked about. So, can you talk a little bit about how you sort of developed as a writer and how you support your work as a writer — when and how do you find the time and mental energy to create the

pieces that you have, and what kind of role does that play in your work and your life?

VAZQUEZ: The writer in me has always been there. In fact, my first love was literature and writing, and what I was to become until Amelia Ash and all of that other stuff intervened way back in my early twenties. It's always been a dual love. The drive to do, to create social change through action, as in political action and organizing, and the desire to analyze it, think about it, offer a personal perspective on it, to express just my own personal struggle has always been there. And so, I've sort of just juggled it all of my life. I mean, a lot of it has taken the form of public speaking and many of those speeches contain elements of both my political analysis and my personal struggle and I think because they do, they're very effective pieces of speaking because it gives people a way to hook into the analysis.

I also — I've actually written some poetry that nobody knows about. I read it a few times when I lived in the Bay Area. I don't think of myself as a poet but I write like a poet. Even my essays sort of have some of that element. And then the essays — you know, I've [been] pushed to it a lot by other people who have said, Please write something for me, and I go, Well, all right, and then I write something. There have been a few times when I — like with this piece that I'm looking at here, I've just decided that there's something clunking around in my head that I want to write down and figure out how to make it part of the public record. And sometimes, that has been very volatile, although usually not. You know, usually they're like parts of collections of, you know, anthologies and stuff.

But I remember writing a piece about HRC's decision to endorse Al D'Amato instead of Chuck Schumer that was a very short piece. It eventually got published by *Gay Community News* as a sort of editorial. (laughs) But this is something that I wrote in the heat of furor with HRC for daring, not only to intervene in a local race that was really critical for queers, but also for intervening in a manner in which they did, which was to endorse one of the most racist, homophobic assholes in the country, with deep, deep pockets to fund the very work that HRC is supposed to be — so anyway, I was furious, furious, furious. I couldn't stand it and I wrote this thing that, you know, criticized HRC for the endorsement but then went beyond to criticize the organization in its overall sort of priorities and policies, suggesting to people that one thing they can do about this is to withdraw their memberships. And oh, it was such a scandal.

ANDERSON: And people like me did.

VAZQUEZ: (laughs) Yes. And so that was a piece I just sent to somebody at the Task Force and said, "Please get it out there." And they did, but then it became a part of the public. And so, that's a lot of what I do. I mean, I sort of respond to requests or write things for something that I know I

want to do, you know, like a speaking engagement. And what I have not done, although I've made several aborted attempts to start doing it, is to write a memoir, and it's time that I did that — take the aborted attempts and put them back together again.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: And I, I envision it not — a little bit more like what Mab Segrest did. You know, sort of a combination of political thinking about my life with some stories to sort of illus[trate] — sort of like what we did with this thing here. That I think I need to do and I probably even know the title of it, *Moon Sense*, which is one of the essays I wrote when I just liked the concept.

ANDERSON: Sort of brings me back to your family and more personal stuff. Can you talk a little bit about what happened with your family relationships when you left, and you lived with all your siblings for a while and then you kicked them out and they — when you went to California and they sort of have dropped out of the picture here. So —

VAZQUEZ: They're all still kicking it around, and I have varied and complex relationships with them. I mean, I think when you're the oldest of a family of seven, the drawback is that it's hard to keep up with all of them. The advantage is that you get to pick and choose who you're really going to be friends with. And so, that's sort of how it's worked out in my life. I mean, all of my siblings are alive and hopefully well. One is still living in New York City, my brother George. My sister Mindy has now moved to North Carolina, where she has gone off to become a journalist again. My sister Nancy lives in Connecticut. My brother Eric lives in Maine. My sister Ida lives in New York. Who am I missing? Oh, my brother Eric also — they live in New Paltz — Pete. Pete and Ida live in New Paltz. And I'm very connected and very close to Nancy and Pete and Eric. Not so connected or close to George and Ida. And Mindy I am close to but since her move to North Carolina, there's more of a distance.

I don't even remember how many nieces and nephews I have now. I think we're up to nine or ten. And they're gorgeous and I love all of them. I mean, one of the joys of living into your fifties and hopefully sixties, seventies, is seeing these babies get born and then watching them grow older. You know, it's just way fun and I love them and I'm close to them, and it's been a struggle over the years. I mean, it's not like, Oh, they all instantly love their lesbian Titi Carmen. In fact, for many years they didn't know about their lesbian Titi Carmen. But that progression of coming out, so to speak, to them, in very, very personal and real ways to help them understand, to have them share in my relationship with Leslie and Carlie and Marcie and hopefully Liz, has been very, very deeply, richly rewarding. And they are — the older ones now are 30 and 20-something — they're in their twenties, and they are



all really sweet young people who have different levels of sort of embracing the gay thing, but who adamantly are allies and not, you know, homophobic people. So that's been rich, that's been great, and I know that the little ones will eventually also become loving and accepting of gay people in their lives because of their relationship to me and my partners and my friends.

My mom is 76. She's gorgeous. Her health is very precarious still but I adore my mother, she adores me. It's totally mutual. She was the first friend in my life and still the top one, you know, so –

ANDERSON: Did the two of you struggle, though, over your sexuality –

VAZQUEZ: Oh yeah.

ANDERSON: – and your politics?

VAZQUEZ: Mom and I had huge struggles over my sexuality. I mean, at the beginning — I think I've talked about this before — she kind of didn't think much of it. She thought it was girl crushes. Everybody has girl crushes, don't worry about it, you'll get over it. I obviously didn't and so when it became apparent that this really was going to be my life, yes, she struggled. I mean, she struggled on two levels. One, she struggled because — and she was actually very articulate about this — because it wasn't her dream. I mean, she wanted the marriage, the kids, she wanted me to be successful, as in have a career, but she also wanted all those other things. And so it broke her heart that she wasn't going to get those things, or so she thought, in the way that she had dreamed it.

42:10

And the other thing that she was very articulate about is that she was scared to death for me. Of course, she knew that I wasn't just going to be little Carmen lesbian sits at home and whatever. She knew, because she knew my tendencies towards both political activism and brash public statements, that I would be very public and that I would lead and that I would be a target, and so that worried her. When she got to a place of being more accepting about my lesbian self, she actually said to me, "Can't you like find a lawyer or a doctor or somebody?" And I said "Ma, it's not going to" — well, I did find a lawyer but not a very rich one. (laughs) And so at this point, she's really loving, and she's gotten so used to it. I mean, you know, I'm on public television.

ANDERSON: Right.

VAZQUEZ: People in Puerto Rico see me on the television and so what's she going to do? She's as out as I am, and she's actually also been willing, on more than one occasion, to talk about her pride in me and the work that I've done, and my courage, so.

ANDERSON: Do you make visits to Puerto Rico? Is the extended family there –

VAZQUEZ: No, there's no –

ANDERSON: – or what's their connection to the –

VAZQUEZ: No, there's no more extended –

ANDERSON: – island?

VAZQUEZ: – family in Puerto Rico. They're all in the States and I actually have not been to Puerto Rico since the '70s. Some of that is because when I lived in California, coming east was about coming to see my family. So, I didn't get that far south. And I don't know what the other part is about. I actually need to go back, and I may get the opportunity to go back though this organizing work that I'm doing to create a national Latino thing around marriage, and I'm keeping my fingers crossed that the next meeting will be in Puerto Rico, so.

ANDERSON: Or at least include some Puerto Ricans in that (laughs) –

VAZQUEZ: At least include some Puerto Ricans.

ANDERSON: – discussion.

VAZQUEZ: That's right. Yes, yes, yes.

ANDERSON: So it sounds like it doesn't hold a big place, in terms of your affection for or longing for it, or –

VAZQUEZ: No.

ANDERSON: – it's home.

VAZQUEZ: No, no, it doesn't. I mean, you know, my home is Harlem and that does still hold a place of great affection and I love going up there still. And the other home is San Francisco. So, no, it's a place much more distant in my memories and dream, so that –

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: I do need to go back to it, especially if I write this memoir, to see if what I remember is real. But it's not a home and yes, home is Brooklyn, Henry Street in Brooklyn.

ANDERSON: So what's next for you?

VAZQUEZ: Well.

ANDERSON: What do you see on the horizon for the next few years?

VAZQUEZ: I talked about some of it in terms of the national work I want to do. And I see myself staying with Pride Agenda for, I don't know, a few years to sort of really solidify and grow those programs. And I decidedly want to do more of the public intellectual — it's time. It's just really time for me to pay more attention to that part of my life — to write more, to speak more. And I'm in love, again, actually with someone who claims never to have fallen in love and who asked me, "Have you?" And I said, "Absofuckinlutely — several times, including the present tense." Her name is Liz Neat. She lives in England. She is an English woman. I think it's pretty insane to fall in love with someone who lives an ocean away, but it can't be helped.

ANDERSON: And you're very committed to domestic politics, so it's not –

VAZQUEZ: And I'm very committed –

ANDERSON: – going to be easy for you to just –

VAZQUEZ: No.

ANDERSON: – jump ship.

VAZQUEZ: No.

ANDERSON: No, so –

VAZQUEZ: Nor for her. She has a 13-year-old daughter, and she's very committed to the work that she does. She works for the National Coalition Building Institute [NCBI], which has, obviously, people working in other parts of the world besides the U.S. And she directs the NCBI Center in Northern England. (pause in recording)

ANDERSON: So — all right. So we just had a break for housekeeping and I don't even remember where we were. You were sort of talking about what's next.

VAZQUEZ: What's next, Liz and –

ANDERSON: And you were talking about doing some more writing and your new relationship with Liz and staying at the Pride Agenda. I guess for our last few minutes, maybe you could reflect a little bit on sort of the future of the movement and of the work, and I guess I'm interested in hearing from you, in this particularly dark time that we're in, what gives you hope and what you see happening politically that really gives us all reason to believe that progressive change is still possible. Where do you see some really exciting things happening?

VAZQUEZ:

Well, the most exciting work that is happening in the LGBT movement truly is happening at the local level. I mean, that's sort of a truism and an oversimplification and everybody says it, but it's really true. It's actually always been true, but now there is a level of development at state and local levels that is hugely much more sophisticated than it was five years ago, ten years ago. And some of that has risen from the necessity of responding to the right's attacks through ballot initiatives. And so, people at local and state levels have developed databases and organizing strategies and political sense that they just didn't have even five years ago.

And what's most hopeful about that development to me is that there is, in a very real and sort of day-to-day, intimate way, a necessity for men and women to work together, for people to understand that all this sort of rhetoric they put in the past into developing relationships with straight allies and communities of color and working communities and unions and stuff like that now has to happen — you know, in the more progressive ranks of the LGBT movement, I think that consciousness and that language has been there, but the practical application of it has not. And now, folks are — we are literally with our backs to the wall. I mean, the relentless nature of the attacks from the right have compelled us into that place. So that gives me hope.

I am made hopeful by — always, still, this is still true. I said in some speech when I left the Women's Building that, you know, that people of color will lead this movement. That if it is to succeed, it will succeed because of the involvement and leadership of people of color, not because we're smarter or cuter or — although sometimes that's true (laughs) — but because of the lived experience, and the bridge-building and alliance-building that this movement requires if it is to move past the stage of, you know, just me, and truly be about justice and about the shared struggles of different oppressed people. That experience lies with people of color. And so, we — Nadine Smith and I are older examples or more mature examples of that truth that I'm talking about. But then I look at somebody like Rashad [Robinson], who is 25 years old, African American, works at GLAAD [Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation]. A little snip of a guy, who is so brilliant and so full of this phenomenal energy. I see the work being done to organize African Americans and Latino people initially around this marriage thing but now more broadly, and it gives me more hope that that leadership will emerge and —

And I'm also made hopeful, especially in the work that I've started doing in New York and with the Equality Federation, around building alliances with straight people. You know, we have so been inured from the necessity of actually figuring out how to do that and having straight people stand with us, that it has been to our detriment. And I think that the opportunity — hopefully we'll have the smarts and the resources to actually act on that opportunity. It's a big if, but if we do, the opportunity to build a movement around gender and sexual rights that is very broad, that really does include our mothers and fathers and brothers

and sisters and co-workers and the people that, you know, people worship with if they worship, and union people — is there for the taking. It's really a matter of how well are we going to organize ourselves and what kind of resources can we put into that kind of alliance work. And I see that moment being much more possible now than it was five, ten, 15, 20 years ago, when we were sort of out there on the fringe and not so much a part of the daily conversation of average Americans.

And then finally, I had a big old, drag-out fight with a couple of very dear friends the other night about this concept of patriotism, because I do consider myself a patriot. I think we have a really horrific government at the moment, with really terrible people in positions of leadership in that government. But somebody like Cindy Sheehan comes along and I go, you know, The people who built this country, who still make this country run — there's a lot of like yahoos out there that are nasty, terrible people who say terrible things about us, but there's also just a lot of really decent, hard-working people who are not like that and who, I think, have really been pushed to the edge of what they can deal with in terms of the contradictions of this economy. The global economy, you know, the racial tensions, the lack of healthcare — all of that I see sort of culminating in the rebuilding of a more progressive movement in this country that, you know, that won't be led by national organizations or big-time leaders, that really will emerge from the terrible, terrible frustration that people have been experiencing for a long time in this country. But when you live in the lap of capitalist luxury, it's easy to sort of ignore it or feel like you're above it or somehow you're not connected to those people in Pakistan or Iran or Iraq or — and now we can't do that anymore.

And I think — you know, I'm made hopeful by the emergence of people like Barack Obama as political leadership of this country, because I think there's going to be more people like him who step forward and have a much more progressive and reasoned approach to how to deal with the international community, our economy and our own internal struggles and contradictions around race and class and sexual orientation. So that's what makes me hopeful.

ANDERSON: That's a lot.

VAZQUEZ: Yes.

ANDERSON: Just a couple of minutes left, and I would like you to sort of think about the next generation, because you did mention that some of the young generation — you do see hope in leadership potential. What do you think one of the biggest mistakes your generation made, in terms of strategy or vision, that you would like to caution my generation against?

VAZQUEZ: Isolation, meaning, you know, building a movement around an identity that is too narrow to really pull other people into — I call that isolation.

And the other is the, the mistaken notion that what we ought to be about is integration and assimilation. We have an opportunity to carve out a different vision, a different world, a different understanding of family, how it gets structured, how people get to protect those families. And we should take every opportunity to sort of scream to the heavens what that difference is and celebrate it and understand it for its unique contribution of the whole of what this society looks like — you know, sort of understand the evolution of where we come from. We come from terrible, terrible, terrible pain and being wounded and hiding in bars and people's living rooms and not being able to sort of shout our name if not our love. But it's over. It's got to be over.

And the next generation of LGBT leadership has the capacity and I hope will take the opportunity to build on what has been created by several generations of queers who came from much more wounded places, and to be able to be queer and progressive. Queer and — you know, to bring a sensibility of what that queer life has given us and given you, into your work as peace activists and your work as environmental activists and your work as reproductive rights activists, you know what I mean? One of the terrible, terrible things, I think, that homophobia did to us is that, you know, we built the infrastructure of the reproductive rights movement and the domestic violence movement and so other many movements, but we weren't out in those movements. And so, visibility, I think, will be really critical and an embracing of queer sensibility as something that enhances the whole of society rather than something that should be scratched and hidden and somehow made to look like straight, heterosexual life.

ANDERSON: Yes.

VAZQUEZ: And finally, I would say that there was a refusal, if not reluctance, on the part of my generation of queers to be absolutely fierce in the articulation of the connections between race and class and gender and sexuality. That has really been to our detriment. That has made it very hard for us to, you know, to make those alliances I'm talking about. And so, that is something that this generation does have to do over and over and over again — be really clear and articulate about what those connections are and take every opportunity, not just to make it intellectually clear, but to act on them, so that change will be possible.

ANDERSON: I think we're out of time. Thank you Carmen.

VAZQUEZ: You're welcome.

1:01:07
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END TAPE 6; END INTERVIEW 2

*Transcribed by Susan Kurka, September 2005;  
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