



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Juanita Kirton**

An Interview
Conducted by
Hannah Sullivan
08/08/2022

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LEOHP Interview

Interviewee: Juanita Kirton

Interviewer: Hannah Sullivan

Date: 08/08/2022

Hannah Sullivan 00:03

All right, so we are officially recording. So hello everyone and thank you so much for joining me today. It is the eighth of August 2022 and I am dialing in from a home sweaty day in Brooklyn, New York. And I am honored and very excited to be joined by Dr. Juanita Kirton who is going to be talking with us today about her very rich life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, which is a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archive and we are going to dive right in. So Juanita, thank you so much for joining us. How are you doing today?

Juanita Kirton 00:45

Oh, it's great. I'm glad to be here in a little cooler up in the mountains of Poconos.

Hannah Sullivan 00:51

Great. [Laughs]— so I know you've lived in many places throughout your life. But just to get started, could you tell us where and when you were born?

Juanita Kirton 01:01

So I was born in Brooklyn, New York in Bedford-Stuyvesant in 1948. My parents immigrated to this country but they lived in Barbados for many years. I think my mom was there from the age two to 19 and my father also. And so I was raised in a very rich West Indian Barbadian community, my grandparents and all our friends and family members. And so it was very, very strong community in Brooklyn, in Bedford-Stuyvesant. And later on in high school, my parents moved to Midwood and then to Flatbush, and then up to New Rochelle. By that time, I was already in college in Ohio.

Hannah Sullivan 01:53

That's great. I definitely want to dive into a little bit more about your academic and professional career. But before I do, I'd love to hear a little bit more about your early life and that time and in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Can you tell me more about your family and how many siblings you have?

Juanita Kirton 02:10

Well, I'm the oldest of four, two girls, two boys. My father was an accountant, and he was a mortician, also. He got a degree from Brooklyn College through the Navy when he was— during World War II. My mom was a homemaker. She stayed home and took care of the kids and the family and the homes. And my father's brother, uncle Cecil, he was a dentist in Brooklyn for 30 years. So and so my family was pretty much middle class. Having a father with a degree, has his

own business, my uncle with his own business as a doctor. And being the oldest child, I had a lot of responsibility. But the youngest one is 10 years younger than me. And I was brought up very Christian, went to Sunday school in the morning with the church. And then we went to another Sunday school program, Episcopalian and Brethren. I did a lot of reciting of different types of Bible verses that I memorized as a child. And so I was gifted as a great speaker, when it comes to speaking in front of audiences, which has really helped me as a poet, as a poet and writer. But that doesn't pay my rent. [Laughter]— so I'm an educator so that pays my rent— my mortgage now— not my rent.

Hannah Sullivan 03:44

Well, I was gonna say, I think that probably also lends to your talents in academia as well, if you're an educator. Did all of your family live kind of nearby in the same neighborhood or?

Juanita Kirton 03:58

Yes, so we lived on Jefferson Avenue, and about five blocks away my grandmother lived on Hancock Street, and my godmother lived in MacDonough Street, and my uncle's business with his dentist was on Dean Street. [Laughs]— we had family. We were all within this very tight-knit West Indian community. And even up until the time I started dating— even when we moved out of Bedford-Stuyvesant, if my father or mother did not know your parents from Barbados, you weren't going out with this guy. You just weren't. So it was very close and very tight knit. And actually my godmother, who died two weeks ago, was 103. And she was still living in the home on MacDonough Street which she bought over sixty years ago, where her son lives there too. So it's a very— it's changed, the community now, it's more gentrified. You find a lot of white families are moving in. But that was, that was my basis. When I turned nine, my mother took all four of us back to live in Barbados. And I lived there and went to school for a short while. My father did not go. My mom went with her best friend, and she had two kids. So here are two single women, with six children 10 and under, because I was 10, 10 and under from one year old to 10, living in Barbados with those kids. And that's where I really connected to my roots, to the culture, to the food, to the lingo, and even up until today, I'm still very connected to that culture.

Hannah Sullivan 05:46

That's wonderful. That paints a really good picture, thank you. And not to get into your career too much just yet, but from what we've talked about, so far, I know that you have done many, many different things in your career, often at the same time, as an academic and educator, a writer, activist, poet, but it sounds like one of those big common threads is psychology, and also art and writing. So can you talk a little bit about how you became interested in psychology, maybe from your early life, and what sparked that interest?

Juanita Kirton 06:23

So when I was 13, I was sexually abused by my dad. My parents continued and stayed married for 57 years. And I went through a lot of childhood trauma, withdrawal, not speaking, acting out. I left home when I was 18 and went away to college in Ohio to an HBCU, Wilberforce University, and there, I found a lot of freedom. I was surrounded by a lot of Black Americans, which was unusual for me. Again, this is the 60s and I got involved with all the activists, all the issues, but I was overdoing everything. I overdid sex, overdid drugs, everything, everything, everything. But my major in college was psychology because I wanted to understand my behavior. And how psychology can either help me— maybe not help me— in terms of healing and getting through the issues because I had been in therapy and out of therapy and hospitalized for many, many years. And then I had an opportunity while in college to be an exchange student to the Rudolf Steiner Schools in England. And there I was exposed to children with developmental disabilities, and still working with the theories of Carl Jung, and Rudolf Steiner. And so I really got involved with education and psychology and how that connects. And that was my groundwork. And that was why I stayed in psychology, got a degree, but also, I incorporated education into that. So I have a Master's in Special Education. I also have a Master's in Fine Arts, in poetry and writing, administration, and a PhD in developmental disabilities. So I really connect psychology and education together to under— first to understand myself. And of course, I've been in the field for 45 years, so I've worked with children who have severe emotional issues, and have brought psychology, education, and writing together for healing, as a healing tool.

Hannah Sullivan 08:43

That's amazing. And psychology is such an incredible common thread between all of those things. How did you find that psychology sort of helped you or maybe didn't help you in those earlier years, in college, when you first started studying it? And did you know that you wanted to study psychology as you went into college?

Juanita Kirton 09:04

Well, yes, I knew I wanted to study psychology when I went to college, but as a young person, 17, 18, 19 years old, unless you accept the therapy, and the intervention, then you're not going to be helped. So— [laughs] And earlier, I wasn't accepting that help. I was doing everything the opposite. So, especially, like I said, back in the 60s, I was protesting. I was at Kent State shootings when it happened. There was the Black Panthers, there was the [unclear]— there was the radical issues in terms of race and working with that. I was at a Black historic college. So a lot of things are happening all in the early 70s. And I was involved in that and think I lost myself. And it's not until after I finished college in my early— late 20s and my 30s that I began to accept how psychology can help me and heal me and my wounds and my scars that I carried all those years— decades, actually— with my dad. And so writing was one way to— is one tool that I use.

But also I went– fell back on accepting the therapies and accepting the interventions in my later 20s and early 30s, so I could heal and be a better human being.

Hannah Sullivan 10:38

That definitely wasn't [unclear]. How did you get started writing, was that something that you always did, or did that– when did you kind of start getting into writing and also processing it as a tool to help you heal from trauma?

Juanita Kirton 10:53

Well, I don't think that when I was 13, I was writing, but I was just scribbling stuff. [Laughs]– because I really wasn't communicating with my family, my parents, that I would scribble my thoughts. But I would do that in a closet. Nobody saw it, nobody was– it was on pieces of paper, there were notebooks. And so that wasn't revealed to anyone. When I got to college, I was experimenting with poetry, with writing, and one of my English teachers saw one of my pieces. And she encouraged me to, well, submit it to the college magazine. And I did and I started writing songs; I used to play the guitar. And that's how I began to think that writing my feelings down was really helping me to deal with my wounds and my issues. And so I discovered that and working with other writers also helped me back in the 80s, I mean, there was a group called–I'm going to look to remember their names now– Gap Tooth Girlfriends in Brooklyn, who were young women who were meeting as salons in their living room and writing and talking about feelings and as Black women in this world. And I got involved with that group. I mean it was Dorothy Randall Gray, and June Jordan, and Alexis de Veaux, it was a lot of wonderful Black lesbian women. And so they helped to structure me and support me in my writing. And so that became something that I used to move me forward. But I still wasn't really focused on it, because I was trying to raise a son, single parent, working two and three jobs to support myself. So writing was still on the back burner.

Hannah Sullivan 12:58

Absolutely, how could it not be? [laughs]– that's a lot going on. Backing up just a little bit, I know that you've mentioned your family life a bit. Can you tell me a little bit about when you had your son and also your involvement–? Sorry, yeah, backing up. Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about your family life kind of after college, and your personal life at that time?

Juanita Kirton 13:31

I was very– I was in the closet. I mean, there's no way a Black female, professional woman at that time was coming out and– you would lose your job. I mean, I was teaching at a clinical hospital at Rutgers University. So I was dating men, even though I was seeing women on the side. And that's how I got involved with my son's father. We had a seven-year relationship. My son was born in 1979. And he's 45 now. And my son's father, he didn't want to get married. At that time, I was making enough money. I had a home, I had a car. I had a master's degree. I said,

“Okay, I’m gonna have my son”, and I had him as a single parent. It was tough because a lot of gay women at that time weren’t into men, and having kids that was like, forget it. So I lost some friends in that– during that time. But also there was another community of women who were so-called straight, but who were living a gay life on the side, in the closet, and I stayed in the closet for a little bit, little bit longer. So I’m not sure if I’m answering the question– [redacted]. I raised him as a single parent. And I began to work a couple of jobs. I also joined the military. And he had to go live with his grandparents, who at that time were living in the Bahamas, while I was on active duty.

Hannah Sullivan 15:19

Yeah, wow. Again, lots going on at that time. In terms– I’d love for you to tell me a little bit more about the different communities that you were involved with at the point when you got pregnant. I guess to backup, did you know that you were gay and closeted at the time that you were pregnant?

Juanita Kirton 15:48

Oh, yeah. I knew I was gay when I turned 19, or even before I was 19. But when I was 19, I was in college, and that’s when the word gay and lesbian was really– I attached that to myself. So I knew that I was– that I had feelings for women, but I had not acted on them. And it’s not until I got to college, I met another woman there who was an upperclassman, and we had this relationship. And that’s when I started to identify myself as being gay. So yes, so the question for you is yes, I did know that I was gay. But again, it was not until the late eighties did I actually come out to my family, to my friends, but not at work, or anything like that– it was just too dangerous. I felt it was too dangerous for me to lose my job and not be able to support my son.

Hannah Sullivan 16:46

How did you meet your son’s father, was that after college, or during?

Juanita Kirton 16:51

Yeah, I was working at Rutgers University Graduate School of Ed. So this was– I already finished my Bachelor’s degree and already had a Master’s degree. He was at Rutgers University also. He had graduated from Princeton University, and was a psychology major also. [Laughs]– and was in the psychology department at Livingston College at Rutgers. And another friend of mine, who was a straight friend, introduced the two of us. And I really liked him. He was a great guy, he was fun. And we had this on-and-off relationship for seven years. And that’s how my son came into the world. And I was– I think that was brainwashing myself, thinking that, wow, if I get married to this man, that everything in my life is going to be okay, I won’t have to be gay anymore. And I was really struggling with trying to balance both of those things. In the meantime, on the side, I was dating a woman who was already married to a doctor. And we were dating on the side as two women. It was a crazy life. It was crazy. [laughs]

Hannah Sullivan 18:05

And how long did you and this woman date for, at the time?

Juanita Kirton 18:09

19 years! [Laughs]— we did that for 19 years through her marriage of eight years, and she finally got a divorce. Then she also had a son from that marriage, who was my godson, and our kids kind of grew up together. So it was really— it was crazy to think that during the week, I wore stilettos, a skirt, in high heels and makeup, and on Friday night, I put on my jeans and my T-shirt and my keys hanging off the side of my pants and went to a club. And I was a totally different person. [laughs] So I was, you know, I was really switching back and forth. Oh my gosh.

Hannah Sullivan 18:56

I think that's probably relatable to a lot of people who are listening to this. Can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like to have your son and then also be in many of these lesbian spaces? What was that experience like?

Juanita Kirton 19:10

Oh, boy, that was tough. A lot of lesbian spaces during those days, especially when you went to musical concerts, you went away for a weekend with other lesbians, you could not bring a male person, you could not bring your male child. Now if you had a female, you could bring your female girl— [redacted]. They didn't like the male hormones involvement to interfere with their community and their female spirit. It was really, really difficult. And at times I felt really ostracized and alone, because my son was not invited, not welcomed in those communities. And so a lot of times I just didn't attend, either because I couldn't leave him home, I had no one to take care of him with my parents living out of the country— I did not trust everyone to take care of him, you know, for a whole weekend. And so slowly, but surely, those communities, I dropped off my list. I was only able to attend programs where either he was invited or I went alone. And it was like during the day or for a few hours.

Hannah Sullivan 20:38

That's hard. Do you feel like you were able to find some maybe community [unclear]— who were raising children, both boys when [unclear]— at the time?

Juanita Kirton 20:52

The only other person was the one woman I was dating, but she was married. And we would try to get together once in a while with the boys, they were like nine or 10 months apart, Terreyl was, — my son was younger, her son was older. But that didn't happen very often. She was working, she had a husband. You know, I was in and out of different relationships, and basically a single parent. So we did the best, I did the best I could. And actually my son today, he tells me,

he says, Mom, I really appreciate you making all the sacrifices you made. Because now he's a father, I have a granddaughter who's 10. He has his own business. He is just the joy of my life. And he's just a wonderful person. He's straight, but he's accepting of everyone. And it's just wonderful to have him. I'm so glad because actually I wanted two boys, and you know, back in those days, like, what does a butch woman want with two kids? Are you crazy? [Laughter]—today, you have so many choices, you can do that! But back then you just— the choices were so limited. And you just, you didn't step out, you know, unless you were really brave, we really didn't step out and do that. And I have a lot of friends from those days who don't have any kids. You know, a lot of gay women who don't have any kids, naturally, you know, actually having a child. So you can adopt now, you can do artificial insemination. That was not something that was possible when I was younger.

Hannah Sullivan 22:37

Sure. Can you tell me a little bit more about what coming out was like to you? When did you come out to yourself at first? When did you come out to your friends and your family?

Juanita Kirton 22:47

Oh, boy. It was a long process. It took forever and every step was a chore. So I think I came out to myself and knew that I was gay, I think I can say when I was 19. When I first— I went to college at 18 but it wasn't till the following year that I had a relationship and I said to myself, Okay, this is who I am. But I hid that. All through school, all through college I dated men. And even when I finished undergraduate school, excuse me, went to graduate school, I still was in the closet. And I did not come out to my parents, I think my son must have been nine years old. So that was— he was 7, 9, so somewhere in middle eighties. And my mother totally rejected me. She didn't want to speak to me. She put the Bible in front of me. My father was okay with it. My mother blamed my father because— he had a sexual relationship with me. So she blamed him for me being gay, and that was not the reason why I was gay, it wasn't because of my dad. It really wasn't. I have two brothers and a sister. My older brother and sister were fine with it; my youngest brother, he just couldn't understand. And then, I was a member of the church, of The Riverside Church in New York City, I sing in [note: the Inspirational] choir since 1985. There's a Maranatha organization there, [note: it's the oldest affirming/faith based LGBT group in the US, almost 50 yrs old.] And on Sunday, I thought that maybe God wouldn't like me either. So I wore skirts to church on Sunday. [Laughs]— because I was trying to hide my gayness, my butchiness, and— But they had a Maranatha program there for gay and lesbians and I joined it. And that helped me to come to terms— [note: with the fact that I was OK & that God made me.] So it was a slow process, building blocks on top of the blocks, to support myself. And then finally, I would say the middle, late eighties, I was totally out. And I slowly began to come out to [note: almost everyone]. I was [note: comfortable enough at work with a secure job] as an administrator in the community, in colleges and at the schools. So I was a principal, an assistant superintendent, district administrator. And so I was comfortable that I would not lose my job,

because by then the laws had changed, and you could not fire me because I was gay and lose my job. So that was fine. My son, I was out with him from the time he was born, and he never had an issue with it. Nor his friends. So I think that is the story of the coming out story. My mom still didn't accept me totally, I guess, until the day she was dying. She said she loved me, but she could not accept my gayness, and I just had to live with that.

Hannah Sullivan 25:57

Thank you for sharing. That's incredibly difficult, but also inspiring. So thank you for sharing. Let's see. I think I'd like to talk a little bit about the trajectory of your interest in psychology, to becoming an educator, and then an administrator, and also your time in the military, to later becoming a facilitator of arts and of trauma-informed arts workshops. So can you tell me a little bit, maybe just kind of at a high level, how did you go from one to the other? I'd love to hear the story.

Juanita Kirton 26:41

Oh, boy, that's a big one. Well, I joined the military in 1983 because I wanted another way to support my son. I thought about his future. And I thought about him going to school or maybe going to a military academy, and getting the extra money that would support him and extra resources. So that's one reason for joining the military. So I did that, was an active duty, regular Army and also the Reserves. I did both. Of course, I wasn't out in the Army back then either because you couldn't be gay in the military either. [Laughs]— but I was a platoon sergeant. And I was responsible for 42 men in my - in my platoon. I was the only Black female sergeant there. And I was Communication Chief. And later on, towards the end of the last, I would say 10 years of service, I became an instructor in high tech communications and technology, analog and digital equipment. And I taught the Marines, the Air Force, and Army in high-tech communications. So that was my trajectory in the military. As far as psychology is concerned— I started going to workshops, you know, writers workshops, to improve myself, I went and got an MFA. And I realized that, writing was really the backbone to me surviving childhood trauma and abuse. And so some of my poems, a lot of my poems deal with that, and deal with not only the trauma, but how I came— how I rose above that, how I turned those wounds into scars, and began to heal. And I began doing small workshops at Kirkridge Retreat [note:& Study] Center with other female writers, and going to workshops with other writers. And it was a wonderful tool to use. The director of Crossing Point Arts, is a member of my choir, and she asked me if I'd be interested in joining and becoming a teaching artist. And the teaching artist for Crossing Point Arts works with sex trafficking victims to heal, and the tools they use are all the arts: music, dance, fine arts, singing, and writing, and I'm one of those [note: Teaching Artists] and I'm trained [note: in trauma informed writing]— they train their artists in terms of how to work with sex trafficking victims.

Later on, I also attended— I'm in the military and the Army has Warrior Writers workshops [note: which is an organization for military veterans who experience trauma during their service. It's a national organization. They provide writing workshops for vets.] across the country. I went to a workshop, and they have facilitators that work with military personnel who have experienced trauma in the military. And there's all kinds of trauma. You'd have the sexual trauma, there's PTSD, there's physical trauma. Again, I joined, and then I was trained as a facilitator, with Warrior Writers, to [note: use writing to assist with working through & expressing some of that trauma, in a safe space with other veterans to support you.] And I'm really geared to women in the military who have experienced trauma; a lot of it has been sexual trauma that was perpetrated by other soldiers. And so that's how the two trainings have come. But [note: the training is very different and] they're really focusing on two different audiences. And so I can combine both of those trainings, and provide workshops for women who experience any kind of trauma, it doesn't really matter, any kind of trauma, and use the tools of writing to help heal and support you, and to just look at it.

Hannah Sullivan 30:56

That's so fascinating and you have such diverse experience, but you can really see how it all fits together. I'd love to, before I dive into the trainings, I'd love to first start with your military experience. It's amazing that you were in charge of, did you say 40, 40 men?

Juanita Kirton 31:15

42 men in my platoon. And anything that I asked them to do, I had to make sure I could do twice as good. So that's right, if you had to run three miles, I better be able to run 3, 4, 5 miles; you gotta get up at six o'clock in the morning, you got to march 10 miles with a 75-pound pack on your back, I better be able to do that too, if not even more. And so I learned leader, you lead by example. I was tough, but I was fair. Because a lot of times they had a lot of trouble in the military back in the eighties and nineties, with men respecting a Black woman with stripes on her shoulder. It was a tough call. I would be out on active duty, and you know, you're out there and you're in your tents and you're in the dug, dug into the dirt, and two, three o'clock in the morning, I had these guys creeping through the woods talking about they want to get into my pants. I'm like, you know, what, give me a break! And I could not come off as being soft. But I could not come off as being too hard. Because if you were too tough, they would label you as a lesbian. You were, you know, you don't like men. And if you were too softy, softy, softy, too girly, girly, you [note: got no respect.] So it was a fine line that I had to walk in the military [note: especially being] a Black woman, that was tough. Now I had a master's degree when I went in, and they wanted me to go and become an officer. I would have been, [note: a commissioned] officer, that would have been wonderful. But my son was away in the Bahamas, with my parents living. [Redaction]. And it would now cost me even more time away from him, to me to go to officer school and do all the [note: additional] training and then even more time. And I just— it was really, really a tough call. You know now that I think about it and say I made the right decision to

be with my son, and to give up being a [note: commissioned] officer. [Note: I'm proud to be a non-commissioned officer.] [Redaction]– I have benefits now. I mean, I have a service-connected disability. I'm getting military to pay disability the rest of my life. I'm getting medical coverage for the rest of my life. I'm 74 years old. I'm still working for the State Department. So I have a good job, I'm going to retire soon. But I think I made the right decision as a mother and a parent at that time. The Army taught me a lot of lessons. And there are days when I do miss it. And this year, my spouse surprised me for my birthday two weeks ago. And I have a huge [note: military] banner flying with the American flag in Stroudsburg PA on Main Street with my picture! [Laughs]–

Hannah Sullivan 34:25
No way, that's amazing!

Juanita Kirton 34:27
Yes, it's my picture and all my regalia and everything for my promotion picture. She surprised me and then had a bunch of people meet me when I went downtown cause she just said, oh, come on, we're going downtown. And I get out the car and there's this huge banner hanging. [Laughs]– and they only have like two or three [note: other] Black females. So I'm one of them, and I'm very proud to have served in the military. I did my duty. It was tough. I learned a lot and I'm hoping that the men that I commanded learned something from me, too.

Hannah Sullivan 35:02
That's incredible. Are you still in touch with any of the men that you commanded?

Juanita Kirton 35:06
No. I do live near a base, Tobyhanna. And I do go up there for my medical checkups and free shots, etcetera. But I'm not in contact with anybody else. I know one woman who was gay, who was not in my unit, but I used to run into her for trainings, and we would run into each other in a club, a gay club, and we were both like, “Oh, my God, I am gay. What am I doing?” And we'd say, “Well, wait a minute. We were– we're in the gay club, it's okay.” But that's how much– you had to be so cool. And so [note: secretive] protective back in the 80s. [redacted]

Hannah Sullivan 35:49
That makes total sense. Talk about not only double bind, well quadruple bind, but also a double-edged sword. There's a lot that you had to balance at that time. And I mean, even– do you think that you would have been able to connect with them if– or stay in touch with them if you hadn't had the barrier of not being able to be out? Or do you think there were other factors at play?

Juanita Kirton 36:19

I think so. There were a few men [note: in my unit], who some of who had my rank or above, that I went to school with and did training with. It is a possibility we could be— maintained friends. But again, I was in a closet. They didn't know I was gay. And I don't know how their reaction would be. But I think that if I was in the military now, and a gay female, that possibility of having a friendship outside of the military with straight men, that might be possible. But back then? No way.

Hannah Sullivan 36:58

Yeah, absolutely. That makes a lot of sense to me, based on my experience with some of my friends who are out and gay and in the military, which is a very new possibility. So that makes a lot of sense. I'd love to go back to the workshops. So you've taught workshops for members of the military who have, who are survivors of trauma, and then also, workshops for women who have experienced sexual trauma. Can you talk to me about what that's like? I imagine, it may sometimes be like putting on two different hats and maybe trying to communicate in very different ways. So I'd love to hear from you what that's like both professionally and personally.

Juanita Kirton 37:42

Well professionally, Crossing Point Arts: when you're working with sex trafficking victims, before the COVID came into effect, I would travel to the Bronx to a safe house and work one-on-one with, I would say, no more than four to five women in a small group doing a simple writing project. And that particular— the way you worked with them is that you provided them with prompts or a suggestion in terms of writing. But there was no requirement for them to share unless they wanted to share. They just did their writing in quiet. We spent about 30 to 45 minutes. But there was no requirement to share or to respond to any writing unless they wanted to. So that was very, very difficult. When COVID occurred, we went online, Zoom. But Crossing Point Arts, I was only allowed to hear voices; I could not see any faces. You had to be anonymous. That was even more difficult for me, because I'm very personable, I like to look at your face and have some facial interaction. It was very narrow in terms of giving feedback, getting feedback. I wasn't even sure if whatever I was doing was even helping. That was tough. That was very tough. Crossing Point Arts has fundraising events in New York City, I attended a few, and you'll see some of the women who've worked with Crossing Point Arts in other art areas, like their fine arts might be exhibited, dancing, singing, songs might be exhibited, a poem might be exhibited, but that's only up to that individual. And again, they are in safe houses, and you can't divulge their addresses or anything. So it's very, very tough. With Warrior Writers, it's totally different. You're online, or you're face-to-face, well before COVID, we were face to face—you're in a large group, you have a weekend, you're involved with everybody, you're talking to everybody. And they might have a mixed group, meaning it's men and women, then they can have separate groups where women are separated, men are separated. And they are writing and talking about their own issues, because some things that involve women really don't affect the men or vice versa. It's very interpersonal. Again, [note: as a facilitator] we provide prompts, you

get feedback, you hear the feedback, and you get feedback about what's working in that piece. And so it's very rewarding for the person who's providing- the facilitator, and also those who are in the workshop.

Hannah Sullivan 41:14

Really interesting. And how would you describe kind of the differences in those two sessions, both in a military context and more in like an arts context? What was it like working with those participants, and what do you learn from the participants?

Juanita Kirton 41:34

There's a lot of damage that was done in the military. Veterans who are now out, young Veterans, who are suffering from all kinds of trauma, be it physical, mental, emotional, and sometimes it's all of those. And so the military doesn't always support its Veterans enough. I've been really made aware of so much suffering, I wasn't even aware of. yYou look at a Vet and you say, okay, to have a physical disability, they suffered a physical trauma, they have PTSD, but there's other things that are happening, that are reoccurring– dreams, if you lost a friend in the military, one of your buddies, you've experienced a bombardment of sound constantly going on, you're breathing in all kinds of dust and dirt and it's getting into your body, your lungs, and you have sexual trauma of men trying to get in– getting in your bed or raping you, etcetera. And of course, then you have the put-downs of being Black or being female in the military. So there's a lot of stuff happening in the Army [note: military], in the military, that I wasn't aware of. And that using art, especially writing, is so helpful. We have a big thick anthology that Warrior Writers puts out every year. And it's amazing, the writing is absolutely amazing. And it's so healing. It's so healing. Crossing Point Arts, who deals with sex trafficking victims, you're talking about young girls, mostly. I'm talking about kids- 10 years old, 11 years old, young teenagers, who are sex trafficked into this country from all parts of the world, who are all ages, all nationalities. And so each time that you deal with that population, you have to really gear your conversation and your arts to that particular population. What I'm going to do with a [note:26] :16-year-old, an [note:48] 18-year-old, I'm not going to do with a 10-year-old. Totally different.

Hannah Sullivan 44:03

Absolutely. That makes a ton of sense. I'm curious if there was anything that surprised you about approaching the topic of trauma and healing from trauma from a professional lens, and what you might have learned from working with other survivors of trauma and how that made you reflect on your own experiences.

Juanita Kirton 44:29

To tell you the truth, I've grown significantly in my own healing by providing these workshops. I didn't realize how strong I am. And when I look back from what I went through, and all the steps

that I took to get to where I am, I'm so grateful that I am where I am today. Cause I didn't have those writing workshops to attend. I did not have Warrior Writers. I had to rely on psychotropic drugs and hospitalizations and lots of crying, and going to church and thinking that God was going to heal me. [note: I had] a few friends. So I came through all this healing on my own, mostly, so that I have built these bridges and these blocks that I'm able to give back to the soldiers, the Veterans, and anyone who has experienced trauma, because of what I've gone through and what I've learned. And so I'm stronger because of it. And writing has given me that voice that I did not have when I was younger. Because writing gave me the voice to say, I'm hurting, I'm in pain. Do you feel it? And then other people say, oh, yeah, I felt that pain, I know what you're talking about. And that empowered me, and I'm really grateful for that. It took a lot of energy, and bravery, to do what I'm doing now. It takes a lot out of me. But I get replenished now because I'm stronger. I have a solid relationship I've been in for 18 years, my son is grown, my granddaughter gives me lots of joy, I ride my motorcycle, and I'm happy. [Laughs]— I'm 74 now so I'm like, “Okay, bring it on. Bring it on. I'm ready.”

Hannah Sullivan 46:54

Okay, I promise you, we're getting back to that motorcycle topic. [laughter] But before we do, is there anything that you would describe as a breakthrough moment, or moments, that you found either through writing as an individual or maybe even through these moments of connection with the different people that you've worked with?

Juanita Kirton 47:20

I have a very strong teacher-mentor, her name is Julie Maloney. She's responsible for providing Women Reading Aloud workshops all over the world, I've gone to Greece to write with her, and I met her in 2005. We are good friends, I attend her workshops, and [note: she's my teacher and mentor. And she believed in me when I didn't believe in myself; when I just labeled myself, oh I'm just a little poet, and she says, “no, you're a writer, you are more than just this, you are this. You can go beyond that.” And so I have to give her credit, because everyone needs a mentor and teacher. Julie Maloney is my [note: inspiration] mentor and teacher. Women Reading Aloud is just absolutely wonderful. I'm still connected with them. And I when I received my master's, my fine arts,, from Goddard College, I had lots of teacher-mentors there too. And I must say that, that gave me the technical foundation that I didn't have. [note: The MFA provided me with] the structure and a technical way to write— to be a better writer so that I could get published [note: I am published in several anthologies, magazines and journals & I have 2 chapbooks out]. That was something that was really important too. So I have to also give kudos to Goddard College for helping me.

Hannah Sullivan 48:53

That's wonderful. Do you feel like you've also been able to be a mentor? To others?

Juanita Kirton 49:01

Oh, yeah. Oh, definitely.

Hannah Sullivan 49:03

I think I knew the answer to that. But [laughs]– I'm digging. [Laughs]–

Juanita Kirton 49:07

Yeah, I'm on the board of Kirkridge's Writing– Kirkridge's Retreat and Study Center. And there are lots of women there. I'm also a mentor to one specific woman who is an artist, a young artist here in East Strasburg, and we're getting ready to do a workshop in September at Kirkridge for women and trauma, and we're working with writing and art as a tool to deal with trauma. And so, yes, I think it's important for older women to give back, for older people, just to give back and to mentor young people, and for those young people to find mentors, and connect, so we can learn from each other, 'cause she's teaching me a lot about the technology some I'm still having issues with. [laughs] And so we're working together. And she's just in her early 30s. So it's working.

Hannah Sullivan 50:08

That's fabulous. What's one piece of advice that you might give to young writers out there, or really more aspiring writers, people who are looking for their voice, but maybe haven't found the courage or the time, or the circumstances to do it, and especially queer young people who are hoping to process something or learn about themselves?

Juanita Kirton 50:34

You got to connect with others. If it wasn't for Gap Tooth Girlfriends, back in the 80s, and going to their salons, I would not have known or been brave enough to begin writing and getting my voice heard out in public. So they really provided that stepping stone, and I saw other Black women doing it, and I was like “oh, okay, they can do that, I can do this too”. And I think most of them were gay. [Shows book to camera]– this is one of their most read– this is an old volume, *Black Gap Tooth Girlfriends*. This is a really old volume. But it is full of wonderful, wonderful poets who are in here, and they are– some of them are quite famous. I mean, you talking about people like Cheryl Clarke, who was at Rutgers University. You're also talking about Dorothy Randall Gray, and Gwendolyn Hardwick. I mean, these are main, major activists who were involved. And so, you have to connect. You have to get a group and you have to connect. And the main thing is to listen. Sit with your community, and listen. And that's what I would, you know, suggest for a young person, I don't care if you're gay, you're straight, you're Black, you're blue, whatever, you have to have a community, you have to listen and connect.

Hannah Sullivan 52:10

That's excellent advice. I will be following it. Based on your early experiences in lesbian communities, and also your involvement today in LGBTQ activism, and just beyond in your

personal life, how would you describe some of the biggest differences in what you've seen and experienced from the 70s to today?

Juanita Kirton 52:41

There's so many more letters behind LGBTQ X, Y, and Z. So I can't keep up with that. That's one. There are so many choices now. So you don't have to just go in one direction. You don't have to hide anymore. So many people who are so quote unquote famous have come out. You have the laws to protect you now. And there's— can you hear that— there's a lawnmower in the background, is that bothering you?

Hannah Sullivan 53:13

No, I can't hear it.

Juanita Kirton 53:14

Okay. There's the laws to protect you. You can get married, you can have children, and so many different ways to have children, back in the day, you couldn't even adopt a kid! Now you can do that. You can live anywhere. So, [note:many] the choices— And I had to fall back on the backs of women back in the 30s and 40s, and 50s and 60s, who were pounding the doors and pounding the pavement, and I stood on their backs and their shoulders. And so young women and young men were standing on my backs and shoulders because we began to open up all those other doors. Now, of course, there's still another door to be opening when you talk about trans. And there is a workshop going to be [note: offered] for trans [note:kids], for parents who have transgender children. I mean, how to handle that? And as a parent, I'm thinking and as a grandparent, how would I react if my son or my granddaughter was trans? I have no idea. So I would have to, I would need to be in a community, again, a community of like-minded people, to kind of have that discussion [note:and support]. But there are many, many more choices now than there were then, we still have a lot of work to do, but I'm hopeful. And I'm grateful that I'm alive today to see the changes that have occurred.

Hannah Sullivan 54:51

That's really well said. Speaking of the way that all of us are working off of the backs of others who have come before us, what's something that you hope that the next generation of LGBTQIA+ individuals can learn from what you've experienced and what you've done and take a step further? What's something that you would like to see?

Juanita Kirton 55:17

I would like to see that we no longer have to use and have all those different titles, that no matter who you are, as King would say, you're judged by your character, not by the color of your skin, not by who you sleep with, or who you identify as. That you could be in the military, and be out and still be honored, and have your stripes and wear your medals with pride. That you could be a

mother and a father, all at the same time. And so that's my hope. And that, you know, we don't have to use all these labels, eventually, I don't need to be a Black, gay, female, I could just be who I am, Juanita! And that's it, whatever else that comes with me is accepted. It's okay. And I hope that for my granddaughter. My granddaughter is what they say– she's biracial. And she's going to deal with a whole bunch of other issues besides what I dealt with. And if she decides that she wants to be gay, or she wants to be with a man, I really– it doesn't matter to me. I want her to be accepted and to be loved for who she is. And, that's my wish. That's my wish.

Hannah Sullivan 56:43

Very well spoken, very clear and positive message. Thank you. I promised you I was going to get back to the motorcycle topic, [laughter]– because I would be remiss if we didn't go into that. So I would love to hear about your experience with the NYC Sirens. Correct? Could you tell me a little bit more about that and how you got involved?

Juanita Kirton 57:04

The New York City Sirens, the best motorcycle club around! [Laughter]– they deliver breast milk all over- all over New York City, even during COVID.

Hannah Sullivan 57:13

Amazing.

Juanita Kirton 57:15

Yes, so I got a motorcycle when I was 41 years old. My son said, Mom, you're going through a midlife crisis. I always wanted to ride a motorcycle, my dad forbid me to buy one. So when I turned 41, I was able to buy my own motorcycle, I don't need my father's permission anymore. I went to school, learned how to ride a motorcycle. And I had it delivered to my house and I was living in Hastings-on-Hudson. And it sat in my driveway for two weeks and my son came out, I think he was around 14, he said “Mom, aren't you going to ride the bike?” I said, “Yeah, you want to get on?” He says, “no, it's your motorcycle, you get on.” I rode that motorcycle. And in 1996 I think it was, yeah, 1996, I took my first two-wheeled motorcycle, 800 cc Honda Pacific Coast, from Pennsylvania to Seattle, Washington, Tacoma, alone.

Hannah Sullivan 58:12

How long did that take you?

Juanita Kirton 58:14

I drove– well, I took five days to go across, but I spent a week in Seattle, and then took another, I don't know, five or six days, drove down to coasts of Oregon all the way around. And then I came back through the middle section of the city, of the country. I didn't hit all the country, all the states yet. That was just the northern part. And then I made another trip on two wheels, and I

went the southern route, back around, so that I could hit all of the states that I missed in the middle. And then in 1989, [correction: 1999] I think, a friend of mine and I, the two of us, we went to Nova Scotia for 20 days and we rode in Cabot Trail and spent 20 days riding in Nova Scotia. And then this year, after riding like 30 something years, my service-connected disability— I have some problems with my ankle and I have a knee replacement— so I was unable to hold up two wheels for a long time. So my two-wheeler, I had it triked, meaning I had two wheels put on the back, it has a special trike kit.

Hannah Sullivan 58:34

That's amazing.

Juanita Kirton 58:35

And this May, I rode it to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to [redacted] the Black Wall Street rally, which is to help raise funds for the Greenwood community that burnt down in 1921, I think it was. So I rode by myself. My spouse likes to ride but she doesn't like to do long distance riding. So I went from Pennsylvania to Tulsa. I stopped in Columbus and met a friend for breakfast. I stopped in St. Louis, Missouri overnight, and then I took some side roads through the side mountains all around, and ended up in Tulsa and I spent five days in Tulsa. And it was just beautiful. And then I rode home. And so I love to ride. I have a lot of poems about riding. It is freeing.

I joined the Sirens Motorcycle Club in 1994, I think. And I was often on as a member, and a book just came out about the Sirens as a motorcycle club to help young girls feel included. Wait, wait, I gotta show it to you. It's just amazing. I should have had it out. And I need to turn the camera around so you can see it. [shows book to camera] But it's called— it's called oops, oops, *Everything in Its Place*. And then if you open the book, right on this side, my name is in here, right on this side, as helping to write this book. I also know the author. And if you look carefully, the illustrator Pinkney is the daughter of the famous Black illustrators' Pinkney.

Hannah Sullivan 1:01:26

That's amazing!

Juanita Kirton 1:01:27

This just came out, dedicated to the Sirens Motorcycle Club. *Everything in Its Place*. And so they haven't— they have book readings and book parties to celebrate the opening of this— the publishing of the book. And so I'm really excited about that. That was just really wonderful. But yeah, so, riding my motorcycle is another therapeutic use, another way of using motorcycles for therapy, because it's just so free and opening and welcoming. And it's dangerous, but I've never been in an accident. I have my motorcycle club to support me for some trips, not all trips, but it's a women's motorcycle club in New York City. We lead the New York City gay parade every year. They lead the Rockland, [note: NY Gay] parade, the Long Island parade, Brooklyn parade, the

Asbury Park parade, the Bronx gay parade, they lead all those parades around the city, and it's just absolutely wonderful.

Hannah Sullivan 1:02:32

You keep busy! [laughs]–

Juanita Kirton 1:02:36

I'm retiring from my full-time job, this January, 2023. Definitely retiring, finally, for my state position with the State Department.

Hannah Sullivan 1:02:45

Oh, that's fabulous. Okay, what are you most excited about for retirement both to do individually and together with your spouse?

Juanita Kirton 1:02:52

I'm going to clean out my closets. [laughter] I have dress suits, and so many shoes that I'm no longer going to be wearing. So I'm going to be cleaning them out and donating them. So that's the first thing. My spouse is seven years younger than me so she's still working. But that's the first thing we're going to do. And then for my birthday next year, which I'll be 75, I'm going to go to the only state I haven't been, or haven't ridden in, and that's Hawaii. I'm gonna be going to Hawaii. I'm planning it now, gonna have a big party, gonna rent a motorcycle on the island, so I can say that I've ridden in every state in the United States, including Greece, because I've ridden in Greece.

Hannah Sullivan 1:03:34

Wow. Okay, I'm very jealous. That sounds perfect. [Laughter]

Juanita Kirton 1:03:38

It's fun. [Laughter]– it's fun.

Hannah Sullivan 1:03:43

Well, I could ask you 10 million more questions, but we are reaching our time. So one question, a little bit abstract. Imagine you are a writer, writing a letter to your younger self. It can be whatever age you want to, but what would you most like to tell her about your life now? And reflecting on your life, what are you most proud of and most excited to share?

Juanita Kirton 1:04:11

Hmm- It feels like I have two separate lives. I have one for my abuse of my dad when I was 13 and one after. And I think the one before, I was happy, everything was fine. I could do anything—all the possibilities were there. And then, when I turned 13, that dark part of my life,

there were no possibilities and it was dark. So I want to say to the self after 13, that in the darkness, there is going to be light. Continue to move towards the light. That's what I want to say to my younger self.

Hannah Sullivan 1:05:02

Beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing everything that you've shared with me so far. I'm excited for other people to listen to this and hear about your experiences. And before we conclude, is there anything else you want to share or talk about or make sure people know?

Juanita Kirton 1:05:20

I just want to say, I'm really grateful to Lesbian Herstory Archives. I visited it when it was in Brooklyn. I have friends who worked in the Archives. And I really, really think that it's so important that they're reaching out to record and have a history, a verbal history, a video history, of women who were so important to the growth of our community. And so I just want to really thank the Herstory Archives for doing this, it's absolutely wonderful and it's a real honor to be here. Thank you so much.

Hannah Sullivan 1:06:05

I would love to echo that. Thanks. It's an honor to be a part of this project and I'm honored to talk to you today. This was fantastic. So thank you so much for your time. I'm excited that we got to do this.

Juanita Kirton 1:06:16

Thank you so much, Hannah. Bye-bye, buddy.

Hannah Sullivan 1:06:19

Bye-bye.

Juanita Kirton 1:06:20

Okay.