



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Mary Kelly**

An Interview
Conducted by
Gail Robson
1/16/2022

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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LEOHP Interview

Interviewee: Mary Kelly

Interviewer: Gail Robson

Date: 01/16/2022

Gail Robson 00:00

Record to the cloud. Great. Alright. Thank you for joining me. So today is January 16, 2022, and we're recording an oral history with me, Gail Robson, talking to Mary Kelly, about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I am in Brooklyn, New York, and Mary is in Minneapolis. So Mary, let's start at the beginning, if you want to tell me a bit about when and where you were born, and what it was like growing up there?

Mary Kelly 00:36

Born on a— I grew up on a farm in Wisconsin. So, born in a little town, a little hospital in town. Wonderful upbringing, lots of hard work. Nobody farms from our family, on any of the sides, anywhere, and that tells you something about the nature of the hard work that that was. But it was a great upbringing. Lots of work, lots of time with my parents. I know my parents, I knew my parents well, had time to talk, time to listen, time to share, time to play. You know, and really good relatives. [Redacted] Good people, fun people.

Gail Robson 01:26

What was it like growing up there, going through like, middle school, high school kind of ages?

Mary Kelly 01:31

Well, so well, you know, one of the things you ask or you might ask later are the significant events in my life and I was thinking this morning, the most significant event in my early life was when they built a four room country school. And in the middle of second grade we moved from a one room country school— I'm talking like "Little House on the Prairie." You know, up the steps— ours was better than their building. It was a more modern building, but you, you went into the building, it was, it would be like a little country church looking building, white rectangle, and there was a kind of vestibule at the back. And for all I know, perhaps it was a church at one time now that I think about it, but— and you hung all your jackets on nails there, and put your lunch buckets down, and then went in and took your seat. The seats were wooden so my seat had a little inkwell, which I was past the days of inkwell, but the inkwell was still there. And they had a little slide under that you put your stuff in, and then connected was the seat for the person— to your table— was the seat to the person in front, and that's how it was. And we also— the furnace in the school was at the front. So if you were the teacher, the furnace was off to your right and if you were a student, the furnace up in the front to the left. And when you had class— there were three of us in first grade, Minta, Mary, and Sharon— and then we would

go up and they had little bitty chairs and we sat with Miss Severson. She did our class and then gave us what we were to do, and then we went back and, you know, fell asleep and daydreamed because we were in with eight grades. Can you imagine? So you can hear their studies, and then you're just sitting there like playing with your crayons. I couldn't wait to get out of there. So the four room country school was a blessing. But in the one room country school, one night we came to school the next day and it was just hot in there, and the furnace had overheated in the night and all of our crayons were melted. And they were just a pool of like— it all turns kind of purple when your whole box melts. And I— and we were really poor so I was really mortified because I thought I had lost my crayons. But my friend Minta just picked up that glob of just wax and just burst out laughing [laughs]— I will never forget that. She just laughed so hard like look, this is our whole thing. Have I disappeared for you there Gail, for a second?

Gail Robson 03:46

No, all good.

Mary Kelly 03:47

Okay, good, my picture went away from me. So going to, and then so in second grade, I went to a four room school. But what you got with that was recess with more age appropriate kids and life was better. You made more friends. It was good. So then I met my friend Joan who is still a dear friend and you had kids to run races with that were your age. In the one room country school if the big kids were mean you were in trouble, and there was a mean eighth grader. And so you couldn't wait to get out from under that. Bullies everywhere, bullies everywhere. So that's the biggest event of my life.

Gail Robson 04:26

Yeah. What was it like going in through high school ages?

Mary Kelly 04:30

So you know, what it was to be gay— I was born in 1952— what it was to be gay was to first of all hope to god you weren't, and they had no language for it. So I didn't know what that was. I knew I liked girls. You know, when I got the Sears catalog, I was turning to the women's bras section. And I'm sure my mother was going "Look at that, Mary's interested in bras." No, Mary was not interested in bras. So, you know, and we didn't have anything. We didn't have a TV, we didn't have a daily newspaper. We got "Life Magazine," that was a world. And then we had the Sears catalog and the JC Penney catalog, which was just a world of toys and things. It was a miracle. Those catalogs were a miracle.

But as I started to become aware that I was different, and I think the first time was I was riding my bike on the farm— it wasn't my bike— it was six kids' bike. We had one bike, my turn to ride. And I stopped at the mailbox box up on the road that went above the house, so the hills

were like down a hill, and then there's a road carved— this is Wisconsin, very hilly, very beautiful. And then the road here, and then down the steps, and then the house over there on the platform, if you can imagine that. The house I grew up in, the kitchen was the original log cabin that was set on that property. But I was up on the road, and they had, you know, over the years, the graveling got better and was more refined, and I was riding my bike and I stopped by the mailbox and I was leaning on the mailbox, and I thought "I'm gonna go pick up my girlfriend." I was fantasizing driving my car, and I'm gonna go pick up my girlfriend, and I went, "Wait, wait, you're in trouble. You can't have a girlfriend." And it was just this fear that went through me.

Somewhere, Gail, I do have a poem about that but I won't be, I won't be searching for it. And then after that, I started to just try to suppress how I really felt, and what I wanted, what I was attracted to, the dreams I had were kind of growing up and having a wife and a family. Those were my dreams. And it just became problematic. But I was able to suppress it. I mean, I was able to suppress myself all the way through high school because I didn't have anybody to not suppress myself with. But I had crushes all the time, through Junior High into High School. By High School it was really awful. I never, ever— I went on two different dates with two guys, I hate to even talk about it. So like, for me, it's just like awful. And they were both just benign. I got the hell out of there as fast as I could go. And you know, I went to prom with my friends who also weren't going to prom, and we sat in the bleachers, made fun of everybody. But I can see now it was just an acting out rebellion. So that was, that was, the world of dealing with being gay. And then, I think when I was 14, my aunt Vera brought a newspaper. And it had the Ann Landers column in it. And this man wrote Ann Landers and said, "I am a homosexual and I am thinking of killing myself." And when I read that word, I went, "That's what I am!" And I was so disturbed. I just was like, "oh, I think that's what I am." And fortunately, she wrote back and said, "Your life has value, don't do it. Get a good therapist." And I was much more— I'm glad for her answer. Her answer another way could have been really damaging to me. But it was the first time I had a possible word for that.

The other thing was, in high school, Thursday was fairy day. And we had these sports shirts in those days and I had one, which I— you know, I saved my money, I would babysit, and we didn't have— so how I got things was I would babysit or do something and get money so I could get something. Like I bought my own little Singer record player, and I had this red and white striped shirt, and it had a loop on the back. So there's that pleat in the back and then a loop, right. And on fairy day, the boys would come up behind your shirt and grab that tag, and they called it a "fairy tag" and yank it off. Well, it also ripped the fabric around that and so I got maybe two uses out of my blouse before they ripped that thing off. Years later— you know, I went to California to college, came back— I'm having dinner with some old friends in my hometown and somebody said at the dinner, "How could you think we didn't love you?" And I said, "because I was there." [Choked up]— "I was there. I was listening. I heard what people said." And then this one guy said, "Well I always thought being gay was a choice. I mean, I just think it's a choice."

And I said, "Really? Gary, let me get clear with you. So you're saying you were 16 and you were sitting in your room, and you said I could marry Peggy or I could marry Skip. It's just all the same to me." "Well, no." I said "Well, how the hell do you think it was like for me? Like, it wasn't like I can marry Peggy or I can marry—" these are real people, I probably shouldn't be even saying it, sorry for my hometown, but I love all these guys. But it woke him up. It was just like, how could you miss the hurt of what we went through, and that you're putting people out? However, having said that, Gail, I had Dave and Rick. I had an emerging posse of people that were gay, even if we didn't talk about about it, we kind of knew, and we were good friends. And I think that's all. Then I went to college and I met somebody.

Gail Robson 10:10

Yeah.

Mary Kelly 10:10

And fell in love. And then it was like, unavoidable, you know, I was just in love. So I'll go right to college, is that good?

Gail Robson 10:16

Yeah, please. Absolutely.

Mary Kelly 10:17

Sorry for the— you're listening to the video, you're going to see—

Gail Robson 10:20

Oh no, don't apologize.

Mary Kelly 10:23

So, I went to college and I met Pam. She was pretty, and fun to talk to. She was interesting, she was rebellious in the sense that I was rebellious. And I just fell in love with her and we just became lovers. And then we were in a lot of trouble. So we were lovers in that first year of our college. I wrote her a love letter— we separated to different sides of Wisconsin for the summer— and I wrote her a love letter, and her parents took the letter. Her mother intervened and took the letter and read it. And it was a love letter. They were furious, and I got this phone call in the farmhouse in the summer night. And it was Pam saying "My parents got the letter and they've gone to the Minister." And I just— you know the, the physiology, the terror— you know, your guts clenching up, not being able to eat or digest food right. Shaking, all that stuff that you— I went through for so many years of this fear. So *they went to the Minister*, she said, and I said, "Deny everything, I'll come down." Now I wasn't a liar. I had good parents, I didn't cheat and I met my curfew. If I was five minutes after one, I'd just go to the bedroom and say "I'm home, I'm home." And then both of my parents were proud of me as a real leader in high school,

I should go back to high school. I was a real leader, I led the marching band, played first chair trombone, was named "Outstanding—" what was I, I was named "Personality Plus" in my high school class. I was the drum major for four years. I was loved. And I knew I was loved. But I also knew that I was loved with a secret. So when you're loved with a secret, you always don't know if you're loved if people know. So when these people are saying "How could you not know we loved you?" It was like "Well, I had a lot of reasons to not know," as any kid would. And I think they were very sorry. And you know have been very kind and are very kind. It was a good hometown, I have to say that for Sparta, Wisconsin. It's a good hometown. Our class was loving and kind people. And I watched my daughter go through High School and it was like, wow, we were not those people. I don't know what the hell happened. But we were not those people.

So anyway, they took this letter, took it to the Minister and the Minister said "She's very sick, keep your, get your daughter away from her at all costs." Of course, Pam wasn't sick, I was sick. It was like the beginning of wow, there's an interpretation. Our child isn't sick, Mr. and Mrs. Kelly's child is sick. All right, so deep thinking. And so they said to Pam, "We won't pay for you to go back to college." Well, I was in love with Pam, and I was like I'm gonna die now. And so Pam forged through and I said, "Just deny everything," I didn't know what to do. And I lied to my parents, told them I was going shopping with my best friend Minta, left at like 7AM. I know my mom and dad are going, "Nobody— Mary doesn't even get up at 7AM if she doesn't have to. Nobody's going shopping at 7AM." But they didn't say, my parents didn't say anything. So I took the car, drove all the way across the state, and met with her parents. And I lied, and I said, "Oh this is just a fantasy of just— and all this stuff that's even embarrassing to say, but I just bullshitted my way through it. And realizing they're probably not buying any of it. But I said, "I will go to counseling if you just let Pam come back to school, we'll go to counseling" and they went "Sold." And we called right then and made an appointment with the counselor that we knew had seen our friend Jo in her freshman year when she was coming out and Jean was great with her. So we were actually counting on them the whole time. And then we went to college and Pam brought the letter, and they came up and they met with the counselors who said, "Oh we'll take care of your kid" and like that. And amazingly, for as queer and defective as I was, they gave the care of their 11 year old daughter to me for the whole time. And I was taking care of her all the time they were meeting with the counselors to see how defective I was. I'm walking all around town with my, my dear little Lisa. So then they pulled away and Pam and I just throw our arms around each other. And Pam said I've got the letter and we ripped it up which is a shame. Now that I look back, that's a shame, that letter should have been kept. But we ripped it up and walked it to the incinerator and threw it down the fuckin' incinerator and burned it up. It was like you, you can't have us. And that was it. And we were together for 40 years after that. So we are not together anymore but it was a long, long life together.

Gail Robson 15:21

Wow. Cool.

Mary Kelly 15:21

And amazingly, as we came apart— you know we had, we separated over almost 12 years ago— and Pam and I were talking a few weeks ago and she said, "You know, as it all turned out, we probably should have come apart a lot sooner." But Pam said "if I hadn't been so busy being a fuck you to my parents"— is it okay if I swear on here? Okay it wouldn't quite be me if I didn't, but anyway, I'm happy to roll for the team. She said "if I hadn't been so busy being a fuck you to my parents for how nasty they were," I said, "Yeah, you probably would have, we probably would have come apart a lot sooner" and she said, "Yeah." Okay, so that's how that all turned out 40, now 50 years later.

Gail Robson 16:03

Wow.

Mary Kelly 16:04

So, and then we did go to counseling. And the first thing that this was Dr. Jean Hugo, who was a remarkable woman, former nun. Had joined the Counseling Center at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. And she just sat down and she said, "I've met with Pam's parents, I want to tell you two that there's nothing wrong with you, that you're lovely people, and you're going to need support with your parents. And Mary, I'd like you to go work with Jack, and I'll work with Pam just so we're not, it's not couples therapy." And that was it. And we were taken care of. We ended up— I ended up becoming good friends with my therapist. Therapists didn't have quite the rules in those days they have now. I saw him a few times and he said, "You know, Mary, I really like you and Pam, I wonder if you'd babysit for our kids." And I said "Sure" and we became great friends. So here we are college kids, not a lot of money, and became good friends with those guys, took care of their kids, and then they would give us a Volkswagen Bug to run all around. So we'd take the kids and go to my home farm for the weekend. And it was amazing. It all turned out for us.

Gail Robson 17:10

That sounds amazing.

Mary Kelly 17:11

Yeah.

Gail Robson 17:12

What was it like during that time with your side of the family, with your parents, and your friends, and everyone else?

Mary Kelly 17:20

Let me just see if I have a poem for that. I'm gonna do some— I do poetry and I'm going to promote to lesbian poets during this thing. I'm going to read this. This is called:

Seeking Comfort

You know how it is when you want someone to talk to
and the deer are lying just a few feet away in the woods.

So I went out on the deck and whistled the The Blue Danube Waltz for them.
They stopped chewing, perked their ears, and were very attentive.

For an encore, I whistled a polka to expose them to a faster rhythm,
and also because I thought they would really enjoy a polka.

At the end, they did exactly what you would expect: they stood up
on their hind legs, leaned against the trees and clapped.

I bowed from the deck and was certain, as I went back into the house,
I heard them trying to whistle.

~~~~~

And it was just like that when I sat at the corner  
of the table with my mother,  
eighteen, trembling, and told her  
I thought I was gay.

She looked at me at first flush with no comprehension,  
not even judgement. Then the pall that falls over  
a parent who knows their kid is in trouble rushed the room,  
and the air between us darkened. Through palpable distress  
she asked softly,  
*What is that?*

~~~~~

You know, of course, that the deer did not clap either;
that as soon as I turned my back, they too jumped up

and ran for deeper cover.

So that's what that was like. I went home in the spring of that, after my freshman year and told my parents, and they went to the priest. The priest said my mother had failed me. And that it was my mother's fault and she hadn't paid— my mother had seven children, lost one— was a good woman. She came home destroyed. So I'm in— my mom at this time— going back a little, I'm on spring break. This is before the letter with Pam's parents. Boy if you look at the trauma of my— I never think about my life as trauma, but if you look at it, it was like, boom, boom, boom. And he [note: the priest] told her she didn't give me enough love. She didn't pay enough attention to me. And then they came back. So I did, right out of that poem, I went to the barn and got Dad up and I said "We need to talk." And Dad turned the milking over to the boys— it was milking time on the farm— and he paced the living room and he said, "Well, gosh, Mary, there must be, there must be somebody, and then you must have a way of knowing." And I said, "Dad, I just know. I'm gay." And in those days, I didn't even say gay, I said "homosexual." And he said, "Well there must be somebody else, you must have some way of knowing." And I said "I just know, Dad" and he said, "Well, there must be somebody Mary," and I said, "I'm not talking— [laughs]— I'm not saying anymore." And he got the idea. So he cleaned up, and they went into town and met with the priest and the priest destroyed my mother's life. And then they came back, and the priest said I should go to the Newman Center in Lacrosse, at the University, Lacrosse Wisconsin, and see a priest.

So they made an appointment, I was supposed to drive in the next afternoon. That time for real I got my friend Minta to go with me. I just needed somebody in the car with me. And I never was out yet to Minta, I couldn't even tell her where I was going. I just said, "I have to see this guy, and you can't come in." And then my mother— I went and saw the priest. He started asking me, "What have you and Pam done?" And I said, "Well, we love each other." He said, "Yeah well what have you done?" And I said, "I don't know what you mean." Which, by which I meant, I think I know where you're headed and I'm not— I have no interest. And he said, "Have you kissed?" And I said, "Yes, we have." And then he started to ask more questions and I thought, oh, whatever in the hell you're doing, I'm not doing and I just start saying "No, no, no," I said no to everything, and I'd done every single thing on his list. He didn't get very far. But I just said "No" to everything and I just thought, oh, I'm so done with you too. My whole life is ending. I'm done everywhere I go now. And I just said "No, no, no." And he said, "Well, you should go to the Newman Center, and here's the card, and you should go to your Newman Center [note: the Catholic organization on campus for Catholic students]— in Eau Claire, where I went to school and see the priest there. Right, this is what a lesbian wants to do, see the priest! And I just got in the car with Minta and I said, "Well, that was a bust." And she never asked, Minta didn't push. And she would have wanted to hear it. Years later, when I came out to her, she was angry. She said, "Why didn't you tell me?" And I, you know, I had all the reasons but I don't know that straight kids can understand all your reasons, because they're not living the fear that you're

living. But I had, I had support, and I appreciated it and she's been a dear, lifelong friend. But that was just creepy [note: the whole way the priests handled both me and my parents, and the horrible invalidation of my good, loving, overworked mother].

So that was one of the other things that when I went back to school, I was like, I'm so not seeing this guy. I'm not talking to anybody who's not safe about it. So anyway, then the summer and the letter, and then the fall and the counseling and then the babysitting. We ended up finishing school and that counselor had moved to California as a psychologist and invited us to come and live with him and his family, and get out of the Midwest. So we took it. We got into Carmel Valley, and then found our way up into the San Jose area, met a whole bunch of lesbians, the Savoy was a happening bar at the time. And it was, it was a great time. It was a great time for lesbian bars. Because they were dinner clubs. I mean, you could go off to Friday and Saturday night dinner and dancing, and meet people. So that was great. So life went on. Okay, hope I answered your question with all that.

Gail Robson 23:12

Oh yes, absolutely. Yeah. Is there anything else you want to talk about in terms of the college time? And if not, we can move on to talking about—

Mary Kelly 23:20

Yes, life in the Bay Area. I'll tell you one of the things, there are people I owe a lot to. And one is a woman named Marge Hedges. When I— so we went through our freshman year, and we had met these two women, Dawn and Jo, and they were lovers, and they had a tough time. And we, at that time— 1970 into '71— they were treating gay people by forcing you to be hospitalized and giving you shock treatments. And either Jo had had that done or was under threat. And that was scary. We were— we lived in a lot of fear. Because you could be taken out of college for being gay, you could be forced into being in the hospital. And I was very determined— I mean, I would have gone running anywhere to not have that stuff happen. Ask me the question again, I got lost in my head.

Gail Robson 24:12

Just a question about anything else important during college, or experience during that time?

Mary Kelly 24:17

Oh, yes. So in the freshman year, word got around "Mary Kelly's queer." You know, got around to the bad kids. My own roommate who was a friend from high school, I think figured out the lay of the land. And she'd go off to class and then Pam and I'd meet in our room, have a love affair, and you know, so I know Amy knew, and Amy is a dear friend today. But as we switched from freshman to sophomore year, we got a new head resident and when that head resident came in, she was out of Kent State. And during that time the year before, 1970 or '71, the National Guard

had shot to death four students on the campus grounds of Kent State in anti-Vietnam protests. It was the most stunning, shocking, just fire on unarmed kids and killed them. And Marg had just come out of that horror with her Master's in Counseling and she became the head resident. And we— and then this phenomenon rose up called "T- Groups." It was like therapy groups only just what over time became "encounter groups," what over time kind of became even book clubs, and coffee clutches, and like that, people just getting together to talk. And so Marg and the therapist that I had seen at the counseling center started one, invited me to be in. And so we're all in there talking. And that's all you did, you just talk. And there was a woman in there named Sharon from the dorm and she said, "Mary, I really like you and I was afraid because people had said you were queer." And there was a lot of fear. And I said, "really" and I got talking to Marg, the head resident. And Marg said to me, "Yeah," she said, "When you, when I started here and was going through who was on work-study [note: part of college financial aid where you work for money]— you have to have a job to get through— somebody said "Don't hire Mary Kelly because she's queer." And Marg said, "I said, hire her and put her right outside my office." I had this great job just sitting on the front desk outside the head resident, and I was thinking, I got this really cush job. She took a stand for us, and she used to go out drinking with Pam and me. Sorry, Marg! [Laughs]— we went out one night, we were coming in and we all had had something to drink. Not only were we coming in, we had actually been partying with the dean of men [laughs]— who I'm positive was a gay man. We were kind of loud and singin', and people yelling out the dorm windows, "You guys shut up or we're gonna call the head resident." And Marg turns to Pam and me and goes, "Oh gals, I've got to leave. I've got to get in. I'm expecting a call!" Just so much, so many life saving people in my life that made my life so fun. And people that had the more mature view and took care of us. All through my life. All through my life. I've had those people that were accepting and kind and including my own parents. My mom struggled much more than my dad. But my dad was pretty much clear about *don't mess with kids*. Don't mess with your kids how they are. My mother actually loved me a lot but she was kind of embarrassed. Maybe she hadn't measured up. But you know, you take that kind of slinging arrow from the priest and you can get it, right? [Note: You can understand why she felt like a failure.]

Gail Robson 27:34

Mhm.

Mary Kelly 27:35

Right.

Gail Robson 27:38

Okay, let's maybe move towards, yeah, what your life was like in the Bay Area and what it was like at those lesbian bars or what your experiences were during that time?

Mary Kelly 27:49

Mhm, great. The Bay Area opened a world. One of the things that was happening, this was 1974 and one of the things that had started happening in the Bay Area was the *est* training, E-S-T.

Gail Robson 27:57

Mhm.

Mary Kelly 27:59

It was a phenomenon. It went on over many years to morph into the whole world now of Landmark Worldwide, which is the largest adult training program in the world. More people do the Landmark programs than all the adults who do adult college education in the world. As it should be, because they were just outstandingly great programs. But I went there and we lived with Jack and Pix for that first year and their marriage was coming apart, and it was really tough. So we got out of there. Moved to Sunnyvale and then that's where we, we were right down the road from the Savoy, met a lot of great people. So we had a mix. We were doing these— we had done *est* in 1975. We had both loved it. So we're doing *est* seminars, and we're meeting more and more people there, gay and straight. But you know, it's a world of enlightened people like happening people and frankly, politically liberal and people that were committed to the world and are— that the world can work to a listening point of view, to accepting people. So that whole world just blew up for us and expanded. And I met in there [note: the San Jose area], a woman named Judy Schwartz. Judy Schwartz is Judith Schwartz and became key to the Lesbian Herstory Archives—all that her talent with organizing and all that stuff. So that, in trying to find Judy, after 44 years, is actually how I found out about the Lesbian Herstory Archives because she showed up as somebody doing a video and then, and I hadn't even heard of it [note: LHA] until then. So that answers your end question right there, Gail.

Gail Robson 29:37

Yes.

Mary Kelly 29:38

So that was that— it was just fun times. I don't know what else to say, it was just fun times. I was working at Valley Medical Center as the word clerk in the surgical intensive care unit, which was a whoa, you know, eye popping thing. You had a one bedroom apartment in Sunnyvale with a swimming pool and Lois Birch, the best land lady in the world, just impeccably clean, everything was just impeccably clean all the time. And it's just a groovy life. It's just a great, groovy life all those years and then, you know, life goes on. People go on, Judy left, somewhere in there I lost touch with her and she went to the East Coast, and a lot of people did. But Nancy Robertson, you know that name? Okay, Nancy was, you know —so there were things that we did, like, classes at San Jose State and that's all I have to say about that time. It was a fun time, met people. I'll just tell you one thing—

Gail Robson 30:36

Mhm.

Mary Kelly 30:36

It's the world of total gossip, ladies and gentlemen. We had these two gay guys that also lived in Sunnyvale and somehow we met 'em, I can't remember how, and they invited us to dinner. And they were telling us how they used to party at Rock Hudson's house and that he was gay, and we were like, "Noooo!" And they said, "Oh we've done a lot of parties at Rock's house." And then you know, you go on years later and you go, "They were right, they were right!"

Gail Robson 31:01

[Laughs]— Yeah.

Mary Kelly 31:01

But it was really, it was just fun to meet everybody we met and be with all the great people that we had the chance to meet. All of them.

Gail Robson 31:11

So do you stay in the same location through the sort of seventies through the nineties, or did you move around?

Mary Kelly 31:16

No, I was in Sunnyvale— and I'm not going to get my years right— for some years, and then I actually went to work for Werner Erhard. I went to work for Werner Erhard in San Jose, still lived in Sunnyvale. That was wonderful. I got promoted to manage his division department in Sacramento, went to there, and then very quickly went on to Denver, and went from Denver. And so we started traveling with my job. Went from Denver to Cleveland, and everywhere I just met great people. I went from Cleveland back to— I took them out of Cleveland— what did I do? I came back to Minneapolis, and then got set up here. And then the job was ending in Minneapolis and they wanted me to move again, and I said no. So I took a series of jobs in Philly, New York, and during that time when I was in Denver, had done an *est* course called *The Six Day Course*. And I met Carrie Fisher in that course. And when we were done with the course, Carrie came up and put this piece of paper in my hand and she said, "Let's stay in touch. [note: This is my phone number and real address.]" And I thought *Yeah, sure*. I grew up on a farm in Wisconsin, you know, I'm always calling my Hollywood friends. And then she called and then I got a postcard and then she called. We ended up being really good friends for 35 years.

Gail Robson 32:36

Wow.

Mary Kelly 32:37

Just a darling, darling woman. You know, there's a Carrie I had a chance to know, that people didn't know. What an absolute sweetheart of a little honey pie she was. Just a sweetheart woman. Kind, kind. So anyway, I had a lot more pissed-offness in life than Carrie did. But you know, great talks and funny jokes and sweet times.

Gail Robson 33:03

Mhm.

Mary Kelly 33:04

So Carrie's one of the things I got out of being in Denver. And she's been to my house here twice. Just before she died, I was going to her house. And then that came crashing down at the end of 2016. I was going to her house, and I was going to go— she just bought a house in London and I was gonna go there. But that ended. So that's the way that went. However, she made it to 60 with bipolar, which isn't terrible for a [note: four-times] New York Times bestseller, so there you are.

Gail Robson 33:34

Wow.

Mary Kelly 33:35

So I ended up coming back to Minneapolis and then went back to the Bay Area. I'm trying to think of the years, all with my work. And then we adopted Taylor, I went to graduate school, I started graduate school 1990 to get my Master's in Clinical Psych. I was leaving working in the world of Werner Erhard. I was going to leave that life because I wanted to raise a kid, and I, and those hours, you're doing programs, they are long hours because the public is available in the evening and weekends. And then you're going to do all your prep. So it's just a long, long job. So much fun, such great people, but I had to change my life. So I went to graduate school at John F. Kennedy University and then we started the process to try to adopt a baby. And that was like, whoa. And Carrie had been instrumental. George Lucas had adopted his kids as a single dad. So Carrie gave me, directed me, to his lawyer in San Francisco. Then somebody else directed us to somebody that was closer to our house. So we went with her, Diane Michelson.

Gail Robson 34:39

Mhm.

Mary Kelly 34:40

Diane Michelson took us on in an open adoption. And we adopted a baby in May, at the end of May in 1993 and they reclaimed that baby when she was two months old. And that was, I mean that isn't even any— I remember when Obama's grandmother died and he said "I can't talk about it." It's too painful. I'm in that camp, just your life comes apart. But I knew one thing, I knew to

get back on the horse and ride in life, seasoned as I was by my life circumstances. So we lost Hailey in July of 1993 and two days later we got a call. I shut my life down because I could hardly function. And uh, and not only lose a baby, but you're so worried about where they're going. And unbelievably, she went to two lesbians who knew what they were doing. Did it anyway. It was unbelievable. And what had happened, I'll just say a little bit about that, what had happened is that her birth mother, the birth father signed right off, and he really loved us. And he was honorable. And the birth mother wasn't mentally very sound, necessarily. And she decided she wanted access to this child. And we were headed to an adoption, we never said anything else. We never represented anything other than we plan to have a family. So she found these women at church, and they stepped up and said, "Sure, we'll take the baby. And then you can see her." That was really cruel because it was a real break with the gay community. It was like, wow, maybe my first experience of how evil people can be and how harsh people can be. No call to us, no call to us to say, "What were the conditions here, just so we're clear? And how do you feel about us coming into your home and taking your child?" So, you know, we, you cut your heart out and you move on. And two days later, the phone rang. And it was this, it was the Jewish mother of the woman that ran our adoption agency. The woman that ran the adoption agency had gone on vacation, and she [note: the mother who was covering for her daughter] said, "Sweetheart, I know you're suffering. But I have your baby." And you know, thank God it was the mother because she could get through to me. I just could hear it. It was so kind and so tender, and just put in that wonderful Jewish mother way. "Sweetheart, I know you're suffering but I've got your baby." Isn't that beautiful? And I just said, "I can't talk right now. Give me a minute." And Pam had been gone. Unbelievably, we had relatives coming in that weekend to visit. And we just said, "We're dead. You can come and stay in our condo here in California." They came and it wasn't bad. They just said "We'll be respectful and kind", and they were. And it was kind of good. They had little kids, and it was kind of good to have kids in our house. And then we just went ahead [note: with our next adoption,] and that ended up being Taylor, my beautiful daughter. And here I am without a picture of my beautiful daughter. Can't believe it. I don't even have my cell phone in here. Aw.

Gail Robson 35:38

Wow. That's ok, you can describe.

Mary Kelly 37:58

Beautiful. Well, let me just see. I've got a picture here of her. Let me just get her, picture of her. This is her. This is not the woman. This is Taylor. I hope that glare doesn't— this is her as a young, maybe 11. Can you see past the glare? There's my baby.

Gail Robson 38:19

Yeah, we can see.

Mary Kelly 38:20

She's a gorgeous woman. She's got a little three year old, so I'm a gram. That's how it goes. Okay. So I got my, I got my kid. Then we went to court, we had to hang in the balance with the adoption. Because now here's the other thing of my life. Meanwhile, my sister, who was high up in the Wisconsin social services division, takes a job working for Pete Wilson, governor of California, as the head of the Family and Child Services Division of California which holds the policy that gays are not allowed to adopt in state of California. So we're now in the adoption loop. And we were in it for a while. My sister's boss comes to visit my house, wants to meet with me, and sits down at the table and tells me, "You can't make trouble for us." I'm just sitting here like, *What? You can't have my life*. She said, "You can't." But, I have to say, she said "I will, I will arrange it so that the adoption certificates in California read 'parent and parent' but you can't go to the ACLU or some place to make trouble for us." And I said "Okay." And she kept her word. She changed it. After our— she said "It has to be after your adoption is final." And after our adoption was final, she changed it.

And Pete Wilson went crazy. Sacramento Bee runs a headline says "Governor Wilson Legalizes Gay Marriage in California." Something like that. And then he went apeshit and went on the air and said, *Anderson did this on her own. This wasn't me* ...and ah kill those queers [note: my words] and *Turn it back* [note: and he overturned the policy on the spot.] You know, all that shit that they do, right? But Eloise kept her word. Fast forward, a woman that I knew from *est*,--Gray Davis, got put in as governor and he brought in Rita Sands, who was somebody I knew, and she changed it back. So ha, ha ha. And it reads "parent, parent." So there we are.

Gail Robson 38:52

No way. What was it like being a parent in the nineties as a lesbian couple?

Mary Kelly 40:37

Well, we moved back here when Taylor was one. We moved to Minnesota. Minnesota is a progressive state, good state, gay friendly. And you know, every place that's gay friendly has pockets that aren't gay friendly but this is a very, very good place to live. And I wanted her to know my mom and dad. This is three hours, little over three hours from my home farm in Wisconsin. So those are the reasons for coming back. I had work. I was now done with graduate school. I've been working as a business consultant the whole time I knew I was going to continue, could create work here, used to run the office at Werner Erhard here, had a million contacts. And that was easy and Pam came back and got hired with MCI here. She had been with MCI in the Bay Area, so it was good. So you know, we did great. We bought this house and set up shop and put her [note: our daughter] in a Waldorf school so we had the comfort of people that were probably more clear thinking, and less hurtful than the public. And she loved, Taylor, loved her upbringing. And I would say this, so there's Taylor's upbringing, which she loved, and

it was wonderful. But interestingly, to watch the parents, the women— the women included Pam— but didn't know what to do with me.

Gail Robson 41:48

Mm.

Mary Kelly 41:49

First of all, this hair is too short. [Laughs]— how do you relate to a person? [Laughs]— and second of all, is Mary a man or a woman? [Laughs]— you know what I mean? So it's just like, if they were listening to this, and it's fine with me if they do, but that was the kind of crap I dealt with, not being included. But Pam had the role of, she was like the woman. That's how they viewed her. She was the woman, she was the mother. And people used to say things like, "Well, who's the mother?" They said stuff like that. They would say, because Taylor was mixed race, "What is she?" I'd say "She's a girl. Thank you." I would just say that. And then finally, somebody in the store asked me after we moved here, "But what is she?" And she said, "Well what is she?" And I thought, oh, you have just asked me at the right time. And I stopped her [note: the lady in the grocery store]. I stopped what I was doing and I said, "She's French, Spanish, a little Moroccan, part Egyptian, a little bit of Canadian maybe like 13%, we think, part Hawaiian, isn't that amazing? A little bit Chinese..." I went on and on and on and on until the lady was like, let me outta here. I just wanted— I just didn't stop. And that was the last time I ever remember getting asked "But what is she?" So that's how I handled that, Gail.

Gail Robson 43:09

Mhm.

Mary Kelly 43:10

I shut the show down.

Gail Robson 43:15

[Laughs]—

Mary Kelly 43:17

Did I answer your question?

Gail Robson 43:20

Absolutely. Yes. So do you want to talk a little bit about things that you're thinking about today, in terms of what your life is like, or what it's been like over the last few decades?

Mary Kelly 43:33

Let's see. I'm looking at my notes to see if I forgot anything. Well I'll tell you the greatest thing in my life today is my granddaughter, Perri. I mean she's just the joy of my life. She knows who she is, she knows who people are. She has named me Ty. And she just calls me Ty. "Here you go, Ty, I love you, Ty." And it's like, my kid just thinks is the best like non-gender, she just goes, "She got you. She got you Mama." Taylor calls me Mama and Perry calls me Ty, but it was the way she shortened Grandma Kelly. And she was— when she was one, she was trying to say it and would say "Ma Ty, Ma Ty?" And she would say, "A boobery, Ma Ty?" and I would say "You want a blueberry?" "Yeah, yes, yes" she would say and I would say, "But I can't get the other part of it." So my son-in-law was here one day and he said "That's how she says Grandma Kelly." And Perry goes, "Yes, yeah." And that was it. So up until two she called me Ma Ty, and then she just dropped the Ma and just called me Ty. "He yo Ty, I love you Ty." And that's— I'm Ty. Never thought I'd be Ty but I am.

Gail Robson 44:49

That's perfect.

Mary Kelly 44:50

Joy of my life. That child's the joy of my life. And my kid and I are terribly close. Pam and I separated almost 12 years ago, that was very difficult. I was 58. I had never lived alone in my entire life. I grew up in a big family in a little farmhouse, went to college, went on into my life, went into that job, where it's just all people programs, and hundreds and thousands of people all the time. I was just with people all the time, and then just like, boom, alone, that was hard. And that has taken some rebuilding. And I'm still in the rebuilding phase. I'm in the phase of my life now where I'm reaching back to my gay friends. I, when we moved out to California in 1994, I had a great community of gay friends there. And I lost that and that was really wrenching. Economically, it was a terrific move [note: to here in Minnesota]. You know I'm sitting here on an acre and a third, next to me is June's acre and whatever, and there's Bill and Yoya's acre and a quarter, vacant—and, I had what I wanted for Taylor. Space, the country, the Midwest, grandparents, but I lost my community. I have in Minneapolis been able to become part of the thriving poetry community. Minneapolis has taken over the world [note: of poetry publishing and production]. And by the way, this isn't me, I believe Jim Moore is the one that said this. But people don't know Jim Moore's poetry. Jim Moore, look him up. And Deborah Keenan. These are the people I love but here's so many great poets here. But you know, Jim Moore said poetry went from New York, to San Francisco, to Paris, back to New York, to Minneapolis. So let me say something about poetry since that's my world and that's a large part of my community. There are two, probably a ton of gay, of lesbian poets that you should know about. But one of them I'm reading right now— my son in law got me this book by Andrea Gibson— it's called "You Better Be Lightning." Isn't that great? Boy, that title alone is worth getting the book. So Andrea's an award winning poet and she's out there as, you know, kind of like me, gender, middle of the road

something, and here's Natalie Diaz, who teaches poetry at Arizona State, just won a Pulitzer Prize. There's our little [note: locally published] lesbian poet, Natalie Diaz, Pulitzer Prize winner. Isn't that something?

Gail Robson 47:19

Wow.

Mary Kelly 47:19

I mean, I didn't think I'd live to see this day and this and this book is a National Book Award finalist. [Crosstalk]—

Gail Robson 47:27

"Postcolonial Love Poem," I believe?

Mary Kelly 47:28

"Postcolonial Love Poem," but look up Natalie Diaz.

Gail Robson 47:31

Yeah.

Mary Kelly 47:31

Get anything she's got. And Andrea Gibson. I'm just in love with Andrea's work. Good job, Andrea! I should have her listen to this video, but her stuff is just great. And then there are other poets who write so incredibly. Dorianne Laux. Anybody who's a lesbian should be reading Dorianne Laux. She has a poem that she wrote about a lesbian lover she had in, looked like in a mental health treatment center. [Laughs]— but it's just, Dorianne Laux just lays it out there. I mean, just so many. So I've had this wonderful, wonderful community of poets, and Jude Nutter, who won the 2019 Ireland Moth Award. I've been with Jude studying for years and years, since Taylor was two, so at least 26 years. Deborah Keenan, really current. Both of these are current poets and wonderful people. So I owe a lot to that group. But I'm now in the part of my life, having had to deal with crushing loneliness, and I'm really bringing back, I'm out for a lesbian community. And I find, you know I've gone on Match, I've gone on Zoosk. And I find that, I don't think lesbians are good at dating. You can challenge me on that, you can win. Especially if you married me, you can win. [note: Addressing the reader, not the interviewer here.] I'll let you win that argument if you marry me. So I don't think lesbians are particularly good at dating. Because it's like, you can't make a connection unless it's a date. And of course, now we've got COVID so all of that's the world, but I do think we'd do better to be much more interested in relating and in building community. And then some love affair shows up outta that. That's how the seventies were. You didn't go around, you know, people showed up in your life. And there's like, wow, that's, there's a miracle. There's Gail, she's a miracle. It was like that. So I just think

it's way, the world's too small right now. COVID has made it ever smaller. But anyway, so I'm building a lesbian community. People that want to travel, people that want to talk, that's what I'm doing.

Gail Robson 49:45

My fire alarm just went off for some reason. [Beeping]— so quick question, just thinking back over, you know all of those— should we pause and pick it up in a minute, or no? Yeah we could do that. It's gone.

Mary Kelly 49:57

Okay good.

Gail Robson 49:58

Sorry for that. Yeah, thank you for sharing. What would you like to share, actually, before we move on at all? Are there other poems you wanted to share?

Mary Kelly 50:06

Yeah, I'll say something from my— I'll go from my little years to my high school years, to college. I've got three poems in a row.

Gail Robson 50:17

Perfect.

Mary Kelly 50:17

Two from college if you can stand it. Okay. So this is called "The Wedding Secret." I'm just gonna let these stand for themselves, any decent poem should stand for itself. This is:

The Wedding Secret

When the band started to play,
I plunked my 10 year old bones on a folding chair
and watched them dance—the sway of her dress,
the top of her breasts, the man who got to hold her
and the praise, praise, praise for this.

For the first time something had churned in me,
too much heat my chest, quivering muscles,
sickness in my stomach, fever.
A pang of terror struck.

Terror, like the first time you realize
You are going to die, the dread and fear
so overwhelming that the only way
you can cope is decide
to never think of it again.

So when she waltzed her red lips
and white dress over to me,
and stood there smiling and smelling like sweetness,
I had nowhere from which to draw even hello,
so distressed, so of control I felt.

I had been happily walking through life,
suddenly slipped, was swirling in a dark hole,
being pulled away from my parents,
my home, my place in life.

A membrane was laying down between me
and everything I belong to. I was locked
on the wrong side, no way back,
no way to talk to the other side.

The first thought of my own wedding had seized me.
I knew then I could never be the bride—

and that I must tuck that secret down
under the floorboards that held my chair
and never tell anyone.

So that's from prepubescent, that first occurring, right, and then this is, I talked about Fairy Day— I think I'll go without the glasses, nope, I think they're gonna win, Gail. She marched down that— this is called:

The Drum Major

She marched down that street
like she owned it,
high hat, red baton, white braided overlay.

At 14 the junior high band,
three more years the senior band
followed her every command.

Drum-roll, whistle blow,
baton thrust, step off playing *Born Free*
past the church that would reject her,
past the proud relatives who cheered her,
past the school who held no dance
or ceremony for her,

where Thursdays were called *fairy day*,
and no one stepped up to axe that cruelty.

She marched to dull the ache of no hand to hold,
no girl to kiss. Marched to try
to outrun increasing desires, try to slow time
as each year brought less hope that she might
wake up and be different.

She feared losing the love of her sweet parents.
Mama, whose life was made whole by her kids.
Papa, sax and harmonica player, who scraped up
enough money to get his kids into the band.

She halted the tromping rhythm of movement
where the crowd swelled and conducted the end
of Born Free:

*Free as the roaring tide
so there's no need to hide.
Born Free and life is worth living
cause you're born free.*

Then, she wanted to command the world.
Truth is

She still does.

So that's that.

Gail Robson 53:31

Thank you.

Mary Kelly 53:32

And I got two more, can you stand it?

Gail Robson 53:34

Absolutely [Laughs]—

Mary Kelly 53:35

Alright. This is called "Women's Day, 1971." And this is just to the goddamn great lesbians at that time from Milwaukee. Just this— anyway:

Women's Day 1971, Eau Claire, Wisconsin

In the first breaths of feminism, women spoke
of the restraints of husbands, and children,

and deliberately suppressed lesbians, because
we were not negotiating such, and straight women,

in their quest for freedom, saw no relevance
to women who did not share their fate.

So, imagine my joy, my fascination, when
a brigade of lesbians from Milwaukee came—

jeans and boots, belts and shirts, cropped hair—
to speak at my university. It was like the doors

blew off, and the stench in the air I had been
breathing blew out as fresh air moved in.

They were out-loud and unapologetic. Exuberant.
Fearless as snow plows in heavy storms.

I hardly heard a word they said, so thrilled was I
to be in the presence of anyone like me.

I was orphaned in a place lonely, gray and hidden.
They opened their mouths and birthed a world for me.

God bless the lesbians from Milwaukee. Whoever you were, thank you. Thank you for butching up your hair. And this one I'll read called "Welcome to New York." And this happened in college, I had a college professor, philosophy, I really loved. And he was a farm boy from Minnesota, I was a farm girl from Wisconsin. And he invited Pam and me to dinner at his house. And his wife was-- they were both great people. His wife was from New York, a level of directness I had not encountered yet. And I want to be clear, I'm going to read this poem, she didn't mean anything by it. It was just all direct, but here I was, 18, dealing, right? I call the poem:

Welcome to New York

Until she offered a new meaning,
I thought a dike was something
in Holland that held back water--
the thing in the story that killed
the sweet little boy.

I was 18, at dinner
at my political science professor's home.
Across the table, his wife said
In New York we call them dykes.
I don't know if that is okay,
but that's what we call them.
What do you call yourself?

She spoke as if maybe I was not
what they talked about in New York,
as if she may have discovered something
softer here in the Midwest.

She peered at me as if looking
in a store window to see if I was breathing,
wondering if I was real.

She meant well. She was friendly.

But the professor squirmed and fell silent.
He and I were farm kids, cut
from denim and flannel.
We knew the dusty smell of oats,
the heady scent of fresh mown hay.
We could milk cows, and change the oil.

We knew a world without noise
and could see things in the ditch
that others did not catch.

There was a farm code
of warmth and reserve,
of treating young people delicately,

of never driving in high gear
around those doing the hard work
of growing.

Okay?

Gail Robson 56:37
Mhm, thank you.

Mary Kelly 56:37
Thank you, Gail. Thanks for letting me do that in there.

Gail Robson 56:40
Those are so good to accompany the stories that you've told us too. The combination is so wonderful.

Mary Kelly 56:45
It's just a bunch of stories.

Gail Robson 56:47
It's great. So yeah, I think we've covered a lot. Are there any other specific little stories or experiences you wanted to talk about? Or is there anything else you want to share with folks?

Mary Kelly 57:01

I think— did I say? When we talk about life events, you know, my president was assassinated. I know for many kids, 911 is their life event. But in my life, we had the first Catholic president ever elected in the nation. And then they killed him. That was like, that was just, that was a life altering thing. And I was talking to my cousin— Kennedy was killed and the next year our grandfather died. And he was really fun, we really loved him. So it was like, 11 and 12, those ages were really tough. I think no, I think, let me see if I've got any tribute I want to say to people, because people are listening. Thank you for listening if you are. Let's see if I want to leave any tribute to these people. Here I am. Well, let me read, let me leave you with this one. It wasn't what I was— I'm going to leave you with two poems. I'll just speak in poetry, Gail, these are short. Okay. One is, you know, what's come of it all. I'd say anybody out there who's gay and who's struggling, and I know people are still gay and struggling, and bi and struggling, and unidentified and struggling. You got to get a core of who you are and hold it. Quentin Crisp, who was a writer, and a British— I don't know what Quentin was, he was this elegant guy, you know he wore kind of capes and a fedora. But very feminine. You know, fedora with a great ribbon. He said something years ago, he said, "Stay where you are." He said "Do not change for the world. Stay where you are and let the world organize around you." That really struck me young, I mean people have said things that have helped me live. Right. Buckminster Fuller said, I've got a quote right here, because I'm a consultant, and I use it. He said, "You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete. Don't fight forces. Use them." That's a tough thing to get your head around. Those people have helped us all live. Toni Morrison said that "We write by remembering our life, and in remembering our life, we create it." Isn't that beautiful? So you can create any life you want. But I would say keep the core of you there. Keep the core of you there. So I have two little poems. For those of you who are listening, one is called:

Staying Aloft

After some years and some loss
one thing becomes clear:

No matter how strong the wind
you have got to keep your wings open
unless you are folding them in
preparing to dive.

So that's for you [note :the listener/reader.]

[Note: And then the last one I give you, is called:]

Without You

You are not part of the poem.
You are the poem.

Without you, it is just spring water
running over frozen ground
looking for a place
to sink in.

It is a love letter
with no address.

It is the tree
that fell in the forest,

and the bird that sat on it,
and the song that was lost.

Without you saying,
Come, tell me,
I will see,
there is no poem.

Without you
there is
no poetry
at all.

That's all I got, Gail.

Gail Robson 1:00:38

Thank you so much. I think that's a perfect place to leave it. Why don't I stop recording unless there's anything else we want to say.

Mary Kelly 1:00:47

Thank you so much. Just really thank you for the opportunity. Thank you people that are doing this as a project and putting it together. Things are getting better. We get better in fits and starts, we don't get better like a straight line. I wish we did, but we don't. So you know, anytime you're in a time of despair, hold on. I never thought I'd see gay marriage in my lifetime. And then I got it when I was 60. You're not 60! If you don't have something, hold on!

Gail Robson 1:01:17

[Laughs]—

Mary Kelly 1:01:18

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[Note: Subsequent to this interview, the poems *Drum Major*; *Women's Day, 1971*, *Eau Claire*, *Wisconsin*; and *The Wedding Secret* have been accepted for publication by *Of Rust and Glass*.]

Poems edited and formatted by Mary Kelly