



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Ruth Kupfer**

An Interview
Conducted by
Rebecca Heywood
07/26/2022

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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LEOHP Interview

Interviewee: Ruth Kupfer

Interviewer: Rebecca Heywood

Date: 07/26/2022

Rebecca Heywood 00:06

Hello, thanks for joining us today. Today is Tuesday, July 26 2022, and we are recording an oral history with me, Rebecca Heywood talking to Ruth Kupfer about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral History Project interview, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. We're recording from— Rebecca in Brooklyn, New York, and Ruth in Lincoln, Nebraska. Great, so we're gonna go ahead and get started. Ruth, can you tell me a little bit about when and where you were born and your early life?

Ruth Kupfer 00:41

Sure. I was born in 1954, during the winter, in Omaha, Nebraska. That's where I grew up. I had a family of just four of us— mom, dad and my older sister. And we were just a typical sort of Midwestern family growing up with lots of sports we were interested in. When I was little, my dad used to take me skating and skating has been one of my lifelong loves. He also taught me how to throw and catch. We would play, catch with a softball after dinner, and taught me how to play softball. For which I'm very grateful, because that's how I met my partner, playing softball.

But yeah, my folks built a house in what was West Omaha at the time. Now it's sort of central Omaha, because it's grown so much, you can hardly recognize it. But my mom taught me how to sew. And that's been another one of my lifelong passions, is making things, sewing quilts primarily and other kinds of things. Not so much tailoring, because that's hard [laughter]. But what's great actually is sitting down and turning on a baseball game and sewing at the same time. Kind of brings back a few memories. Yeah. And when my sister and I got to a certain age, it was clear, we were expected to go to college, which we both did. We were expected to find husbands at college, which we both did. And for both of us that did not work out. When I— yeah, well, I'll tell you about my first teaching job. Is that— is this a good time to do that? Oh, I have to say one more thing, though, about my mother. Okay, we were watching some television program— this would have been back in 1971, or '72— and the word homosexuality was used, or homosexual, and I didn't know what that was. I was 18 years old or so and I did not know what that was. So I asked my mom, and her standard answer for everything was "let's look it up in the dictionary." Pretty sure she knew what it was and she didn't want to have to tell me. So we looked it up in the dictionary and I was like huh, but it still didn't really sink in that that was, you know, who I was, or that I knew anybody who was a homosexual. And so, yeah, I think, I mean, there's lots I could say about that. Not sort of having any context for you know, who I was interested in hanging around with.

You know, I had a best friend that I would get on my bike and ride to her house and all through school up to graduation, she was my primary friend and I had a lot of other friends who are girls. Didn't date boys, actually. And so, yeah, I wish that I could be like young people today and sort of know and understand because of the visibility that exists today. But yeah, anyway. Did I, did I— [laughs].

Rebecca Heywood 04:56

No, it's great. Can you share a little bit more about that experience with your mom and how, if you remember, how she reacted when you read the dictionary, and then how that affected or didn't affect your experience as you discovered your own identity?

Ruth Kupfer 05:19

Well, you know, it took a while for me to get it. And my parents even had these friends— I'm certain now that they were a gay couple. But they used to go to football games with my parents. But I don't know if you know about Nebraska, but like football is this thing. Or it used to be, not so much anymore, but it's a big sports state in terms of that, and he— mom and dad used to have football tickets with these guys, Herman and Jim, and they would come over to our house, and my folks would go out with them and so forth. And even, kind of having a knowledge of what homosexuality was, didn't quite sink in for a while. And at some point, when it did, I asked my dad, I said, "Do you think Jim and Herman are, are—" I don't know if we said gay then and he's like, "No, couldn't possibly be," but there were lots of indicators now that I know that they were and yet, I didn't understand so much how that affected me. And we didn't talk about it. We were a not talk about stuff family, for the most part. Yeah and that's been a long time ago, too. It's been 50 years ago now. So, yeah.

Rebecca Heywood 06:53

If you're comfortable, can you share with me a little bit about your experience coming out?

Ruth Kupfer 06:58

Sure. Well, let me kind of infuse this with some information about that first job. I had— my first teaching job was kind of in the middle of Nebraska and Hastings, and this is where I was with my husband. I was really trying to figure out how to be a teacher. I think you don't learn really how to be a teacher until you are a teacher. And I was also working on new curriculum they hadn't had there before teaching Title One reading. So I'm pretty involved in that, and I made friends with the female PE teacher there and started spending more time with her and when I finally moved back to Lincoln from there— I came back by myself— there was nobody else with me at that point then. But I got to know folks here and I ran into a guy that I had gone to high school with, and he was like, "Yeah, we're having this pickup volleyball game, you should come to the church, and we do it Tuesday nights." So I did and got to learn some things about volleyball and got to know some people there. It was co-ed. But I got to know some gals and

they said, "Hey, we're going to start a city rec team, do you want to be on our team?" I was like, "Sure." So we would play and afterwards, we generally go get frozen yogurt because that was big at the time. But sometimes we'd go to the bar, and we were at the gay bar one night after a game and the person who has become one of my dearest friends, Moni, turns to me at the bar in a way only she can and says, "So are ya lesbian or what?" And I said, "Well, I guess I better be figuring this out." And [laughs]— and clueless me, I'd already had some relationships with a couple of different women but didn't have that name for it yet. So I was grateful, I'm eternally grateful to Moni for posing that question to me so that I could figure it out, and figure out that it's important to name it, and it's important what you name it. And that was kind of the beginning.

Oh, I lost my train for a minute there. I think also being in a context then that I didn't have before so that I could see what the language was. Back in that time period, in the early eighties, we talked a lot about femme and butch, terms I don't hear so much anymore. And I saw how people were, how their households were. It just gave me a sense of what things in my life that had already happened mean, what they mean. And yeah, then that identity began to grow, if that makes sense. So that was kind of it [crosstalk]. Coming out to parents is a different story for me, because my mother had passed away when I was younger and I saw my dad. And I was— he was legally blind so I'd go up every other weekend and kind of take care of him, get groceries, drive him places and stuff. And I had my partner, a partner with me at that time, and she and I were in the basement doing his laundry and we had paused to kiss. And then suddenly, she said to me, "Um, your dad's right there." And so I was like, "what?" And everybody scattered, you know, I went someplace. But I did ask dad, I said, "Can I help you with some of your— what do you need?" And he wanted to show me something so we did, and then everybody sort of went to different parts of the house and just kind of, you know, sat in shock, I guess. But you know what, my dad never mentioned it after that and we never talked about it. Because there again, remember the don't talk about family. And he actually really did like that woman. And yeah, so there you go. I mean, big fat, nothing burger, really. But I— that doesn't mean I don't feel for people who have to go through that experience in ways. And that was, you know, that was a big part actually of working with gay kids, was talking to them about that whole coming out process and so forth.

Rebecca Heywood 12:27

Great. So it sounds like a good moment maybe to transition into talking about your experience teaching. Is there anything that you want to share kind of related to what we've already talked about, before we move into your teaching career?

Ruth Kupfer 12:44

Gosh, I don't know. I think we could start talking about that.

Rebecca Heywood 12:55

Okay.

Ruth Kupfer 12:56

And kind of too about that identity growth, that my own identity growth, like in my first teaching job, obviously didn't identify as a lesbian. So I wasn't like keying into students either so much. Because it was different back in the early eighties in regards to students, young people being open and being visible. My friends who are still teaching now tell me that it is much more visible at school. People, you know, holding hands in the hallway and wearing messages that would suggest that they're openly gay and so forth. But at the time, it wasn't so much like that. And so, I think when I was sort of formulating who I was, I became more aware of what students also would need. But in my classroom, I didn't start the school year by saying, "Hey, I'm Miss Kupfer, I'll be your lesbian teacher this year." You know, it wasn't relevant at that moment. And at a lot of moments wasn't relevant. You're there to do whatever is expected academically, and I'm there to support that. But at some point, things would happen, that would require me to be open. For example, one time a kid said to me, "Hey, Miss Kupfer, a lot of the kids think you're gay." And so my question back to him was, "What makes them think so?" or "Why do you think that?" And he said, "Well, when people use language that's like anti-gay—" that was sort of the "That's so gay" period, you know— "you don't let 'em do it or you call 'em on it." And I said "Yeah, all teachers should do that." And he said, "But they don't." And so I said, "Well, you're right, I am gay." You know, because then it made sense and how am I not going to tell him that. That would be so dishonest to try and cover that up. But to sort of bring it into a, you know, show him how to question too and talk about things like that, I hoped I could help with that.

Then a bigger time, more impactful thing that happened was that I had a student in an English 10 class who was going to bully me. He's kind of a bully in general. And he decided that he was going to do some things that would call me out in front of the class. So he'd come in and say, "Hey, Miss Kupfer, what do you think about gays in the military?" and so forth, and I said, "What do you think about this assignment that's due today?" or whatever— try and deflect it. But one day he came in, and he made a gesture with his hand and his mouth that was straight up sexual harassment, very chilling to me, very inappropriate. So I flew like a banshee over to where he was and grabbed him and said, "We're going to the office." And so we went down to the assistant principal's office, I was really angry. I went into the vice principal's office, and I said, "Look, here's what's been happening with this guy. And here's what happened today. He's baiting me because he thinks I'm gay. And you can't tell him I'm not because I am." And the Vice Principal is like, "Oh, well, okay, what do I have to do?" You know [laughs]— it was kind of a first for him too, I imagine. But I— this is not where it ended, either. Because this young man also was nominated to be a part of the National Honor Society, as happens with the senior class. And the way we always did it for teachers was to get a list. If you saw anybody that you felt didn't qualify for the National Honor Society, you would let them know. When I did— and so did

his— another one of his teachers who I talked with, and she said, "Yeah, he's kind of, you know, poor character. Well, it so happened that the committee that confirmed National Honor Society folks confirmed him said he would be fine. Even a teacher who he had also sexually harassed, a gay male teacher, said he should be in the National Honor Society. So I'm like "What are you talking about? What message does this send?" So I talked to the principal, I talked to the associate principal, and they're both saying, "You know, it's not a problem" or "We're not going to take this seriously" in so many words. And I decided I needed to talk to one of the higher up administrators in the district, and she told me that she wasn't familiar with the guidelines or the standards for the National Honor Society. So she couldn't help me. Well, number one, look them up. And number two, use your head. You know, and I just felt so hung out to dry in a way or definitely unsupported in this idea that, you know, students should not be able to do those kinds of things without serious consequences. Anyway, as you know, I wrote about this experience in a book called *One Teacher in 10* that came out in— was it the eighties? Maybe? I don't know. Anyway, I think it's still in print [laughs]— if you want to find it. Anyway, so at some point, I think I said to myself, you know what? I need to be who I am. I need to take risks. I need to be a model for gay kids in my school. So there's that story.

Rebecca Heywood 19:51

Thank you for sharing that. Even today, Nebraska, I believe, doesn't have laws protecting people from workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation, or gender identity. Did you ever worry about being open about your identity at the school that you worked at? And how did that affect how you came forth every day as a teacher?

Ruth Kupfer 20:34

You know, I've been thinking about that, since we've been working together. And I think it was a gradual process, for me to be out, like in the teachers lounge, for example, or to other teachers. I had gay teacher friends in my school, and that helped a lot. But I think— I'm blanking a little bit here, ask me again.

Rebecca Heywood 21:12

Just, it sounds like you were open about your identity at school and I'm just interested in how you made that decision to be open, and if you ever worried about your position—

Ruth Kupfer 21:26

You know I—

Rebecca Heywood 21:26

[Crosstalk]— if you are worried that something might happen.

Ruth Kupfer 21:28

That's the thing, yeah. I do think that I did have some worries about it early on. And it's very disappointing that, but not surprising that Nebraska can't do better in terms of protecting all of its citizens. But it helped to have gay colleagues. And at one point, we got together a gay teacher kind of support group. We'd meet for dessert at one of the teachers' homes, and talk about different things that were happening and kind of just be happy to be together and know that there are other folks. And they came from all the different buildings, the elementary, middle school and high school and that was, that was good. But at some point, I think it was just like, yeah, I need to do this for me. You know, for example, I took a wonderful class as part of my master's degree program at the University that was a women's literature class. It meant so much to me to be reading about women's experiences and all, you know, kinds of women. And I said to myself, I need this class in my high school. I need to teach this class to students. And I was, I wanted to do that because I wanted young women to have a similar experience to what I had. But I also did it for myself so that I could teach something that I had passion about, I could identify with. We used some literature, I chose some literature to use, in which there were lesbian characters, and lesbian authors. It was a wonderful chapter in my teaching career. And then, but even then, I'm not starting the class the first day saying, "I'm your lesbian teacher." But as it fit with questioning and made sense to talk about or answer questions certain ways. That's when it's good to come out in that manner, I think.

Rebecca Heywood 24:13

Did you receive any pushback when you were designing that class or selecting the books to read? Did you run into any issues with students or with parents or with administrators, or anything like that?

Ruth Kupfer 24:27

You know, not as much as you might expect. I do remember one parent in particular, who I had the feeling that she had her daughter sign up for the course because they were conservative Christians, and she wanted to monitor what I was doing and what literature I was using. But that's about all in terms of parents. And I didn't get pushback about that course, in particular. When we started talking about the Gay Straight Alliance, that was a little bit different. But I do have a story about one of the associate principals pushing back. But it was with a different course actually. Because I guess I was getting this in my mind, even before the women's lit class, that I should present these characters and so forth. I taught a course called Contemporary Literature and we were teaching it with books that just weren't being used in other courses. So it was like Willa Cather and like, not real contemporary. You're trying to find some maybe young adult literature that would be interesting, and so forth. So I chose a book that was called *Happy Endings Are All Alike* by Sandra Scoppettone. And it was about young women who were coming into their identity as lesbians. And the book, you know, ordered it, my department chair ordered it, they came in, they were all stamped with Lincoln High and everything, all ready to go. I'm

like, "Yeah!" Well, so the next thing, you know, I get a note from the associate principal, and she has me come down. She's like, "Well, talking about this book" and so forth. I said, "Yeah, this, this will be a good step in finding some contemporary literature." And she said, "Well, I don't think that we're ready for this book." I was like, "What are we not ready— they're here, they're stamped, we were gonna hand them out." And she said, "Well—" She had read, I don't know if she read the whole thing, but she'd read enough to know that there were stereotypes in the book— "We don't want to perpetuate stereotypes." And I was like, "Okay, what are you talking about?" And she said, "Well, they wear flannel shirts, and they wear hiking boots, waffle stampers." I was like, "Okay, I'm still looking for the problem with this, maybe that's just a little realism that you're not aware of, or whatever." So, but I, you know, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking, okay, this woman doesn't want to have to justify it, when she gets a call. And this is easy. So she sent them back. They were stamped, can't send them back, but she did. She sent them back [sighs]. So, charge ahead, I think maybe when we had Women's Literature, she had moved on to greener pastures, I don't know. Or maybe it was just she was a little more courageous. So, but yeah.

Rebecca Heywood 27:42

Will you share a little bit, in working with your colleagues, you had mentioned some work that you had done around staff development, and helping your colleagues navigate, it sounds like both supporting gay students and supporting their colleagues potentially. What was the work that you did to support your colleagues in this?

Ruth Kupfer 28:04

Well, I have and had a very good friend whose name is David. And he and I developed the staff development program, presentation, let me say, and we worked primarily with people who were working on teaching degrees or administrative degrees at the college in our area. And so we'd bring in exercises and so forth. For example, one of the things we would start with was to ask all these folks, "What do you think your college thinks about, or colleagues think about Gay and Lesbian people?" Like "Do your college colleagues think they deserve protections in the law? Do your colleagues think that this is a healthy lifestyle?" Whatever, and then after they had marked that down, and we kind of had them show by standing, how many think this, how many think that, and they're all showing that they think their colleagues aren't ready for this, or it's negative, they don't believe in this. Then we ask them to do "What do you think?" And of course, they think something needs to be done and we need to make these particular changes and so forth. And so we're like, okay, what are you waiting for? Because you think these people are not ready, but you're saying you are ready, and you should be ready. So we'd get them to thinking about that sort of thing and we tell some of our own personal stories. We'd give them lots of ideas about where to go further, how to find the right books, and what kinds of things you ought to look for to read. And one of the young men who was in one of the courses to become an administrator is the principal now at the school, and we're friends. We worked together a lot before I retired. But

I just saw him recently and I said, "Hey, Mark, I want to ask you a couple questions. First of all, do you still have the Gay Straight Alliance at Lincoln High?" And he's like, "Yup." I said "Do you still have Pride Prom?" and he said, "Yep." "You still teaching Women's Lit?" He said "Yep" and I was really, really happy about that. I remember the note that he wrote me after that training day, where he said that I had made him think about things that he hadn't thought about before, in that context, because our whole message was: this work is not about sex, this work is about scholastics. If you have students who are being harassed, they don't feel safe at home, if they don't connect with the curriculum, it's not a safe place for them to learn, and they're not going to learn to their full potential. So hopefully we shifted people's focus to where it needed to be with kids in schools. How can you possibly disagree with the notion that all kids need a safe space in order to do their best academically?

Rebecca Heywood 31:47

Yeah, I mean, that's— I'm excited to, for you to share more about this legacy that you've created. Can you talk about starting the Gay Straight Alliance at Lincoln High?

Ruth Kupfer 31:59

Yeah. Actually, my friend, John, also a gay— well, not also a gay man, a gay man— who I worked with, and a really wonderful man, had gone to the pride events in Washington, DC, a march on Washington, in '92. And I'm thinking in the summer months, but he came back that fall, and he was like, we need to do something. We need to carry this on. So he got the group going, and he has a very interesting story about how he did that too in his chapter of *One Teacher in 10*. He got it going and the next year, I said, "Hey, can you use some help? Can I join in?" And he said, "Yes." And there were a couple other counselors and folks that, you know, support it as well. But we got it going. And at first, just a few kids, maybe half a dozen get together every Tuesday after school. And then there's a kid that showed up that we don't know— well, he came from another school because he heard that we had this at Lincoln High. And we got more of those kinds of kids from the different high schools. And yeah, it was clear by the stories they would tell when we'd get together. One kid had said his dad had thrown him out. And so we're talking to him about where are you living, what do you need kinds of things. It was very clear that it was needed. At the beginning, it was called GLOBE which stands for Gay and Lesbian, uh no, Gay and Lesbian Organization for the Betterment of Everyone. [shows sweatshirt to camera]

Rebecca Heywood 34:04

Oh, I love that you have the sweatshirt, if you can show the bottom part as well. You have your hand just over it.

Ruth Kupfer 34:11

Oh, GLOBE.

Rebecca Heywood 34:12

Oh, that's so great. So '92 was the first year that was started.

Ruth Kupfer 34:17

Yeah. Well, after a time, a couple years later, a young woman came up to me in the hallway and said, "Hey, I'd really like to—" you know, or "I had these situations I want to learn about" and I said, "Hey, you should come to GLOBE because that's the kind of stuff we talked about." And she said, "Well, I just don't think I can. I'm going to be applying to some competitive colleges and I'm going to need some letters of recommendations from my teacher. If they know I'm going to this club, I might not get them." So I said, "Okay, let's troubleshoot this problem." And it just so happened that shortly after that gay teacher group I was telling you about, got together and— oh, shoot, I should have looked up her name— there's a woman who was making a presentation at the University that came into our group. And she had written about, she'd written a book, she was an attorney, I believe. And she'd written a book, a book about rights and so forth for gay and lesbian kids in the educational setting. So I said to her, "Look, this is our problem. Not all kids feel safe coming to our group. And so what should we do? Should we move it to the church that's nearby? Should we, you know, meet on the weekends, or whatever?" And she's like, "No, all you have to do is change your name. Change your name to the Gay Straight Alliance. That means straight people go to your group, even if they're just passing as straight. And that way, that gives kids an out to say, 'I'm an ally, I want to be an ally.'" And a lot of straight kids did come too, but it just made it that much safer. And so it was the Gay Straight Alliance for a while and they were like, the lesbians are like, okay, come on. So then we're a Gay, GLBSA. And then of course, GLBTSA, and then I— since then there's the Q and the +, and so forth. We weren't quite at that point when I was there, but you get the idea [laughs]— so yeah, so it got going. And we had this wonderful policy at the school, which was called "Club Day." There was one day a month you could miss your class to go to a club during the day. So like, if you had to go home and take care of your little siblings, or you had a job, or you had sports after school and couldn't go to club meetings then, you could go during the school day. And so we would use that time to bring in speakers or to do projects. We have the tradition of doing a little get to know ya icebreaker with little pieces of yarn and made little bracelets and stuff. But it wasn't long before kids activism started to emerge. And so we're figuring out things we could do to educate the GLBTSA kids, but also the larger community of our school.

One of the coolest things was when in December, we brought in panels from the NAMES Quilt. We had a big room, multipurpose room, they were able to put up the panels. You know, it's a really beautiful display. And then made it possible for teachers to bring their classes through during the school day also to see and understand and pick up literature that would explain and the GLBTSA kids would staff it and ask for, you know, a solemn, quiet. And people would do that. And I mean, that was so great, so moving. And yeah, and there were other kinds of things too, let me check my list. We went up to Omaha and participated in some Pride marches in

Omaha with our banner that we have. On National Coming Out Day and especially on National Day of Silence, we would, the kids would create observations at school. They'd make placards to wear that said, "I'm silent today and this is why" and so forth, and kids would come and want to participate in that. The other high schools started to have their own GLBTSA's and so our kids would help them get that going and give them ideas. A couple of really amazing things now that I think of it— one was that they planned, we planned a two day— well, here's the book. It was a conference, [shows booklet to camera] "Spread the word, let us be heard: building gay voices in our community." We had a two day conference that had all kinds of presenters from the Lincoln community, from the University, from the religious community, from the healthcare community. And then the final thing that weekend was to then break and go to Pride Prom. Pride Prom was just the coolest thing. It was like no big deal and a huge deal at the same time 'cause it enabled you to go to a dance where you could dance with whoever you wanted to. You can dance with your same sex partner, you can dance with a crowd, you can wear vintage clothing, or you can— you know it just opened it up for lots of kids, not just the GLBTSA kids but other kids too, to have that special celebration of themselves. Started out having it in the Unitarian Church. Yay, Unitarians. Then we decided it needed to be in the school. So now it rotates. It has been rotating around to, from different school cafeterias, so that it's right there in the building.

And then also, another cool thing I have to tell about is in 19— or in 2005, when George W. was elected president, a kid from another school was like, "Let's, you know, let's protest this cause I think the way, the direction things are going are not great for us." So we organized this march on the Capitol Building. We weren't very far at Lincoln High from the Capitol. So we gathered at the High, had some, you know, some announcements, some words. We marched up there and had several speakers, again, from some of those communities, the religious community, a legislator came out and made some comments and so forth, and kids had a lot to say. It was so amazing, so many people. I think learning how to do that kind of protest is super important. And so they got a chance to do that. It was just, it was just so great. Let me just say that, it was really great. GLBTS—

Rebecca Heywood 42:33

That's an incredible community that it sounds like you are such a key part in starting. I think a lot of folks don't think of Nebraska as the most welcoming place for Gay, Lesbian, Trans and other people who may call themselves queer these days. What— how do you think about that question? Both when you were starting this, so when you're trying to create a safe space, it sounds like things like families were not accepting, prom was not accepting. And then how you, how do you reflect on the difference between when you were involved and what you're hearing about today? And how things have changed or not changed in Nebraska for Gay and Lesbian students?

Ruth Kupfer 43:24

That's a good question. I am really concerned about what's happening in Nebraska. And in the country in general. I feel like the time period that I was involved with GLBTSA and teaching in general, was the pendulum was swinging towards more acceptance, and more visibility and the benefits of visibility. And now I think things are going the wrong way again. Here in Lincoln, the City Council passed a Fairness Ordinance that would have ensured protections for Gay, Lesbian, Transgender people. And they were encouraged to rescind that because some in the queer community felt like it wasn't something that was going to pass if it came to voting, the community vote, okay. And so they, yeah, they rescinded it and were like, okay, we need to go to work on this because it's, we're not going in the direction we hoped that things would go. Yeah, and the religious right in Lincoln is very organized, very strong force. And the fear was that they, if we put it to a vote of the community, that they would vote it down, and then that would be very bad. But I don't know. I mean, it's that thing where you think everybody else isn't going to do it, but you would. Well, doesn't that mean, there are a lot of people like you who would vote the right way?

I don't know. And I read an article about a young woman in another state, Texas, of course, who was suspended from her teaching job because she had spoken of her upcoming marriage to her partner. That's crazy. I mean, yeah, I'm sad and concerned about what direction things might be going. But that just means we got to continue with GSA and continue with—I think what's super important is reading histories, knowing where the movement came from. You know, you need to understand who Del and Phyllis were, you need to understand what truly did happen at Stonewall, you need to understand that Bayard Rustin was a huge part of what Dr. King was able to accomplish. And you also need to know, what's the day to day for same sex couples? You know, how is it different from any other couple? How's it the same? Maybe it's not different at all. So yeah, it's a worry.

Rebecca Heywood 47:00

So when you think about young teachers, or folks who've been teaching for a while, but maybe haven't been involved, what advice would you want to leave with folks based on your experience in schools and Lincoln, and in Nebraska? What do you want to make sure folks take away?

Ruth Kupfer 47:23

I think do your homework, you know, do your homework, understand where all this comes from, why people feel the way they feel. Keep in mind what's important in terms of safety for everyone, for students, especially you know, the growing the force [laughs]. Yeah, I think, I don't know. Oh [laughs]—I kinda burned out on this one.

Rebecca Heywood 48:21

No worries. If something comes to mind later, we can talk about it. I did want to ask— you mentioned in one of our earlier conversations, a full circle experience you had with one of your students. Can you talk a little bit about that? And why that's something that's important to you.

Ruth Kupfer 48:38

Yeah. There was a young woman who was in my Women's Literature course and also in the GSA, pretty active in GSA, who graduated and went to school at Stanford. And we kept in touch, she and I were pretty close. I wanted to give her some, be her lesbian mom in a way to help her kind of navigate the waters. So we kept in touch and she was getting ready to graduate and she wanted us to come out and see her graduate. So we did and it was really neat. Stanford's graduation ceremony is like none other. And so we were having a good time and you know, hanging out with Emilie and so you know, that part gets done and she's like, "Well, okay, Pride is this weekend here in San Francisco and I would like you to march in the Pride Parade with me." And I was like, "Yeah, I would love to do that" because she had been a part of an honors program. And her honors project was to work in the the school systems around the Bay Area to see what kind of support gay kids had, and what they needed, and start, you know, and propose programming and set guidelines for that and so forth. So it was like that. She was in my GSA, and now she's making GSAs. And we had ours before either one of the coasts had in school kinds of support, maybe because there was plenty of support outside of school. But Emilie was doing that and working on that, and so we marched in that parade, and it was amazing and great. And now kind of keep track of her on the Facebook, and she's married and had— she and her wife have two great kids. And in terms of, let's see how lesbians live, it's like, there's the day to day right there, they're a family with kids and loving nature, and yeah, it's pretty awesome. I'm grateful to have known her.

Rebecca Heywood 51:18

Thank you for sharing that. That's a great— I think the point about you and Lincoln, Nebraska, having a GLBTSA before the coasts is just again, something folks often don't think about. I wanted to ask also, you've mentioned a couple times the book, *One Teacher in 10*. And I think the full title is *One Teacher in Ten in the New Millennium: LGBT Educations Speak Out About What's Gotten Better...and What Hasn't*. How did you get involved in that project?

Ruth Kupfer 51:52

Actually, there is a first book that's called *One Teacher in 10* and then the one you're referencing is the follow up one.

Rebecca Heywood 52:02

Oh, great.

Ruth Kupfer 52:03

But I've— John, actually, my colleague found out about the first one, the call for submissions that he had accessed through the editor, who was Kevin Jennings, he was a director of GLSEN for, at that time, GLSEN, Gay, Lesbian Education Network [laughs]— what's the 'S'? Anyway, Student? I don't know. So we had written our stories at that time, and I wrote about the story I told you about the student who was sexually harassing me. But after some time had passed, was it? I don't know if it was 10 years, I don't know if it was that long, he asked us to write another piece to kind of say, now that the years have gone by a bit, how are things different? And yeah, I wrote in my piece about how I have moved from being less open about who I am to the person that I was then, now, back then. Working successfully, and my sexual orientation really not an issue for the most part. That makes me think about a couple of times, I did get a little pushback from a couple other teachers. One was when we put up a Pride Prom poster that depicted two men, one behind the other, holding the one in front with tuxedos for Pride Prom perfect. And one of the Industrial Tech teachers said— he wrote me a letter. He wrote the same letter to the principal and so forth and said that it was a terrible thing we're doing having Pride Prom, because that's how AIDS is spread and then pretty soon kids will die. Wasn't quite that bad, but he did reference AIDS and attached some documentation he had that was about the number of deaths from AIDS. It's like, okay, it's a dance. What do you think happens at the regular prom? Kind of the same thing, but not. Anyway, and then I also got an email from another teacher who said that there's no way she was going to read our announcements for GSA. On the announcement, she didn't want kids to know about it. So, you know, other than some things, those two things really, and I think I was comfortable going to school every day. People knew who my partner was, and they thought she was great. And [laughs]— when we'd run into people, they'd talk to her more than they'd talk to me. So yeah, I mean, I'm glad that my career ended on that note. So, and here's the first one, [shows book to camera] *One Teacher in 10*, Kevin Jennings, the Gay, Lesbian, and [crosstalk]— Straight Teachers Network, yeah. And then here's the— this one's says second edition, that's the one [shows book to camera] and but I think—

Rebecca Heywood 55:36

Oh, okay, yeah.

Ruth Kupfer 55:40

So.

Rebecca Heywood 55:40

Thank you for sharing those.

Ruth Kupfer 55:42

Sure. I felt honored to be selected to have some writing published.

Rebecca Heywood 55:52

So I'm curious, you talk about some of the teachers who weren't supportive? Did you have experiences of straight or presumably straight teachers who were supportive, or who needed advice, or would come and ask how they were able to support their students in different ways that you may not have expected?

Ruth Kupfer 56:17

You mean gay teachers, or just teachers—

Rebecca Heywood 56:20

Just teachers in general. If there's any— you shared a couple of the negative experiences, are there any positive experiences that come to mind?

Ruth Kupfer 56:32

Ah, it's been a while since I've been there, 11 years. Oh, yeah. One teacher I remember came to a friend, a good friend. She said— oh, okay, here's how it worked. The student came to me and said "Would you talk to Miss So and So?" I said, "Sure, why?" "Well, she thinks I'm a boy. And I'm not." And I said, "Okay." So I went and talked to my friend and said, "Hey, you know this student?" And even had quite a feminine name, you know? And my friend said, "Yeah." I said, "You know, she's a girl, right?" and she's like, "Really?" I said, "Did you notice her name?" She said, "Oh, I just thought, you know," whatever you think. So it was kind of silly, kind of puzzling, and got fixed right away. I mean, there were plenty of teachers like that particular teacher, who was— she was a wonderful, wonderful teacher, and had done lots and continues to do lots of anti-racism work. So she got it. She got it. But I can't remember a whole lot of other specific things. Yeah.

Rebecca Heywood 58:08

Okay. So I think that covers just about all the teaching questions and things that we had discussed. Is there anything else about your experience teaching in Lincoln that you want to share?

Ruth Kupfer 58:27

Gosh, let me look at my notes here a little bit. I think we did a pretty good job of covering a lot. You know, I think the school I taught in as well as the high school I attended was very racially diverse, ethnically diverse. And I think it's important for teachers, also people, to know that there's actually a great diversity of thought and identity amongst queer people too. I mean there are some experiences that are universal and other points of view and other experiences, beliefs are very diverse among us. So whereas I think it may have been easier earlier to kind of clump people into a certain box, it's not anymore and it shouldn't have ever been.

Rebecca Heywood 59:51

And with that, actually, one thing you said, you told me in an earlier conversation was sharing a little bit about Midwestern dyke, and your experience as a Midwestern dyke. You've talked a little bit about both the volleyball in Nebraska, in Lincoln, you'd previously shared about attending the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, building community today. Can you just share, is there anything you want to share about Midwestern dykes [laughs]— with folks who may be watching this?

Ruth Kupfer 1:00:23

Well I have to say, there was nothin' better than Midwest dykes in the eighties right when we were coming up and coming out, and we were being lesbian feminists, and they were giving me shit because I had long hair, like waist length hair, it was like, "You have to do something with that hair," you know? And questions like, "Well, if you—" If you were a femme, and you were, and you were dating a butch, which of course is what you gotta do— and it's no problem for me, I'm into butch women [laughs]—. But it's like, "well, if you want to date a man, why don't you date a man?" I'm like, "Honey, she is not a man. She may wear men's clothing and be in a man's traditional job, but," and we were talking about that kind of stuff. And we had some butch women that we still revere. There was one who died at an early age from cancer. And, you know, she was just the best woman to do anything for you, never wore a speck of women's clothing that I can remember, you know?

Yeah, and we said dyke. I don't hear dyke much anymore. But we would, you know, we would be talking about someone and someone was there, "well is she dykey lookin?" We knew exactly what that meant, we still know what that means. I mean, I think there's a nice sorority of us who got things going in the eighties and continued to go, and we love sports you know, we love politics, we love talking about politics. We don't love politics, but we love talking about it. Yeah, it's kind of great. And I will say we have my partner and I have found a camping group that we really enjoy being with. And it's been fun to get outside a lot, which we love. And we have, you know, a little camper, and we get to see these other gals who are our age, and also interested in what we're interested in and get together like that. It's marvelous and healing. You know, you'd mentioned that we went to the Womyn's Festival for many years and that was always something I thought of as my healing week. To be among, in a very safe place, among lesbians and straight women supporters. And yeah, I remember the first time I went, I came back and I had to look at men and I kind of was like, "Oh, it was so great at the festival." I, you know, men are fine. There's some— I really like [laughs]— but you get what I mean, it's like you get used to just seeing women and then you go back into the real world. So anyway.

Rebecca Heywood 1:03:49

Thank you for sharing. So I think the last question I have is just about your connection and experience with the Lesbian Herstory Archives and how you got involved in this project?

Ruth Kupfer 1:04:05

Well, we had a very active community of lesbians in the 1980s that I'm still friends with, and they had worked with you, and your project, and the Lesbian Elders Project, and they told me about it. And they said, "You should look into this because it's important" and you know, I am so passionate about the fact that we need to preserve our history, and we need to access our history as people, in order for people to really understand what it means to be queer. You gotta do homework. You can't just turn on the TV. Unless you're watching a documentary about what the way it was, with uh— what was Edie's last name, Edie— Windsor, yeah. That's a great documentary. But my point is we've got to, we've got to connect with the lessons that have been brought forward and learned in our past. And I just want people to know now when schools are under attack I mean, with some of the most ridiculous things, this "Don't say gay" business. What they need to know is that it's possible. It's possible to have a, to teach in a school where you help make the climate safe for everybody, where you present information that's going to help folks understand what they need to understand. And you know, here's some of my suggestions about how it might happen because it needs to happen.

Rebecca Heywood 1:06:14

Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you want to share today, Ruth?

Ruth Kupfer 1:06:26

Gosh, let me look. I don't think so. Soon as we're done, I'll think of something, but I don't know.

Rebecca Heywood 1:06:46

Great. Well, we'll never get to everything but thank you so much for taking the time. And this—it was, it's an honor to be a part of being able to help you do this, so thank you.

Ruth Kupfer 1:06:59

Well, let me say too that I'm really, really excited and happy that people, young women like you, are doing this work and doing the preservation, and going forward. And I'm guessing learning some things yourself, about going forward in this world. So I'm really happy we get to work together.

Rebecca Heywood 1:07:22

Yes, I am as well. Great, so I'm gonna turn off the recording but we'll stay on video. So just one moment.

Ruth Kupfer 1:07:29

Okay.