



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Kate Walter**

An Interview
Conducted by
Moss Berke
12/16/2022

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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LEOHP Interview

Interviewee: Kate Walter

Interviewer: Moss Berke

Date: 12/16/2022

Moss Berke 00:02

Okay, great. And I'll start by reading the intro statement and we'll get right into it.

Kate Walter 00:07

Perfect.

Moss Berke 00:08

Okay, so hi, thanks, Kate for talking with me today. Today is Friday, December 16. And we're recording an oral history interview with me, Moss Berke, and Kate Walter to talk about her life history and career as an author in New York City. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, a project with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and I'm recording from Brooklyn, New York, and Kate is joining me from her home in Manhattan. So, Kate, when and where were you born?

Kate Walter 00:39

I was born in Paterson, New Jersey in 1949.

Moss Berke 00:47

What was it like growing up with your family in Paterson?

Kate Walter 00:50

I had a very traditional family. My parents were very Catholic. The nuns thought we were the ideal Catholic family. It was mom and dad, two siblings, an elderly relative who lived with us. And yeah, we lived in a house. It was one of those houses that had three floors. And everybody who lived in the house was like a family member. So we were on the second floor. And then there were people on the third, people on the first who were my godparents. So it was sort of like one big family, the whole house. And I liked that. And we had a backyard where we played, and the other kids came over to play in my yard because we had a yard, and it was very Catholic, and Catholic school, and everything was all wrapped up in school, in church. And my father was a teacher, a high school English teacher, and my mom was a homemaker.

Moss Berke 01:40

How would you describe your early life? Happy, fun?

Kate Walter 01:45

Yeah, I think it was pretty happy and fun. My mother could be a bit of a control freak. But other than that I certainly wasn't lacking for anything. I mean, we weren't rich or anything, but you know, we certainly had everything we needed.

Moss Berke 02:00

So fast forwarding a little bit. When did you move to New York City? Why? And what was it like when you first arrived?

Kate Walter 02:08

Okay, I moved to New York City in 1975. I was 26. After college, I had been living in this house in New Jersey, it was kind of like a hippie house. And I had a bunch of roommates, guys and girls. And that was a lot of fun. And that was where I started, you know, experimenting. And I came out. And after that, I was like, I don't want to live in New Jersey and be gay. It just seemed like—not in that time period, anyway.

So I wanted to live in the Village. And at that point, I was already going to the Village on weekends and had starting to make friends, going to women's bars. So, you know, I already knew some people and in fact, I think I got my first apartment through someone I met at this woman's bar. It was a sublet, someone needed to sublet and I wanted to move, so I figured I would try a sublet. If I didn't like it, well, it didn't matter. It was just a sublet. So, and then of course, I'm still here.

Moss Berke 03:02

Do you want to talk a little bit about what New York City was like when you first arrived?

Kate Walter 03:07

Oh, yeah. Okay, 1970s and eighties. It was a little bit on the sleazy side. And people were talking about how now is like, compared to the seventies? I don't think so. I think it was a lot more, you know, dangerous to some extent during the seventies. But on the other hand, there was this sense of freedom. And it was not expensive! That was the thing. New York hadn't been gentrified.

That's the biggest difference, you could get a really cheap apartment. And then if you didn't like it at the end of your lease, you could just move out and find another one real easily, you had your choice of cheap apartments. And that's something that certainly isn't true today. And that was one of the biggest differences, the inexpensive apartments, and there were more artists living in—I was living in the East Village for most of my early years, from '75 to 1998, I think it was when I moved here to the West Village.

And it was—it was fun. I had several different apartments. I mostly lived on St. Mark's Place, which is, the center of craziness in the East Village. And places to go. When I was single, I would go to Bonnie and Clyde's which was this women's bar and then after I got into a relationship, it was more doing stuff with my partner.

Moss Berke 03:49

So did you feel like there was already a sort of vibrant gay community when you—?

Kate Walter 04:08

Oh, yeah, yeah. And one—well one thing that was different was, this was also the heyday of lesbian separatism, which I'm sure you're familiar with. I mean, I was never into that. I had a very close friend who was gay man, and he sort of helped me come out. He was my boyfriend before we both came out. His name is Joe. And so I always had gay male friends, I was close with my brother. So I was never into this separatist thing, but a lot of women were.

And I even remember at one point marching in the Pride Parade with, I think it was, Lesbian Feminist Liberation, and some guy wanted to march with us and someone was "Go! Get away, get away! This is all women, you know." And I also remember, okay, I'm just remembering some crazy stuff. I went to an Alix Dobkin concert—do you know who she is? Okay. And I'm sitting up in the balcony of this church where they had concerts in the Village with my girlfriend at the time. And all of a sudden Alix puts down her guitar, and she says, "There are men in here! Mutants!" And then she made the men leave!

And we were sitting there like—my girlfriend and I, we were like, holy shit, we can't believe this. And she actually made them leave. And they, of course, had come with their women friends. She made them leave and then she continued the concert. So that'll give you an idea to some extent what it was like in the seventies. That would have been the late seventies. Because I'm thinking of who I was with at the time. And we lived together like '78, '79.

Moss Berke 06:10

Wow, it's such a—yeah, it's such a different environment than it is now.

Kate Walter 06:15

Right!

Moss Berke 06:15

But there's still so many parallels.

Kate Walter 06:18

But now I'd say if you go to the Cubbyhole, you'll see a lot of men in there, and women, and straight people too, you know.

Moss Berke 06:24

Totally. So pivoting slightly to the sort of beginning of your career in New York. I'm curious, how did you begin to find yourself as a writer, did you know you always wanted to be an author?

Kate Walter 06:39

Well, I was writing in college for the college paper. I was writing in high school for the high school paper. So I always enjoyed writing journalism. I was doing a lot of music reviews for the college paper. And then this man I was dating who I mentioned, Joe, he was the editor of this alternative paper called *The Aquarian* which was kind of like the *Village Voice* of New Jersey. So he said, "Why don't you write some of these reviews for this paper?" So I said, "Oh, that's good." I got paid for it. So I was actually writing and publishing when I was still in college. And then I continued doing that after I graduated, even though I had a job as a teacher, I was always writing from the time I was, in college. And I don't know what else.

And so I could tell, talk a little more about that. So I was writing reviews, mostly—book reviews, music reviews. And then at some point, I think within the eighties, I had an opinion piece published in *The New York Times*. And that was like, wow, everybody read it, I was interviewed on a couple of radio shows. It was like, wow, this opinion writing this is pretty cool, you get a lot of attention, and you can be controversial. So I did a—I started writing opinion pieces.

And then I sort of transitioned out of reviewing into opinion pieces. And I became a columnist at a number of papers, most recently *AM New York*. And then, I don't know if we wanna get into the books. But then at some point, I was doing all these essays and opinion pieces for local papers mostly, and some bigger papers. And then, and then I ended up writing two books.

But going back, since this is a gay interview, I wrote for *The Advocate* a lot during the 1980s, interviewing and reviewing all these gay artists, unfortunately, a lot of the men are dead from AIDS. I also wrote for *The New York Native*, which was the big gay paper in New York City. That's the one where Larry Kramer wrote these scary, outrageous articles which were true, basically, but they really scared people.

So I was writing for *The New York Native* during the height of the AIDS epidemic, and I was writing for *The Advocate*. And a couple of my editors died. So you know, it was really a weird, sad time, because, people you were writing about, people you were working for, were dying. So that was the eighties. And then I kept doing—I was—I went from reviewing to opinion pieces and essays, and then into books, and I still write opinion pieces and essays.

Moss Berke 09:10

Do you remember what your first—your opinion piece in *The New York Times*, do you remember what it was about?

Kate Walter 09:15

Yeah, it was about what was going on in the East Village. With people selling stuff all over the street and a lot of it was stolen. And, you know, I—it was considered controversial. I mean, some people thought I was like a neocon. I think it was called East Village Flea Market Swamp. Okay. That was what it was called. Because you could barely walk on the sidewalk by Astor Place. It was just—when I look at pictures from that era, I'm like, holy crow. But that was one of my pieces and about Tompkins Square Park, I wrote about that. That was another kind of controversial piece. So those were some of my early pieces in *The Times* and I wrote a lot about what was going on in the East Village.

Moss Berke 10:02

So do you feel like there was always an overlap for you, between your personal sexuality and community, and the work that you were making?

Kate Walter 10:09

Well, when I was writing about the stuff going on in the East Village, that was more neighborhood-y, that wasn't necessarily gay. But what I—I wrote a lot of pieces for *AM New York*, that was more recently, that were gay, you know, gay-oriented. Yeah. So yeah, there was definitely an overlap, a connection. I mean, it wasn't like I was being closeted when I wrote for *The Times*, it's just that, you know, some of these pieces, it wasn't appropriate to mention that I'm gay. So why would I?

Moss Berke 10:37

Well since we're also already talking about your writing, if you want, we can talk about your books. I think it's a fine time.

Kate Walter 10:44

Okay. Where are they? I've taken them out. Okay. Yeah. So I have two books that are out. All right. This is the first one [shows book to camera], it's called *Looking for a Kiss*.

Moss Berke 10:56

Would you do me a favor and describe the title a little bit? Like [crosstalk] the cover page?

Kate Walter 11:04

The cover page says, *Looking for a Kiss: A Chronicle of Downtown Heartbreak and Healing*, and it's about—and this is a photo of two women at the fountain in Washington Square after the Dyke March, which I took, but having no idea it would be the cover of my book. So the first book is about the breakup of my long-term lesbian relationship, which was 26 years. And we were living mostly on St. Mark's Place. And, yeah, it's a breakup story, and a recovery story, and how I got screwed because we weren't married because it wasn't okay to marry, and then we broke up. And I think it was 2005 or 6, before gay marriage. And it's all about how, what it was like, what happened.

And it also talks a lot about my mother and how this horrible breakup which just really destroyed me, brought me closer to my mother, who at that point was now a widow. And she really helped me a lot during the breakup. So that was like one of the good things about the breakup, that I got close to my mother and I had 10 really good years of friendship with my mother before she died. And I don't know if that would have happened if it wasn't for the breakup because we had like a stormy relationship. And as I said to you in the pre-interview, after my father died, my mother became much more open-minded. So I think a lot of the homophobia, or whatever you want to call it, was his thing. And then she was able to be more herself. So anyway, that's all in this book.

It's about the breakup. It's about healing. It's about my mother, but it's mostly about this long relationship I was in and how things fell apart in someone I thought was, I was going to be with forever. So that's the first book. And that came out in 2015 when I was 66. And I was writing it a really long time, I think we were still together when I started writing it. Because I knew I was gonna write about the relationship. I didn't know it was gonna be a breakup story when I started it.

And then more recently, I have [shows book to camera]—that's me, in that picture, *Behind the Mask*, living alone in the epicenter. And this is a pandemic memoir, it's in essays, the other book was more written like a traditional memoir. And it's a series of essays I started writing, I did it at Westbeth Artists Housing, and it's a very vibrant community with a gallery and community room and tons of activities, and concerts and openings, and everything shut down. Like, almost overnight. Well, New York shut down, my building shut down. So we went from being this lively place to this place where we felt trapped in our apartments. I mean, we got a note from management, saying “One in the elevator at a time, don't go down to the lobby more than twice a week to get your mail.” And it was like, scary.

So I started writing about it. I started writing essays, sending them to *The Village Sun*, which is our local paper website. And they were publishing them. And I was just like, oh, people like these. I was getting lots of feedback, lots of comments, lots of reactions. And my editor said, “They really like what you're writing.” So I kept going. And then at the end of 2020, a friend of

mine said, “Kate, you're writing a memoir in essays” and I said, “Oh, okay.” So I contacted my publisher, again, same one, Heliotrope Books, and she said, “I like it, finish it.” So then I continued. And I finished the book in like June 2021. It came out like a year ago at the end of '21— this is 2022. I'm sorry, it came out in 2021. November. So the whole thing was done very, very, very, very quickly. So those are the two books and they're different in style and content. And, yeah.

Moss Berke 14:51

No, cool, thanks for talking about them. If you don't mind I'd love to go back a little bit to what you were talking about in the first book. I'm curious if you would talk a little bit more about sort of this process, of what it was like coming out to your friends and family, and how your relationship with your mom was able to change, or maybe a little bit about what it felt like or what it meant to you to step into your adult life as a lesbian.

Kate Walter 15:16

Okay. Good question. Okay. So I came out in 1975, I came out to all my friends, I came out to my brother, because I was really close to him. I was not out to my parents at that time, okay, and I wasn't at work, either. I was working as a high school English teacher in New Jersey. When I moved to New York, I left that job. And one of the reasons was because I felt like I was so in the closet. And I ended up going back to it anyway. But that's another tangent, before I got into college teaching.

So coming out, I was out with my friends, I was out to my brother, but I wasn't out to my parents. Okay. And that was disturbing to me that, you know, I just hated feeling like this fake person. Yeah, I had a girlfriend at the time. And it just seemed fake. And so I think by the time I came out to my parents, I think I was 29 at the time. And at that point, I was single. I was in between—this was before that other relationship, the big one that I wrote about. So I mean, it just seemed like a good time to come out. And it's all in my book.

It was a really horrifying scene. I mean, I told them, I sat my parents down, I said, “Look, I have something to tell you.” And my mother said later, “I knew this is what you're going to tell me.” You know, like she said, “I knew, I knew, I knew, because you hadn't dated any men in a long time.” And I said, “Well, what do you think Mary was?” That was my girlfriend at the time, would be at the house and stuff. And so she kind of knew, and my father had a fit. He really was very religious, I think he thought I was gonna go to hell. And he was very upset. And then he wanted me to get him some books about being gay, which I did at the Oscar Wilde bookstore, which was a great place. And then I have to admit I got so freaked out that I didn't give him the books. It was just like, I kind of came out and ran. And, and that was that. So now that he knew.

And then when I ended up meeting Slim—that's what I'm calling her in the book—then we sent them a letter saying that we're really in love and we want to be treated like a married couple, and my parents were like, “We got the letter” [laughs]. So I mean, it was really like, we didn't really talk about it much. They knew. But after I had this horrible breakup, and after my father had died, that—like I said, my mother became like a different person. And she was so much more open about, “Oh, gay men, oh, they're so creative” [laughs]. She was just, like, totally different. Then I realized, Okay, he was the one who was holding her back the whole time.

Because, yeah, I mean, my mother was religious, but not a fanatic like my father. So that was like one of the longest 20 minutes of my entire life, when I came out to my parents, and I'd be happy to send you a copy of the book, too, if you give me your address. So, but then it was done. And that was that, you know, and so now it's like nothing. I mean, I think all my nieces, and my nephew, and grand nieces, and grand nephews, they all know I'm gay, it's no big deal.

Moss Berke 18:08

You mentioned your friend, Joe, that you had a really significant relationship with and really helped you form community and come out. Would you like to talk a little bit more about him?

Kate Walter 18:18

Sure. I would. And unfortunately, Joe died of AIDS in—God, I don't know what year it was. It was in the eighties. I'll have to look it up. But anyway, he was couple of years older than me. He was like my serious boyfriend through college. Okay. And we went to concerts together. We were both, you know, rock and roll fanatics. We went to Woodstock together. We never really lived together. But we were, you know, we were definitely a couple. And everyone knew we were a couple and thought we were a great couple, and a real like sixties, seventies couple hippie type.

And then after Woodstock—and I was out of college at this point, too, I was still living in New Jersey—Joe takes me aside and says “I'm gay.” And I'm like, “What?” And so he said, “Well, how do you think I got out of the draft?” I said, “I don't know.” He said, “Well, I told them that I was gay.” And I said, “Well, you knew all this time and you didn't tell me?” He said, “Well, I like you as a friend.” I was like, oh my God. So then I started to think, oh, wow, this is really interesting. And I also knew that this guy I had dated in high school was gay. So that's interesting: Joe's gay. Ricky's gay, you know, is something going on with me?

And then, because I wasn't really that into sex with men, I never got off on it the way my girlfriends would talk about it, and I thought something was wrong with me. So then Joe said to me—because I told him I was kind of curious about women, Joe said to me—oh, so Joe took me to this gay bar in Asbury Park with a friend of his, and that's when I met this woman.. First

woman I think I had sex with was a one night stand at the M&K bar in Asbury Park, which was a hotel so you know, you'd kind of—then you went upstairs and got a room.

So I remember coming over to Joe and his boyfriend at the time and saying, “Oh, this is Tina,” I think was her name. And I said, “I'm gonna, I'm going back with her.” Well they were like, falling out, the guys like, “Oh my God” [unclear]. So anyway, so then I went upstairs to the hotel with Tina. And that was the first lesbian experience. But, it was just a one night stand. So anyway, so then after that, and then I thought I was bisexual.

Okay, so then after that, Joe said to me, “This woman Laurie, who I knew from the past, she went to college in Boston, and she's a big lesbian feminist now and she's coming back for holiday vacation and she just broke up with someone.” So then he arranged for us all to meet at this bar in Hackensack, New Jersey, probably some mafia dive. And then I think, I don't know if I went home with Laurie that night or not, but then we started this hot affair. And that's how I knew I was a lesbian.

It didn't last long. But yeah, so Joe was really instrumental in all of this, because he's taken me to the gay bar for the first time, and he's also taking me to meet this woman who he knew was a lesbian. So he was like, my queer wing man, as I call him in one of the books. So, and then we stayed friends. And then I moved to New York, and he moved to New York, but I didn't think we—I thought we'd be closer. But I got involved with my partner Slim, and then he was out at Fire Island all the time. So, I mean, we'd see each other but it wasn't like, you know, close-close. But it was very sad for me when he died. I visited him at the hospital when he was sick. And it was really sad.

Moss Berke 21:37

Yeah, it's crazy with those relationships like across, I don't know, sexual identity but within the same culture can be so important to helping us free ourselves. I also—

Kate Walter 21:47

Oh absolutely.

Moss Berke 21:49

All of my, or like, my one, two boyfriends I ever had were, are also queer, which is really funny [laughs]. It happens like that.

Kate Walter 21:58

And then this past summer, just this past summer, someone came—I have a bungalow at the Jersey Shore that belongs to my family. I'm sitting out in front of the house. And this guy comes up on a bike and he says, “Are you Kate?” And I said, “Yeah.” And then he starts telling me all

these stories. And he says, “Do you know who I am?” I said, “No.” And then he told me his name, Jay. And I said, “Oh, my God.” Had not seen him since '75, or '76. And one of the things he said to me when he was playing the guessing game was “You took me to my first gay bar.”

So it was like I took Jay to his—same place, to the M&K in Asbury. So I took Jay to his first gay bar. So we spent the whole summer reconnecting and now we're friends, again, we just completely lost touch. So it was like a gay man took me to my first gay bar. And I took this—he's younger than me—younger gay man to his first gay bar. And it was—The M&K, I don't know if you've ever heard of it, in Asbury Park, it was, oh it was a really, really, really big, big gay bar with the hotel and a pool. And it was like, one floor was women. One floor was men, and the other floor was mixed. So there were like three floors, dancing, DJs on every floor. So it was like a really great place. It was like a really coed bar. Okay. And it was a huge, huge space. And it was also a hotel. So you know, you could see where that went [laughs].

Moss Berke 23:17

That's incredible. How did, how did he know how to find you all these years later?

Kate Walter 23:21

Well he knew where my house was. And I was, I just happened to be sitting in front of my house. So. So that was like a really great reunion. And of course I was really thrilled that he was still around. Because you know, so many men of that era died. He's in his sixties now. A little bit younger than me. But that was like thrilling to reconnect.

Moss Berke 23:39

Yeah. So you mentioned when you were talking a little bit about your first book, *Looking for a Kiss*, that your long term relationship with Slim really sort of changed your understanding and your attitude toward, attitude towards like, gay civil rights? And how that was really informed by your personal relationship? Would you want to explore that a little bit?

Kate Walter 24:02

Like I said, we were domestic partners. And I remember that was a really big deal when domestic partnership passed, we went downtown, we got our pictures taken. And it was like, we're getting married, so forth. And, you know, we always thought of our relationship as a marriage. And even though it wasn't a legal marriage, and there was no legal marriage back then. And then we broke up. And I mean, I had no rights at all, nothing. So that was horrifying.

And specifically, financially, I was really in a bad situation, because my partner had saved up all this money for our retirement, which I wasn't entitled to. And I mean, maybe looking back, I could have done more to protect myself, but I just wasn't thinking along those lines. I mean we had a will. So if she died I would get whatever she had, but the breakup wasn't covered, so to

speaking. So it really made me feel like wow, people really do need gay marriage because she wasn't very nice. She didn't want to negotiate any kind of settlement.

And I spoke to a couple of lawyers, including a lesbian friend who's a lawyer, and they basically said, "You don't have any rights, so don't waste your money on a lawyer." So that was that. So I, I was really burnt. And I was, as I say, in the book, I was broke and brokenhearted. So then I had to really recreate my life and really start thinking about finances in a way I hadn't before. And then luckily, I got a full-time job at the community college. So that kind of saved me.

Moss Berke 25:30

Thanks for telling me about that. And actually, it's um, yeah, you, I'd like to focus on your teaching career as well, a little bit about your books, but this move to sort of realizing the importance of gay marriage or civil rights in a larger sense. And as a, when you were a professor and a teacher, you were really involved in like the Gay Teachers Association, and the National Writers Gay Caucus. Would you like to talk about that?

Kate Walter 25:53

So I was like, I have to get out of New Jersey and I have to get out of high school teaching. So I continued doing that for a few years into the eighties, when I was in the Gay Teachers Association, and worked on their newsletter. And as I said, people felt afraid to come out because New York didn't have a Gay Rights Bill until '83. So if you had some principal who didn't like you, you could be fired. So then I thought, I really want to get out of this, move into more college.

So I taught at the Borough of Manhattan Community College for , part time, full time, NYU, part time. When I taught at the community college, I was completely out to all my colleagues, including my bosses, who happened to—all my bosses happened to be gay. Okay, well, that was really all in the eighties. In fact, I met Slim at the Gay Teachers Association. And at that point I was teaching in New Jersey, still—I hadn't transferred into New York yet, she was teaching in New York. And almost everybody was in the closet, at their workplace, okay, whether you were in New York, or New Jersey, or whatever. And that's why the group was very important.

So I was, I was in the closet at work. And in fact, I remember thinking about this interview, I came out to a few people. This was at this high school where I was teaching in Paterson, I was in New York commuting. I remember I knew some people were gay. And after I came out to them, they shied away from me, it was like they were afraid of like being associated with me. And at one point, they even had a Gay Faculty Association at the community college because there had apparently been some homophobia on campus, which I wasn't that familiar with. But I went to a few meetings of that group. It was like the Gay Faculty Association with BMCC. So everybody knew I was gay, in terms of my colleagues.

I wasn't really out to the students, because I just felt it would be a distraction. You know, I wasn't teaching personal writing or anything. I was teaching critical thinking. And I mean, I made it really clear I was pro-gay and everything, but I wasn't really out. I mean if a few students asked me I would tell them. You know, "Are you gay?" "Yeah." They came to my office. Sure. I would be confiding. And even when I taught high school, I came out to a few students that I knew were gay. They were like, "Hey, we heard you're gay," you know? And I said, "Well, yeah" but I like swore them to secrecy, kind of, you know.

But then, when I was teaching at NYU, which was overlapping with the community college, I mean, here I am teaching personal essay, and I'm sharing my work. So of course I was out. Plus, it was a whole different ball game. Because this was like, more adults Continuing Ed. I mean, I definitely thought some of the students at BMCC, who are young, they might not be able to be ready for this. But they had a big, gay student association at BMCC, which was really good. And that was pretty active. But I did hear some incidents of, you know, homophobia and stuff at the college, which is one of the reasons why they started the group.

So I thought it was just better to be quiet about it, but I mean, anyone who could figure it out, I would be happy to tell them. And sometimes students would come to me and—I remember having this one counseling session with this one girl, who was like about to graduate, and she didn't know whether she should come out to her mother now who she thought was really just homophobic, or should she wait until she was out of the house and in college, and I said, "I think I would wait until you're out of the house and in college." That was the advice I gave her cause I was like, why make your life miserable while you're still living at home when you're accepted into college? And then, I mean, so people must have known I was gay because they wouldn't be discussing these things with me otherwise. But I mean, I wasn't like, standing up in front of the classroom, "Hi, I'm Professor Walter. I'm gay." No.

Moss Berke 29:33

No, of course, it's such a gift also, though, to be able to be present for the students that you know are in need, in a way that other teachers can't address those needs.

Kate Walter 29:44

Right. Because I think the students pick up on, you know who you are.

Moss Berke 29:50

Yeah.

Kate Walter 29:51

But I mean, I didn't see what purpose it would serve to announce it, it just didn't seem appropriate.

Moss Berke 29:58

No, for sure. That makes complete sense. Do you feel like it sticks out in your mind, like the other, or instances of other professors or teachers being unfairly treated? Like, have you felt a serious difference in the work environment from then until your, until before you retired?

Kate Walter 30:19

Um, yeah. I mean, I don't think when I first started teaching—I started teaching—I've taught at BMCC for 26 years, and I retired like four years ago. So figure 30 years ago when I started. I mean, there was no gay student organization back then. But this college was pretty open. I mean, by the time I left they had pride week, pride month, they had transgender speakers coming, so, I mean, the administration was very supportive. And one of the head vice presidents was very obviously a gay man. But again, everyone was in the closet, especially the administrators. I mean, my one boss at my department, he was very openly gay. But, so yeah, there was a big change in the sense of the school having, you know, a very open, welcoming attitude towards gay students.

So they had this club, they had events. Yeah. But even then I heard—I remember hearing stories like that people would be afraid to go into the classroom where they were having the club meeting, because, you know, they would have—what they had, they had club on Friday, from x time to x time when there were no classes. So I mean, people knew, you could find out what room the gay club was meeting in. And I heard stories of people being harassed—students, or people watching to see who was going in. So it was, it was kind of bold and brave for the students to have this club and to come out, you know, on campus. And this is not that long ago, we're talking, you know, in the last 5-10 years.

Moss Berke 31:48

It's really notable to me, in all of your answers from the time that you've lived in New York City, that you really witnessed and been a part of so much historical change, whether it be the Gay Rights Movement, of course, but also so many other changes in New York City. Throughout your history of living there, do you want to talk about what sticks out most in your memory in terms of historic events?

Kate Walter 32:13

Right, we talked about this in the pre-interview. Well, starting back, I would say—well, the AIDS epidemic was really shocking. And then who would think we'd have another health scare epidemic? You know, so many years later, although they were very different. But there was this thing of people being scared and not knowing how it spread at the beginning. Then once people

knew that it wasn't spread in the air, like the Coronavirus, it was different. But I mean, the AIDS epidemic, it was like, every time I turned around somebody I knew was sick, and you were gonna die. You know what I'm saying? I mean, lots of people who get COVID don't die. But if you had AIDS back then it was a death sentence.

Very few people survived. So, and one of my bosses at BMCC, he died from AIDS, too. So it was, it was all over, AIDS and people dying. And then the next thing that was really significant would have been 9/11, which I saw from my rooftop. I live in the West Village. I saw the towers on fire, I saw them falling down. It was horrible. And it was just shocking to watch that and witness it. It was, you couldn't believe this was actually happening. And then BMCC is really close to the World Trade Center. We lost a building, one of south buildings was destroyed.

So my whole life was really affected not just because I saw it, but I was working on a campus that was really part of the terrorist attack. They were taking parts of the World Trade Center as they tore it down to a barge port on the Hudson River, which was right across the street from where I was now teaching in a trailer and dumping the parts of the World Trade Center 24/7. And all this horrible pollution was going up in the air. Now, why am I teaching in a trailer on West Street? Because the classroom that I had been teaching it was in the building that was destroyed.

But I give the college credit for saying no, we're going to reopen, we're going to reopen. And they did like two or three, maybe a month later, which was shocking. So the terrorist attack, it affected my workplace, it affected me in a very big way. And then the other thing I would say, Hurricane Sandy flooded my building. We had no heat, no hot water, destroyed the basement, destroyed the laundry room. So that was pretty traumatic. And again, in my book, I compare 9/11 to COVID. And Sandy—I'm sorry, I compare Sandy and COVID and how in COVID we had to like hide in our apartments. But in Hurricane Sandy, we were all running around the halls carrying buckets of water and helping each other and bringing food over to each other's apartment but we couldn't do any of that during COVID. So the four events would be the AIDS epidemic, 9/11, Hurricane Sandy and then COVID. So.

Moss Berke 35:07

Yeah, it's crazy when you're talking about historic events, it's like, so many of these historic events that really stick out in our minds are ones of trauma—

Kate Walter 35:18

Oh, absolutely.

Moss Berke 35:18

—and disaster and sadness. I wonder how—do you see your personal writing practice as sort of like a healing work?

Kate Walter 35:27

Absolutely! In fact, in this book, *Behind The Mask*, my publicist said, “You know, you want to come up with some writing prompts because you're a writing teacher?” And I said, “Oh, that's a really great idea.” So at the end of the book, here's, there are a whole bunch of writing prompts. Sorry, you can't see this. Writing prompts. And it says, “Writing helped me cope with anxiety, I felt it was important to record what was going on during this unprecedented time. Now it's your turn to journal your experiences, to journal about your experiences during the pandemic, here are some writing prompts.” And there are 12 writing prompts, which are basically all things that I've addressed in the book. So you know, it's sort of like the book was healing for me to write, and maybe it will be healing if you do some of these prompts.

Moss Berke 36:16

And even the chance to tell personal stories, and to feel like you're sharing your story with the world is such an opportunity for healing and growth. Do you feel like that's one of your main motivations for writing?

Kate Walter 36:30

It is. I mean, you know, some of it was political, like when I was writing opinion pieces, but it's always been about finding out who I am and feeling my feelings and expressing them. Yeah, I've always thought that writing was a form of healing, for me anyways. Especially the personal essay, the memoir,.

Moss Berke 36:49

Awesome. So we're sort of coming towards the end of the questions. I'm wondering if you would share with me a sort of reflection on why sharing your history is important for you, and for our community as a whole, and why you were drawn to participate? And what's your connection to the Lesbian Herstory Archives?

Kate Walter 37:09

Okay. A friend of mine who's a lesbian, and who knew about this project told me about it, and she's an old friend from when I taught in New Jersey. And actually, we had a little fling back then. And that was really funny, too, because like, I'm, we were having an affair, and I'd be visiting her in the classroom where we had a—well not during class, but during lunch hour, of course, when we were both off—and I've had, we had a pretty really discreet, but you know, it was pretty funny. But anyway, so we're still friends. And so she told me about this project. And she had to drop out of it, but she was taking care of her mom, who died recently. But I thought, yeah, that sounds great. It sounds interesting.

So, I mean, I've always thought the Lesbian Herstory Archives was really important. I have been there, I have visited the building, the library itself. 'Cuz we're keeping our histories there. And I know, I sent my first book to the Archives. And it's so important to preserve our history and to tell other people about it. And I think it's great that you're doing this, because a lot of people don't know what it was like to live without a gay rights bill or without gay marriage and what that was like, and plus, who knows what's going on today, maybe some of these rights will be taken away. And it's so important to continue to fight for them.

I remember when the gay rights bill passed, I was very happy. That was in '83. And also, when gay marriage passed, I remember going to the Stonewall Inn and cheering with everybody even though I felt kind of sad because I was single, and I didn't have the opportunity. Who knows, maybe I'll still get to have a chance. But, you know, you never know. I didn't have a chance to get married because I was no longer in a relationship. I think this was when it passed. I guess it was when it passed in the—I was in New York or whatever.

And I also met Edie Windsor at a party [unclear]. And I live in Westbeth Artists Housing, and a friend of mine was having a party and Edie was there and I was like, oh my God, to me, it was like really meeting a celebrity. And I was like, "Oh, I'm so honored to meet you. Thank you for your work." She was really nice. And that was like a thrill to meet her in person at a party at someone's house, because I consider her sort of like the Rosa Parks of our movement. So it was very exciting. And, you know, and it's exciting to see all these changes. I mean, I never—you know, when I came out in 1975 I never would have thought that you'd have gay marriage and a gay, married gay man in the cabinet. Who would think? So you know, we've really come a long way and we have to keep going and not slip back.

Moss Berke 39:47

You know, everything you just said is really important. But I have to say I didn't know the friend that recommended you do this interview was a past love affair [cross talk]!

Kate Walter 39:56

I think I forgot to tell you. I forgot to tell you that in the—yes, we had a very hot affair and she was with someone else at the time. Although she was the one who initiated the affair. I will say that. I'm not a homewrecker. And then, and then she went back to her partner at the time. And of course, that was real sad and everything. But then I realized looking back that we weren't really compatible to be a couple who lived together. And she told me what she wanted, and it was different than what I wanted. And I could see having known her all these years, you know, we're just, we're just very close friends. But yes.

Moss Berke 40:32

I love—that's a delicious little fact to add.

Kate Walter 40:36

Yeah, I left that out.

Moss Berke 40:37

Um, yeah. So Kate, I'm really thankful for your time today. I'm wondering if there's anything else that you'd like to share that we, that you feel like we didn't get to in this?

Kate Walter 40:48

Well, I want to say I think New York is a great place to live. And it's thrilling to be living in the neighborhood where the Stonewall Inn is located. It's very exciting, that whole area is a park, it's a national monument. I mean, again, I think that really shows how the country is honoring, you know, LGBT community. What else did I want to say? I mean, I had to really educate myself about transgender. I don't know if we got into that. But it was not something that really— coming up when I came up, it wasn't really out there, you know. And I felt like I didn't know that much about the transgender community. I'm learning and I don't know if I mentioned this before, but my cousin's husband transitioned and became a woman. Did I mention that?

Moss Berke 41:34

You never mentioned this, no.

Kate Walter 41:36

Okay.

Moss Berke 41:36

Please tell me more.

Kate Walter 41:38

My first cousin. And we're really close in age and our moms were sisters. Okay. And this is, again, the Irish Catholic family. And so her husband was John, is now Jackie. And so, this was a complete shock. And we were at some party, and we heard something was going on, and we thought they were getting a divorce, okay. Then we find out a few months later that John is becoming a woman. Well, everyone was completely shocked. Because John was like, this big guy. He looked like a football player, I mean, he was just—there was not a clue. And my cousin who was a PhD Psychologist claims she had no clue.

We didn't just talk about, we still haven't really talked about it that much. But on their 25th wedding anniversary he told her that he wanted to transition. Okay, could you imagine? So then I was—then it became out in the family that again, exactly what Jackie did, I don't know. But Jackie is now living as a woman, has been for some time, became very active, started giving

workshops in transgender, they're still married, they still live together. They're a very close couple that, you know, finish each other's sentences. I haven't seen them in a while. But that was indeed a huge shock in my family like that John is now Jackie.

And then of course my cousin Eileen, she had to negotiate all these things like—they're Catholic, so there's a Baptism, there's a Christening. Is it okay if she brings Jackie? You know, because she didn't want to shock—who knows who's going to be at this big family party and my other cousins, “Why do I have to babysit?” Of course I remember—I think that was the first time my mother met Jackie. That was pretty wild. And my mother's only comment was, “Oh.” She was shocked at Jackie's fingernails [laughs]. But I'm like “Okay, so you're not used to seeing Jackie with, you know, a manicure.” I thought that was a funny comment.

And the other thing that happened was that after this happened, my mother, my sister kept asking me—and I was with Slim at the time—to explain it. And then that was when I realized I don't really know that much about transgender myself. So. So then I kind of had to educate myself. And the one thing that they kept asking was, “Why now? Why now?” Which is a very valid question. Like, why did John wait so long to become Jackie, and I just venture to guess that he was waiting ‘till—or she was waiting until, parents were dead? You know, because there was one surviving parent and as soon as that parent died, the transition took place. So, but Jackie seems to be pretty well accepted by his siblings and his family. And, as I said, I haven't seen Jackie in a while but they've been at some family events. So that was, that was a really big deal that my cousin's husband transitioned into a woman and is now living as a woman and has been for some time.

Moss Berke 44:33

It always strikes me that one of the more—for me, beautiful parts about being queer and being in this community is that you—because everything is always changing and evolving, even when you don't inherently know or organically know or understand some information, the community as a whole is always pushing all of us to learn and develop.

Kate Walter 44:57

Yes!

Moss Berke 44:58

Which is such a beautiful part about being gay.

Kate Walter 45:01

Yes. And I mean, honestly, I have not asked her because of her sex life, because I don't really think that's any of my business. You know what they do? Or don't do. Maybe they live together as friends. I have no idea. And I wouldn't ask her that, because if she wants to share it, fine, but

she hasn't. So I didn't ask. But I know that they're still married, and they still live together. And seem to still be in love. And in fact, had this Facebook post about how much loves Eileen. And it was, you know, I think it was then, it was their 40th anniversary.

So they've been together for 40 years. So he came out as trans on their 25th anniversary. So they've been like, living as a couple, queer couple, for 15 years with—yeah. And I don't know if my cousin is a lesbian. I don't know, I don't know! You know, it's just, I never thought she was, so who knows what's going on. But that's not my business, you know, that's private, what goes on in your household, but they're in love. And they're still married. So?

Moss Berke 46:03

Yeah. And it's so personally different to each, to each individual.

Kate Walter 46:06

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. But I know that, you know, they're —as I said, she posted, Jackie posted this really touching thing on their 40th anniversary on Facebook about how much he was in love with Eileen. And I thought, wow, you know, boy, they've gone through a lot. And I also thought, I'm really glad that her father is dead, because he would have gone through the roof—my uncle, he would have just gone crazy. I mean, all the parents were dead at this point, you know. So anyway, that's, that was one little story I forgot when we spoke before. So everybody's changing, and everybody has queer relatives. And I mean, I have some gay cousins, too. And, you know, everybody's more out of the closet.

Moss Berke 46:56

Amazing. Thanks so much for sharing. Is there any final thoughts that you have?

Kate Walter 47:01

Well I don't know if I want to end on that [laughs]. Okay. It's a pretty wild story. Just that I think New York is a fabulous place to live. I'm so happy I moved here. I mean I was thinking after I came out, should I move to San Francisco? Should I move to New York? I mean, I was definitely gonna move where there was a gay community. But then I thought, you know, my whole family's in New Jersey. I mean, like, you know, I'm going out there for Christmas next week, it's so easy to go out to New Jersey and come back the next day, or a couple of days later, if I went to San Francisco it would've been a big to-do. So I wouldn't have been that close to my family.

So by staying in this area and moving to New York, I can have a close relationship with my family who are almost all in New Jersey, and have my life in New York. So, yeah, I don't really think they get my life in New York to some extent, because they're all like suburbia. But that was never my thing. I mean, I, even if I hadn't come out, I think I probably would have ended up in New York, because you know, it's for me. So it's great living here where there's a gay

community, I live really close to the Gay Center, I'm close to Cubbyhole, it's just great. I love living here. I made a great choice.

Moss Berke 48:12

Awesome, I'm gonna, if you don't have anything else, I'm gonna end the recording.

Kate Walter 48:17

Okay.

Moss Berke 48:18

Okay, great.

Kate Walter 48:18

Well, wanna talk about Westbeth? I don't think we talked about—

Moss Berke 48:21

If you'd like to, please.

Kate Walter 48:23

Yeah, well, I just wanted to say and also in addition to living in New York, I live in Westbeth Artists Housing, which is a fabulous place to live. I was on a waiting list for a long time to get in here. It's one of those conversions. It was originally Bell Laboratories, a factory that was built over 100 years ago, and a little over 50 years ago it was converted into artist housing. I have lived here for about 25-26 years. So it's fabulous to live here. And it's a great place to live. So I mean, I'm in a great city, in a great building. Yeah, so I've had a really good life so far [cross talk]. I think I still want one more relationship before I die, though. One more great relationship.

Moss Berke 49:06

And I think, I think it's in your cards completely.

Kate Walter 49:09

Okay, Well, if anyone's listening [laughs] I'm easy to reach. I'm in the phonebook, you know.

Moss Berke 49:15

I think that the LHA should also pivot this to a lesbian elders matchmaking.

Kate Walter 49:24

Absolutely.

Moss Berke 49:25

That would be fun!

Kate Walter 49:26

That would definitely be fun. Absolutely. Well, thank you so much Moss.

Moss Berke 49:31

Yeah!

Kate Walter 49:32

It's been great meeting you and you did a great job with the interview. I really appreciate it.

Moss Berke 49:36

No, Kate, really, it's been my pleasure. I'm gonna stop recording now.