Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Deb Silberberg

An Interview
Conducted by
Rebekah Aycock
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Rebekah Aycock 00:03
All right. Hello, today is Friday, August 20, 2021. My name is Rebekah Aycock. I'm in Lawrence, Kansas and today I'm speaking with Deb Silberberg about her life history. This interview is for the Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. So hi again Deb. I'm glad you're here today. I guess we'll get started by you just telling us a little bit about yourself and your background, starting with where and when you were born.

Deb Silberberg 00:44
I was born on January 3, 1955 so I'm 66, born in New York City. Queens. And I spent most of my— well, I spent 35 out of 35 years in Queens and then moved to California. San Francisco and now Oakland. And I've been married for— oh dear— I've been with my partner for 32 years and married since 2008. So I guess that's 13 years, almost. And we have a dog and we own a business called ShipShape which organizes homes and offices and relocations and closets and all that stuff.

Rebekah Aycock 01:32
That's really great. Thank you. I guess the— thinking about these central question of the project, which is what is your connection to the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I guess my first question would be, how you first discovered the Archives or even just the lesbian community in New York?

Deb Silberberg 01:57
When I broke up with a long-term relationship of about nine years— a lot of that was closeted— and I slowly came out of that closet at the end of that relationship and then into being single, I looked for the community I would feel, most at home with. And it was the lesbian feminist community, of which the Archives is a big part. And I think one of my first marches certainly in the gay and lesbian parade— at that point it was actually a march— they were right up front with their signs and with their pictures of women through the ages who were admired and or forgotten but had done wonderful things and just, you know, it spoke to me.

They were very welcoming, extremely mothering in a positive way. It just felt like I was home. This is when the Archives was on the Upper West Side. It was out of Joan's apartment— right. And Deb I think, was as well— they were together. And it was all this Upper West Side energy that I was drawn to. There was a women's bookstore where there were readings, there were meetings, there were envelope stuffings, and there was— it became like a, it was a really good offshoot for someone who was a lefty progressive person previously. It just felt like the right connection.

Rebekah Aycock 03:43
I have to ask if you can tell me some about the bookstore. Can you describe it?

Deb Silberberg 03:50
The bookstore, yeah, it was called WomanBooks. No longer there. I believe it was on Amsterdam Avenue in New York, in Manhattan. I'm not positive but it was in the early 92nd or 93rd. I'm not positive of the street but I know it was on a corner and it was a magnet for everyone who wanted to participate in that lifestyle.

But you know, I should say that when I first started coming out, I went to the bars as people did back then. I hung out at The Duchess at that point, which was a big part of the lesbian community, also no longer there on Seventh Avenue South and I guess it's— must be Grove or Greenwich. I'm not sure of the street there either. Not Astor Place, Sheridan Square. I hung out there every night for six or eight months even though I wasn't a drinker. It wasn't my scene but it was where I felt like I could find like-minded women.

When that was done, when I sort of retired of that, I sought out other places like WomanBooks, the Gay Women's Alternative, which was also a part of the Upper West Side scene. These women were in and out of each other's stores or meetings or— it was just this bevy of women, fantastic women, smart women, committed women, political women, left wing women, fantastic women— you know, it was a gold mine truly and you could go there for a reading and have 30 people in this very small space. It wasn't that big, it was sort of like a living room size. The shelves were lined with all these books that I'd never seen or heard of. I didn't have that kind of education. And while I considered myself a feminist, I wasn't really part of the— I was sort of at the tail end of the first wave of the women's movement. But it was just, it was just glorious.

Rebekah Aycock 06:22
That sounds amazing.

Deb Silberberg 06:24
It was. It truly was. Of course, bookstores all over the country and world are no longer in use and that's a sad part. But it was great. It really was a community meeting point.

Rebekah Aycock 06:41
Yeah, and you've brought this up a couple times. I was wondering who some people you mentioned were your mentors and your peers during this time?

Deb Silberberg 06:55
Well, there was Marge Barton, who was this amazing woman who lived on the Upper West Side on 99th Street. She ran the world from her little apartment, her little cluttered apartment, very cluttered. She knew everybody and everything. She worked for the GayYellow Pages at that point or the Pink Pages I think they were called as well. I remember my therapist at the time who wasn't a lesbian but was very hooked in, and also from the Upper West Side, had told me about this Gay Women's Alternative which was this group that met at the Unitarian Church on Central Park West and 76th, I believe. They met in the basement and all of a sudden, there was just— you'd walk in there and it would have topics and they would have rap sessions and people [correction: women] who wrote books. Shere Hite was there, Blanche Wiesen Cook, and Claire Coss. Joan Nestle, Deb Edel, Batya Bauman.

Marge was a big— and Marge approached me, she just was that kind of dynamic person. She identified with me as a Jewish girl who had [note: parents who were] holocaust survivors and we became fast friends, which is kind of her way anyway. When Marge wanted you to be her friend, you were her friend. [note: That's just the way it was. And she directed you and provided all these resources.] I was recovering from Hodgkin's lymphoma at 26 which was in 1981. So this might have been five years later, four years later, when I was really sort of ready to come out again from that shell and, you know, Marge just kind of took me under her wing and told me about a lesbian healer named Nancy Johnson, who I went to, and that brought me to being part of a lesbian illness support group originally started by Audre Lorde. Audre had moved on from there but it was ongoing and it was also in this amazing support network. Everybody knew somebody who knew somebody. It was just incredible.

And the woman who owned [correction: founded] WomanBooks, Karyn London, she was this amazing woman. She had been partners with this woman Sonny Wainwright who had cancer and unfortunately died of it. Shortly thereafter, Sonny had written a book about it, called *Stage Four*. Womanbooks was just a treasure trove really. You needed something, you found it, you know? And people were dating and meeting people as well so that was part of it too for us. Joan would do these incredible readings of her books in her little, you know, in her beautiful lingerie, her slip. I mean, just the whole— the way they welcomed sexuality and it didn't kind of negate your own feminism— it was like a whole eye opening experience. I think I was about 31 by then. Yeah I mean, it was just, it was my teenage years [note: all over again]. I was able to finally kind of do all these fun things. So—

Rebekah Aycock 10:55
That's a really dynamic description of—

Deb Silberberg 11:00
It really was. It truly is— even when they get together now, even on Zoom when they have something from Sinister Wisdom, which is this publication that features lesbian writers and so forth— they publish three or four times a year— it's still the same crowd. We're grayer for sure and maybe more wrinkled. We have been through this or that or the other and it doesn't matter where we're living. It's still that sense of warmth and acceptance. That's really the key of the Lesbian [Herstory] Archives. What's really stunning about them was they always did outreach to other communities where, you know, if you were part of lesbian feminism, it was largely white and still is, I think. But you know, it's maybe better than it was, I hope. They always did amazing outreach. Mabel Hampton [redaction] was this amazing woman who Joan and Deb and others brought into the limelight. It was something that I think came out of their very strong sense of justice and I found that just intoxicating.

Rebekah Aycock 12:47
It's exciting to hear about. I—

Deb Silberberg 12:50
Yeah.

Rebekah Aycock 12:52
[Unclear]— you said a little earlier that you described this as your teenage years, and I was wondering if you could elaborate on that a little. That's really interesting.

Deb Silberberg 13:00
Well, it's so funny because I have a niece of a friend of mine who just came out in her mid 30s. She's having a very bad relationship breakup. And I said to her, "This is all part of it." It's like you pick silly people and you repeat patterns and you make— everything's very dramatic. It's the stuff you would do as a teenager, right? You have these relationships, and they seem like they're going to go on forever and of course they don't. And you're heartbroken. It's very rich but it has that teenage feel to it. I don't care if you came out when you were 20, 15, 30, 50, whatever, you'd start to kind of— you're feeling your way around it, right?

I remember I was in the midst of a really bad breakup. It was just ridiculously toxic and horrible but— after a nine month relationship I called Nancy Johnson, who was my good friend and my healer and said, "I think I'm having a breakdown," and she said, "no, you're just having a break up!" I was like, oh okay. That's the kind of guidance it was. Nancy was also the one who took me to my first Halloween parade in Greenwich Village, which was a big gay thing and turned me on to women's music. That was also something I had not heard about. Cris Williamson and Holly

Near and Meg Christian and just a million— Teresa Troll. It went on and on. There was this whole undiscovered part of life that's just beautiful. So—

Rebekah Aycock 15:06
No, that's really interesting to hear. It's like support for a new, another chance at being young but also having to deal with pain. That's hard.

Deb Silberberg 15:16
And it's also a way to be seen. If you're a lesbian— when I came out, I wasn't great at coming out. I— took me a long time. Others seem to win, you know, do better at it. But nevertheless, it worked. It gave me a guideline where I didn't have one before. We didn't have Ellen or *Will and Grace* or any of that and I'm thrilled that we do but it was different. I remember when Phil Donohue, at the time, was doing his talk show, and he would have Connie Kurtz and Ruth Berman. Ruth was a teacher who challenged the [NY] Board of Education to give her rights for her partner. They made a movie about it, a documentary. I think it's called *All Over the House*. That was done maybe, I'm gonna say, 15, 20 years ago [note: in 2002]. Unfortunately, Connie has passed on but they were on Donohue. You know, they were one of the first gay [note: people on TV]— so there'd be this phone tree going saying there are gay people on television! I mean literally, it was like cause you know, you couldn't record it or anything. It was like, oh my god, there are gay people on television! It was just, it was crazy. But that's the way it was, everybody would call. And then there were dances you would go to and fundraisers mostly for different organizations and stuff. It was a great and vital time, I have to say. I don't know what young people are doing these days. I'm way removed from that so I'll have to look into that. It was lovely. Yeah. That's funny, because everyone leads to another, right… Connie and Ruth led to this, and now leads to that, so forth.

Rebekah Aycock 17:27
Yeah, it's interesting how you're describing what's usually a— well it was a really tumultuous, sometimes scary time—

Deb Silberberg 17:47
Oh absolutely—

Rebekah Aycock 17:48
Some positives and a lot of community at the same time. And then you talked some about the fundraising—

Deb Silberberg 17:57
Here's the thing though, I have to say this. I was one of the lucky ones. I didn't get taken down by it. There are a lot of women and men and of course then, AIDS became a part of our lives, that got taken down by alcoholism, suicide, or depression, or a combination of those things, or drugs because it was really a time where you were very— it was scary. It was scary.

I remember very distinctly before I went into the Duchess, this [lesbian] bar, which was on a corner, I looked around for like 20 minutes. I made myself so— such an idiot because nobody was even looking at me, right? But I was looking around so long that they probably did start looking at me. But I snuck in under darkness. Oh, my lord it was exciting too, I have to say. The fact that we're more mainstream now which is super— I mean, it's the way it should be but I miss that underground feeling of being an outlaw of sorts. There was that feeling of being on the cutting edge, if you will. There were many people who suffered and still suffer from that, from their lack of family support and so forth.

I felt very lucky to have hit upon [note: this oasis] and I was in a city that was very welcoming too. I think I told you I worked for the Trevor Project for a year, which is a gay and lesbian LGBTQI+ hotline for kids in crisis. Kids would call us from the middle of the country like where you're from or whatever and had been thrown out of their houses. I mean, people are still being thrown out of their houses and being [forced] into prostitution and tricking and all that. I just wanted to say to them, "oh god, just hang on. Hang on, get your money together and come to New York or come to San Francisco or LA or Chicago or, one of these big cities where you can find your people." So yeah and that's actually what the LHA, the Lesbian Herstory Archives is about. Making sure you knew these were your people. Yeah. Non judgmental.

Rebekah Aycock 20:40
I, I definitely feel you on the Midwestern fear.

Deb Silberberg 20:45
I bet you do.

Rebekah Aycock 20:46
Yeah. It's interesting to hear about. I wonder a little bit what you, you sort of describe being at these marches. You describe the Halloween— I wish I could have been a fly on the wall at the Halloween parade.

Deb Silberberg 21:00
Yeah, that was wild. It was so wild. Yeah.

Rebekah Aycock 21:03
Did you feel like you described the bar? Did you feel threatened as well as that sort of freedom you're describing? Or was it just—

Deb Silberberg 21:18
I have been threatened over my life, taunting and stuff but not to the degree that others have. I would walk through a park here and they would yell epitaphs at me. I guess I did feel threatened because when I started my relationship with Sylvia, who's my wife, which was 1989. She's younger than I am by about eight years and she's from Germany and she has a very different view of lesbian feminism. It was much more separatism over there as well and she was very out. It wasn't really a problem for her to be out. She was very proud of it. And it's just very different and each generation has a different way of doing it. But you know, I still was— "don't hold my hand." I don't want to— I remember that for at least I don't know, the first 10 years maybe. So from '89 to '99. Maybe at some point, it really changed, and I didn't care anymore.

I'm a little old lady. I'm barely five feet, a little round person. I don't feel threatened, I'm not threatening to most people. But if you're a person of color or if you're very butch, you stand out. You can feel threatened so much, still. It's not different really. You hear about crime against— well, certainly the trans community. That's huge. So that's sort of the next mountain to climb. So many people are still being threatened. I think I was trepidatious, but I wasn't scared. But then I always tried to be amongst others. It isn't true for everybody. It just isn't. And that's unfortunate but it's still true. It's better, it's a lot better. I mean, living in San Francisco and Oakland for the last 30 years, it's very mainstream. I never felt like my couplehood was any less than anybody else's. I don't mean— I shouldn't say that. I mean, I always felt that way, but I'd say the people who are in my life or in my world or I worked with or clients, they never treated me like my couplehood was any less than theirs if they were straight. Which was an eye opener too.

Rebekah Aycock 24:22
Yeah, that makes me think about what you were saying about the people or the person you were advising through the Trevor Project. This continued need.

Deb Silberberg 24:35
Oh, totally.

Rebekah Aycock 24:36
For a lot of people to uproot themselves.

Deb Silberberg 24:41
If you want to be the kind of Christian that you grew [correction: were raised] up to be and you want to be gay or Jewish or Muslim or anything like that, any Protestant denomination, and you want to have acceptance from the church, it's kind of rare still. Particularly in the in-betweens, not the coasts. I mean, it is changing. The marriage equality law changed a lot. But you can't legislate compassion, that's for sure. So as we know, I mean, we see it all the time. So it's not just about sexuality or gender or anything like that.

Rebekah Aycock 25:32
I love that. "You can't legislate compassion."

Deb Silberberg 25:35
You can't. You can't change people's minds by legislation. You just can't. It's a start. It's a good thing to do because it's justice. That's why I think, going back to the Archives and the community, having a soft place to land is everything. Because you're fighting the fight. You know, when the worst happened and this heinous guy was elected— don't want to say his name. Five years, I guess it is five years now, isn't it? Four years, four and a half years? I thought, oh my god, we're going to have to put our marching boots back on and we're going to have to march in the streets. It's just the way it has to be. It's not going to stop. It never will stop. We're still fighting the same fights we were back then including women's right to choose and birth control. It's staggering, but—

Rebekah Aycock 26:36
Absolutely.

Deb Silberberg 26:38
Yeah.

Rebekah Aycock 26:39
I wonder, too, about continued fights. You did mention the AIDS crisis earlier and I know that's something we had talked about. I want to make sure to ask you about the role of lesbian caretaking.

Deb Silberberg 26:57
Oh, it was enormous. I mean, I think it really was the first time that the two communities came together in this really positive way. They think of us as brothers and sisters and to some degree we are. It's a very different mindset. Normally, you know, not— I'm generalizing, but we were under siege in a big way. We are in the midst of a pandemic now and there was a pandemic then too. We couldn't get anybody to take care of these young men. It was sad, it was [criminal]. The

lesbians kind of plugged in and became the caretakers, the hospice workers, they took the animals of the sick people, they helped with finances, they held hands, they dealt with family, they— it was such a crisis.

When we moved to San Francisco [note: in 1989, the pandemic was raging] and we would see these ghosts— men, young men who look like ghosts walking and then they would disappear, a whole phalanx of men. Gay men lost their lives. I just lost a friend. I think it's four years ago now who was a long-term HIV survivor. And I have another friend who's a long-term HIV survivor. And we're thrilled that people are making it to the long-term and they just passed a law in California that helps create a safety net for the long-term survivors, which is fantastic. But what about if you're not in California? But it's incredible that, you know, there are still these people obviously, walking around. They're kind of— they're hidden at this point in a way. It's still an issue. It just doesn't get the same attention. You'd pick up the newspaper, the BAR, the Bay Area Reporter, which was a gay newspaper back in the day. I don't think they still publish but there were pages and pages and pages of obituaries every week or every month— I'm not quite sure if it was monthly or weekly.

It changed the way we look at illness and it changed the activism in the community. I think that that became— it really was an amazing transformation of how the activists took over and created a path for [new] drugs and for recognition and that was amazing. There are a lot of good films on that [time]. Lesbians were at the forefront [marching toe to toe with gay men]. It was all hands-on deck really. I think it changed the way [that the current pandemic is being managed]. Dr. Fauci, who was big in that AIDS pandemic, was a major player along with Larry Kramer and ACT UP and all of these organizations. So yeah, it changed the world. It really changed the world.

Rebekah Aycock 31:04
Yeah and thank you for sharing that. I know, it's such a difficult topic that—

Deb Silberberg 31:09
It's a difficult topic. The mourning of that time— the grieving is still apparent, at least for me. I saw a piece on PBS the other night about Broadway and Michael Bennett, who did *A Chorus Line* and *Dreamgirls*. And he died in '93 of AIDS. This amazing creative talent that was taken. This whole generation truly— we need to remember but we also need to honor by staying active.

[Redaction]

Rebekah Aycock 34:13
I, yeah, that's just— it's just so much to think about and so much to grapple with but thank you. I did want to ask some about your thoughts about the project. And that's something you sort of touched on just like the— and in our first conversation, just the power of this history and remembering—

Deb Silberberg 34:37
Oh, it's so important.

Rebekah Aycock 34:38
The underground struggle and not just the mainstream. And if you had any thoughts about that in general, or about this type of project.

Deb Silberberg 34:46
Well imagine, those of us who are aging and thinking about our legacies in the world, you actually have a place to give a letter or tape or my playbill collection [laughs]. It always staggers me when a name comes out of the Archives that I had forgotten and yet they remember, like Nancy Johnson, who Joan just referred to last year on Facebook, just out of the blue. It's just so valuable. We need to have ourselves be heard and not lose the older generation who becomes somewhat invisible. Anything that keeps us in consciousness is very essential. History is everything in terms of figuring out your path. So, I believe this project is essential, which is why I decided to do it.

I think we have to if they want to hear us. If people are asking to hear our stories, it's very important to state, to actually share your story. You have to stand up, you have to say, you know, what your part of it was. Maybe it's just a teeny-weeny part. Maybe you didn't go to the Archives, or maybe you did, or maybe you volunteered, or maybe you donated, or maybe you met your lover there, or whatever it is. It's so valuable. Or maybe it gave you a part of your identity. It's so important.

I used to teach improv to senior citizens. Everybody wants to be seen. Yeah which was fun, a lot of fun. But, everybody has a story. Everybody is so fascinating if you just ask them about themselves, it's crazy how interesting they are. Just asking someone what their favorite ice cream is brings a whole other story. People wait their whole lives to be seen, and accepted. It's critical.

Nancy Bereano, who was a publisher, one of the first publishers of women's writing and lesbian writing— she was on one of the recent calls— did so much to make sure that women were heard, seen, published, movies, television shows, etc. The Archive is actually on the cutting edge, as it always has been, to be honest. Now we have these things, but it's essential. We can't forget where

we came from. It's okay to be young and frivolous and fun and not have to check with your grandma or your grandma lesbian or mom lesbian. That's all good. That's all part of it. But it's important to write it down, say it, [have it accessible as our history].

Rebekah Aycock 38:32
For sure.

Deb Silberberg 38:33
Yeah.

Rebekah Aycock 38:34
Well, now I feel like I should have asked you your favorite ice cream.

Deb Silberberg 38:38
Oh, my favorite ice cream.

Rebekah Aycock 38:39
Any stories I missed [laughs]— I blew it.

Deb Silberberg 38:42
Oh, next time. What's your favorite ice cream?

Rebekah Aycock 38:47
Oh, Chocolate.

Deb Silberberg 38:48
Chocolate. Okay. Well, there's chocolate—chocolate is a classic [laughs]. It's the classic. Absolutely. I'm with you on that. There's nothing wrong with chocolate. There's nothing like ice cream to bring people into their childhood. You gotta have fun too, right?

Rebekah Aycock 39:16
Oh, yeah.

Deb Silberberg 39:17
Yeah, that's the other thing. The Archives and the group— they weren't so serious that you felt like you couldn't kind of play and interact in that way. That was not the way it was at all. And still, it's playful. It's fun. I give that credit to the people who started it. There are serious causes and serious issues and there always will be but there is a playfulness that happens as well.

Rebekah Aycock 39:51
It's a good environment.

Deb Silberberg 39:53
It is!

Rebekah Aycock 39:53
I think an archive has sort of connotation like very stiff and—

Deb Silberberg 39:57
No, no, not at all. No, no, no, no.

Rebekah Aycock 40:00
Yeah. So that's great to hear.

Deb Silberberg 40:02
I think it's sexy and open-hearted and warm and all that stuff. Cuddly. You only have to get a hug from Joan to know that. So truly, it's life changing.

Rebekah Aycock 40:24
Well, is there anything else? Any other thing, story or whatever, that you want to share that we haven't covered today?

Deb Silberberg 40:36
I don't know. I think we did a really good job. You did a really good job.

Rebekah Aycock 40:41
You did a great job.

Deb Silberberg 40:42
Aren't we fabulous? We are so good. Yeah, I think it was really good to talk to you. I just hope the names stay alive. And as we're losing people to age and illness, it's very important to keep that in mind. [Redaction]. It was a pleasure. I think it's a way to kind of lift yourself up when you're part of that kind of community. When you feel like you're alone or you're in a desperate situation, so I hope it remains vital. The fundraising to buy the building was definitely a big part. So that was amazing. Now we have a [permanent] place.

Rebekah Aycock 40:47
We try. Absolutely.

Deb Silberberg 41:52
Anything else I can answer for you? I'm happy to, otherwise I guess we're coming to a natural close.

Rebekah Aycock 42:00
I think it's all right. This is so wonderful. Thank you.

Deb Silberberg 42:04
Oh, thank you. It's such a pleasure to hang with you.

Rebekah Aycock 42:08
Yeah, you too. I'll I guess close out real quick. Thanks for being here today. It's great to hear about all of your different experiences and reflections. And I'm glad that it gets to be a part of the project so thank you.

Deb Silberberg 42:24
Me too. Me too. Me too.