RL10066_Pharr_access_master.mp3 / Pharr, Suzanne - interviewed by Rose Norman / Duke Digital Repository

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- I'm starting the tape then, might as well.

- Okay.

- I don't know if you checked your email since I sent that, since I, after I read that Smith College Voices of Feminism interview, I rewrote most of my questions. Because I felt like, you know, we oughta just reference that, since it's online, it's really good, and long and thorough.

- They do a good job, don't they?

- They really do.

- Yeah, the woman who did that is, she was just, you know, very careful, very good.

- Whoops, I just, speaking of which--

- And one thing that was kind of hilarious about that interview is I have a, I have a couple of dogs. You know, I'm one of your classic lesbians. And one of them's this beautiful, kind of a mixture of a blue heeler and something, that looks like a Blizzard ice cream. You know, all black and white and beautiful, big dog. And it had a seizure while she was here. We had to throw her in the car and take her to the, take her to the vet. So, that I did that interview was good. It's actually quite remarkable.

- Truly. When you consider that it got interrupted--

- It got interrupted like that.

- You know, I forgot to say, I need to say this to the tape, so I can document it. This is Rose Norman, March 28th, 2013. I'm interviewing Suzanne Pharr by phone. She is in Knoxville, Tennessee. For the Southern Lesbian Feminist Herstory Project. I have to remember to say that every time, it's hard.

- Right, can I just say how glad I am that you're doing this project?

- Thank you, we just love doing it. It's gotten to be a lot of fun.

- And Rose, where are you from?

- I'm from Alabama.

- Alabama. Down there, Mount Seacrest country.

- Well, I live in North Alabama, which is very different from Mab Seacrest, Alabama.

- Oh yeah. I know that whole area pretty well, you know, I've been such a lifelong Southerner myself.

- Yeah, I love hearing your Southern accent. It's surprising how few of the people I've interviewed have a Southern accent.

- Is that right?

- They're Southern, you know, and grew up in the South. Okay, let's see. Let's talk a little bit about what we'll cover. I want to focus maybe half of the interview on SONG. And I'm thinking it'll be about an hour. Unless we decide we need more time. But, you know, my original set of questions was just modeled on what I had sent Mandy. And I mean, when I found that interview, I thought of all these other questions. It covers your childhood and youth, and growing up on a farm, in a very white farming community, and goes into a lot of detail about your work in Arkansas with Head Start Vista, and starting the Arkansas Women's Project, and I think we need to mention those things, but we don't really need to do much with them. Except I want to try to connect some dots that I thought needed to be connected. And the fact that you don't talk about SONG too much on that interview is good for us. That way we won't be replicating much. And get you talking about it here. So the first question I want to change, the original question was when in your life did you realize that you wanted to work on sexual orientation along with the race and class issues that SONG addresses. Were there specific life experiences? And you talked in that Voices and Visions about growing up always knowing you were different, the family saying there were four boys, three girls, and Suzanne. Cutting your hair, liking boys clothes, knowing you were attracted to girls and boys, knowing you shouldn't let on about that, but having a relationship with a girl in high school while double-dating football players.

- Right.

- Not being very attuned to civil rights issues. And then you went to a small state women's college that your aunts had attended, and heard the word homosexual for the first time aimed at you, and then you got a little more aware of how various forms of closeted lesbian culture worked, and about civil rights. And then the path is harder to follow. And I'm wondering, you know, how you came from that very sheltered, you know, not very political upbringing to that women's college, which, I went to a women's college in Alabama, and it was about as apolitical as you can get. Maybe yours was not. How did you, how did you, you came back from New Zealand ready to just dive into the movement. And be a part of every single thing. And change your whole mind about whether to be a teacher and an academic, and do something? How did all that happen, I don't understand.

- Okay, I don't 100% sure I do. But let's take a go at it. Like I just wrote a note to someone today, who's doing, a little bit of history research too for a class of hers. And she wanted to know how I moved from, how the civil rights movement impacted me in the '60s. And I, she wanted it in a few words. And I just said that I

think I was moved initially, well first of all, I think probably the most compelling motivator in my life growing up was the fact that I was so rebellious. You know, I think that was a good thing. That I, I think I was shocked all of my life by injustice. You know, as little kids are. And some of us maintain it and some of us don't. And for me, it stuck. I don't know if it came from having seven older brothers and sisters, or, you know, where, if you're the youngest kid in that family, you're always looking to see if the pie is cut in exactly even slices. (women laugh) Does that make sense?

- Yes, right.

- So that probably fed some of my sense of injustice. And then I saw the contradictions within the church. You know, I grew up in the rural Methodist church. Where there was huge contradictions between belief and behavior, as there are in, you know, many, so many places. And the, I can't say I had great awareness of the civil rights movement at that time. Except in conversation, 'cause I lived in an all-white, you know, out in the country. But the conversations among my family members, and the conflict within the church over whether, even though no one was knocking on the door, whether or not they would let black people in.

- And the church--

- so that was one of the enormous contradictions, caused a huge split, you know, in the church. And, you know, I'm pretty much a lifelong atheist. And so, but was very much affected by the, you know, the kind of spiritual religious teachings. And then when I went to college, well, I was in the Georgia State College for Women down in Milledgeville, which is a little school of 600, you know, mostly for children of farmers and store owners, you know, small town people. There was a woman there who was head of religious affairs, and her name was Izzy Rogers. I think it was actually Isabelle Wood Rogers. And she was very progressive. You know, we didn't have a framework to put that in, students. But all of us who thought we were rebelling against whatever status quo existed anywhere. And I think many of us who were lesbian went in her direction. Single woman, very smart, very compassionate, and held these great discussion groups, where you actually got to talk in very real ways about things that were going on. And so she was the one who introduced us to the idea of this great thing that was happening around civil rights. And so she, she helped to, wanted to get us to have some critical conversation and vision about it. And then she also engaged us in some things. Like, it was in Milledgeville where the school was, that I first saw the Klan ride through town on horses, you know, carrying torches. But, it was very kind of scary stuff. It was an all white school, as they were in 1957, '58, '59, '60, '61, as so many, colleges were. But also, it was the first time I'd even worked with black people, as I was working as a waitress in a restaurant across from the school. But she involved us in the good things going on in the state at that time, about whether to close public schools because of the possibility of desegregation. And so she took, she organized with us to go to a very large meeting, where the Grand Dragon of the KKK spoke, you know, against desegregation and for the closure of schools. And we testified, you know, in the favor of keeping schools open. So that was--

- Wow.

- I couldn't even tell you what year, it was somewhere between 1957 and '61.

- That's when you were in college, '57 to '61?

- And so, I wouldn't call myself anywhere near the center of the civil rights movement. Very much on the edge of things. But when I was at the University of Buffalo, there was a raging conversation about civil rights, I was in the presence of black students for the first time. I was in the presence of Jewish students for the first time. And I was really off that, way off the country to Georgia. And, I'd had no experience with people other than, you know, kind of white Protestants all my life. And so there was, it was in that debate, Malcolm X came, spoke at Buffalo. We were also under the whole scare around Communism. You know, one of our huge political moves at the university, I was a teaching fellow there.

- This is your masters degree?

- Pardon?

- This was your masters degree?

- Yeah, I was one of those go to school, drop out, go to school, drop out kids. Once I got out of college. So in that first year, so Malcolm X was there, and then there was this whole debate about whether teaching fellows and faculty were gonna sign the loyalty oath which was demanded of us. So there was organizing around that. There was, so there's lots of conversation going on. And I was actually in, I don't know what you would call it. The discover the world part of my growth. You know, I had not been anywhere. I had not, you know, seen or heard or talked about all these things. That was happening, and then I did one of my dropouts, went to the Young Harris College in south Georgia, and taught as an English teacher there. Then back to Buffalo, and then I ended up teaching at Mary Washington College. And at Mary Washington, it was interesting. It was more buffered I think from the civil rights movement. So there was, there was activity and conversation going on. I would say what was moving there more than anything was feminism. There was just that beginning of, you know, '64 to '67, there was that beginning of conversations about feminism. And I was teaching 19th century literature. You know, during the first round of the women's movement. And so, I and all the other faculty members were engaged in that, in that conversation, both outside of the class and in class. And then I was also getting more and more engaged in, reacting and protesting, and taking action against the Vietnam War. So all those things kind of worked together, and the same time, I was trying to figure out how, how you could be a lesbian in the world. You know, coming to that recognition and not knowing what and how to do with that. And I think one of the, one of the good things that happened to me was going to New Zealand. And you know, I went there out of, great rebellion and search for freedom. And profound ignorance. Which is an interesting, (laughs) sometimes volatile combination. My, my partner and I, girlfriend, I guess I would have called her then, we went so that we could be lesbians, you know? And we went also because we were sick of this country. We just felt that, that it was, you know, a country without a, without a soul. But I would say that most, the thing that propelled us the most was, we didn't know how to be engaged with each other as lesbians and have a life, without escaping out of the life we had here. And so the profound ignorance is we didn't really know anything about New Zealand, we kind of chose it out of books, you know, I think we thought it was an undeveloped English-speaking country where we could help

build it rather than be, (laughs) being like, being in the heart of the Empire. You know, they were one step out of the heart of the Empire. But what was good for us there was that we, we were in the position of having to explain the US. Every time we moved, we were both teaching there. I started out teaching in a high school, and then I taught at the, at the university. And, she, she and I both, everything that we did was social. People were really like, what is this thing about race, what is this thing about you all and Vietnam, what is this, what is this, what is this. And there's nothing like that to, to make you have to think. You know, there's, I'm sure neither of us had ever been asked piercing questions before. And neither of us certainly had ever been put in the position that we had to either, offer a critique of our country or defend our country. You know? And then the thing that sent us back was the deaths of, we thought we had, we thought we were gonna be (laughs) the expatriates, you know, we had a lot of, all my life I've read way too many novels.
(cellphone rings)
Sorry, let me turn this phone off. And so, we just felt like we just couldn't live there anymore. And, and so the, the shift from that to decide to come back and then to do a trip that was a gift to us, at that time you could buy tickets, and as long you were in a forward progression, you could stop anywhere you wanted to. So we had saved a little bit of our teaching money, which was not very much. But thanks, we were able to stop in a number of countries, and one of them was India. And one of the places in India was Calcutta. And it was, it was a transformative moment for us. For me in particular. Around thinking I had seen poverty, and knew what poverty was. And thought that I knew a little bit about colonialism. And, you know, it was, it was quite, quite staggering for me. And at that point I just said, you know, I'm gonna go back, and I'm gonna figure out a way to spend my time working. I didn't have the language of social justice issues, but if I'd had that language, I would have said that, what I said was, changing things so that we don't have the poor. That we have of them in the US and elsewhere. And then, Rose, I stepped off the plane into the women's movement. And there you have it. And you know, worked with another woman to create the first conscious-raising group in New Orleans. And had that moment of recognition, I guess I write about it in the homophobia book. You know, that recognition that I couldn't be in this thing, this consciousness-raising group unless I talked in a real way about my life, 'cause that was the point of it. You know? And I couldn't talk about my life unless I talked about being a lesbian. So here was the first time. New Orleans, Louisiana. You know, me, age, 30 I guess, 29 or 30? Saying those words for the first time in a group of eight other people, seven or eight. And, you know. Huge changing point in my life. That was a long answer, but I don't know, did that give you what you needed?

- Yeah, it did, I think there's a lot that's good there. I want to go back to one thing. And that is, Izzy Rogers.

- Yeah.

- In a way she's your Quaker American Friends Service person.

- That's right.

- Like Mandy had. I wondered, if she was Southern?

- I don't think so. But I, just, just in the last year, I had enough curiosity to look her up. You know, 50 years.

But I had the curiosity to look her up. And some of it, she, after, after being at the women's college, was, Union Theological in New York. And she also became like the highest ranked woman in the Presbyterian church.

- Really, wow.

- You should Google her, there's this great picture of her, looking for the world, like a great lesbian of that time. (women laugh) You know? We had all these single teachers that, you know, that brought such power to our lives, who were, you know, fairly closeted. And just gave their all to transforming the lives of young women, in wonderful ways.

- Well, that is truly remarkable.

- Yeah. So yes, she, so she comes out of what I would think of as a very progressive church theology.

- Okay, all right. Okay, I also wanted to ask you about the term lesbian feminist activism. Your interview, the woman who interviewed you for Voices of Feminism, I think it's the last tape, and you're probably about worn out with that interview, but, she says, well, now we're moving into the '90s, and that's the end of your lesbian feminist activism, and now you're doing other kinds of political activism, and all that in Oregon and everything. And I wondered, I would have said that was all lesbian feminist activism, in the way we're defining it. But I wondered how you see it. Do you see yourself as a lesbian feminist activist? Or some other term?

- If, either that or lesbian feminist revolutionary. I don't know which.

- Okay, I like that.

- I'm teasing, I wish I were a revolutionary. But, yeah, I'd say a lesbian feminist organizer, activist. That that's the, I would actually put another word in. I would say, lesbian feminist and anti-racist activist. That has been for years my core. And I'm like a number of people that, in what I consider the kind of lesbian feminist, I don't know whether you'd call it a movement, or wing, or whatever it is you would call us that I love so much, I think so many of us were formed and shaped in strong ways by the Combahee River Collective's statement, you know, Barbara Smith and Audrey Lord, and that group, also by Kitchen Table Press. And, you know, and some of that, you know, essential writing of Adrienne Rich. And I still carry those things. I've been listening to this DOMA and marriage debate, and I keep thinking about Adrienne Rich and Compulsory Heterosexuality. I keep thinking about Audrey Lord, and the uses of the erotic. It's like, wow. And everyday in my work, I talk about intersectionality, and you know, where'd I get that idea? I got it from the Combahee River.

- Way back then.

- Collective statement.

- You know, and that's another question I have. Let me, I want to, I have an anti-racism question here. I want to know how you got, okay, it was in college, it was, Izzy Rogers that got you into civil rights, and understanding civil rights. But when did you start having black friends, and how did you begin to make anti-racism such an important part of your activism?

- I think it began in New Orleans. And the women's movement there. As we were, you know, building it. And that was, that was fairly limited, you know, but I, part of it came through reading. But it came through feminism. It didn't come as much through, civil rights, there was a lot of reading involving that. But it was where these two kept coming together, and being able to see them linked through particularly black women's thinking and bodies. And, it was a gradual increased awareness, understanding, analysis, probably the writings, the books of Kitchen Table Press more than anything. In terms of the real, real bringing everything together. I think, you know, the, the people who were going back and forth across country, in the '70s, what I call the Great Lesbian Migration, where, you know, it was not only the Olivia music folks, and all the other music folks that were going back and forth to little towns, and you know, we would, we would have somebody great, like Linda Tillory. In Fayetteville, Arkansas. You know, and it'd be in a little tiny auditorium, or, maybe a big room. You would have 50 women in and get to hear someone like that, and be in relationship in some way. And then I think my work in Head Start for a couple of years, it was a place where I was really able to put it on the ground, and the work in, helping to develop the first shelter there, in northwest Arkansas.

- Were you getting--

- We were already working to, you know, to be engaged with black women. You know, we weren't seeing multiracial. You know, we weren't seeing people of color. It was black and white, seeing life in that way. And you know, that had the, there were a lot of folks beginning to, a lot of white people beginning to catch on to anti-racism. In Arkansas, I mean, all during the '70s, even if people weren't living in racially mixed situations, in what I would think of as kind of the left, or the women's movement there was that constant conversation of analysis, and, trying to figure things out.

- But you do mention on that other interview that all the CR groups in New Orleans were white.

- Yes.

- So there's something Mandy talked about, the importance of making it interracial from the beginning. And not just something that you look around and say, oops, where are the white people, we better find one.

- I totally agree with that. But that was not where we were in 1969.

- Right.

- In New Orleans, you know.

- You were finding your way then.

- Oh, very much so. I mean, I feel like that's been the story of my life. You know, it's not like, I'm so interested in hearing some people talk about their lives, who either imply or virtually say that they had their political, their politics all their lives. That would not be true of me. You know, my life has been evolving. And political analysis evolving. Political awareness evolving. You know, all of that. That's why I believe in social change. I think if a person such as myself can change in my view of life and my commitments, into, you know, my relationships. Then there's a little bit of hope for everybody.

- (laughs) Right.

- You know?

- I do know.

- Lucky those of you who were just born with this awareness. I don't know how it happens.

- I don't know how it happens either.

- Yeah.

- When you go back, when you look at some of the--

- And that what it's been, is that growth. But I remember, when we had the first meeting in Fayetteville, probably 1975 or '76 to talk about battered women, it was a racially mixed group.

- So what do you think, when I talked to the Gainesville Women's Health Center people, which, one of the three founders of the Gainesville Women's Health Center was Byllye Avery, an African-American. And, they mentioned that about half of their abortion patients were black. But they offered many other services, including CR groups. And almost no black, African-American women went to those. They had a hard time reaching across that racial divide in Gainesville. And I asked Byllye--

- I can understand that, can't you?

- Well, yeah, in 1969, '70, yeah, for sure.

- Yeah, who would, who would trust that, you know? Or actually feel that it was gonna actually speak, even maybe your life? I think that was also true of a lot of low-income women as well. White women. It's like a CR group, I don't know.

- Like your father not wanting to sign those loan papers, because he didn't want to tell you how much he

made, 'cause.

- That's right.

- Yeah, I can see where that would be true across the board.

- Yeah.

- Oh gosh, when you think back to that period, and, you know, it's such a long time ago in a way, but like when you look at movies, or go in the Civil Rights Museum, and you see the TV from that day, and you remember, you wonder how we ever got out of it.

- Isn't it true that we've, I mean, I think in some ways, it feels as though we've inched ahead, because it's not as great and as thorough, and desegregation but not necessarily equality. And there's a great income and equity and injustice, that gap, is still based so much on race. But at that same time it's been with the speed of light that some things have changed.

- Yeah, marriage equality seems almost like the speed of light to me.

- Yeah, yeah. And it's really interesting.

- Okay, I have another question here, and this was one I was about to ask a minute ago, about models of organizing, is that? I think one of the most important things about SONG is how that organizational model works, with codirectors and 50-50 black and white, reaching out to non-gay groups about non-gay issues. And that seems to be model that you were working on when you started The Women's Project.

- That's right.

- So your interviewer asked if you had a model for that, and you said you don't think so, and that you think. So can you talk about if you brought that model to SONG, or others were working with that model, how did that come together?

- Well, I brought a lot of the Women's Project to it. There's no doubt about that. We had already been going for, about 11, 11 or 12 years then. And it was, The Women's Project in the '80s, you know, from '81, and SONG started in '92. It was, that was for many of us who worked in it in Arkansas, and almost for all of us, I would say, it was just so amazing and so life-changing for us. And I had not only brought my politics to it, but it built, all those, my politics there. But I think the, the big thing that, that I probably brought to it, that was a sense of political integrity. That your organization and what you do in your organization, and how you treat each other should mirror what you're demanding of society. So, don't demand racial justice, if you're going to insist that white people be in the majority. Don't demand economic justice, if you're gonna pay people, have huge differences in salaries. You don't demand equality if, people don't have the full share of decision making, and control over resources, you know, all of those things. So, I think that's, that's what I brought,

and then that's what people built on, and built it far more than I had envisioned or dreamed. But we, we knew that. And I think I came in with this, that we have such a history of racial injustice, and it's so ingrained in every fiber of the, of our society, that you can't change that just by fighting it, that you have to actually create models of living where, I used to call it, where you would tilt the balance toward the equality and the, the full self-determination and wholeness of people of color. And so that was why it was always, not that we have, 50-50 could never work. 50% white people and 50% people of color because white people carry--

- more than their weight.

- Yeah, so much greater share of privilege, and greater share of power. That to even begin to making that tilt, you've got to have a majority on your staff, on your board, you know. And it can't be just, what my friend used to call color me up. You know, like I have a board and make sure we get some people of color on it, so that we'll look great, as opposed to, let's have something where people have full decision making and power and authority. So yeah, and then the people who came into The Women's Project were just, just great, great folks. And we were just so committed to, and it was, you know, it was lesbians and straight women. And it was black and white. And then it became multiracial. And then in the, in the '80s, we begin to have trans women come in, and volunteer with us or work with us, and we always had sex workers engaged with us. And, you know, so it was a very rich place. You know, kind of following this idea that, we can, we can keep racism and sexism linked together. Because they are linked together. And we can always work on the two simultaneously. So that was.

- Well, you'd already written the homophobia book, linking racism and sexism.

- Yeah, I didn't do that, though, until the late '80s.

- But you'd written that before SONG, so.

- Yes, yes.

- So that would be a big. Yeah.

- And that's why I had the, you know, we're friends, and Mab had, an outstanding history of working against racism. And so that was just our agreement. Well, first of all, when we came together, it was at the Creating Change conference in North Carolina. It's a big national queer conference. And, it was a time of, you know, all of the conversation about NAFTA. And so what we did there, and Mab had a huge leadership in this, was to insist that there be, that they're in the South, and we were gonna talk about NAFTA. And so we did this huge workshop, and also got Mab as the preliminary speaker. And it caused a great upset there, because, you know, all these folks, particularly guys, but women as well, were walking around and saying, well, what the hell does this have to do with, you know, my gay freedom? And so we, we knew it before we went in, but we really recognized it then. There was so much controversy, but we badly needed to get people off this single identity politics and to get, at least in the South, LGBTQ people to take on race, class and gender, in addition to, because gender then wasn't the way we think of gender now. In addition to their, you know,

homosexual identity, or LGBTQ identity. And then we said, but you know that's not all that's needed. We also need to get the historic civil rights organizations to take on homophobia. And so that was basically our approach. And then, in terms of who was gonna be part of SONG, we were all women, we were all lesbian feminists. Three black women, three white women. And it took us a long time to let men be in leadership. Because our standard was that you can't be part of this unless you are feminist, and you're an anti-racist worker. If you're a white person you have to come in not with talking anti-racism, you have to have a track record. And so that's how Pam and Mab and I, you know, we came in with that track record, and we insisted on it. And, so it was, and that's what made us reluctant about bringing in men, because they had to have a track record around feminism. And to us, the track record wasn't talk. You know, it was something active that you had done, and were doing, and you know, permeated your work. So I think that, that kickoff, you know, and with us all having strong inclination to, carrying an economic analysis along with this, and an analysis around violence. I think that set the, set the political part of it. And also really, really believing in the power of our relationships, the power of our Southern histories and lives. You know, recognition that the South is this extraordinary combination of having this horrible racist history, horrible labor history. The history of slavery, the history of worker, worker oppression, and women's oppression. And at the same time, carries the most outstanding movement of the 20th century. And the civil rights movement carries extraordinary work by women, carries on the one hand, and strictly since the '70s, such negative politics out of churches, once politics was moved into churches, at the same time such liberation. You know. So, and that throughout all of that, people who grew up in the South love the smells, and sounds and tastes of the South. And so to carry all of that and sort of believe in our cultural lives as well as our political lives, and how those intertwined, that has been SONG. That continues to be. And so we expand, we expand as our awareness expands. Of now, now we are multiracial, now we are multigendered. Now we are engaged in work around immigration. You know, we, so as the, not just the moment expands, but that our awareness of the moment expands. Our awareness of the conditions, and awareness of, when we talk about we want a place at the center of our work, poor people, people who are so, inviolate gender so much that they are persecuted. For people who are trans, for people, you know, there's a whole list of the people that we place at the center of our work. But our awareness of those people at the center grows all the time. It's not just, oh, we want these people. The people who are experiencing so much of the marginalization of society to be at the center. You have to have, you have to build eyesight, you know. In order to recognize that, and work side by side with people. So. You know, I work on the staff of SONG now, as of last May.

- All right, well that's good to have you back in the saddle there.

- Yeah, 20 years of working closely with it in all sorts of ways. And now that I'm getting more than a footstep away from it, now, I'm 73, and I'm back working half time with it.

- That's great, I'm sure they're glad to have you.

- It's mutual, definitely mutual, it's a great group of people.

- It looks like a pretty young group, too.

- Very young group. We have me and one staff member over 40. And the rest are under 31 I believe. I believe our youngest is about 22. And it's a really, really strong, strong group of people. And it's grown, it's grown from a very small group to now it has, you know, 10 staff members, half are full time. And has a decent budget. And working in five states. Your state's one of them, Alabama.

- Is that right? Who in Alabama is?

- We don't have a person actually living there, yet all the others, we have a staff person in the state, but Mary Hooks from Atlanta and Kate Shapiro have been working back and forth in Alabama. And I believe they're, they just had a meeting, and I think most of the people were from Tuscaloosa and Huntsville. So they're just beginning organizing there.

- You know, I've been doing this project for three years. And I haven't interviewed one person from Alabama.

- Is that right?

- Well, actually, Donna Burnell now lives near me. She's actually somebody who was one of the directors of the Gainesville Women's Health Center. And I did interview her. And I did set up an interview with somebody who had to back out. But I've, I just haven't hooked into the, I mean, I keep, we're kind of doing, we call it a snowball method. You're just following where people lead you. And it hasn't led me to Alabama yet.

- I guess, you're gonna do a map, right?

- Yes, probably. To show where we're. This special issue can't possibly cover.

- Yeah, well Mab, you know, she grew up in Alabama. So, she could talk at length about that.

- Yeah. Actually, I'm not sure we are gonna interview Mab.

- I just, you gotta. (laughs) Gotta interview Mab. Mab and--

- And Minnie Boise. I know, but you know, they're sort of like the figureheads in a way. I mean of course they did wonderful things, but they've written about it already.

- Yeah, that's true.

- They've written about it widely, and a lot of what we're trying to do, I mean, you're one of the more famous people that we're interviewing, you and Byllye Avery are the most famous people we've interviewed.

- Well, Mandy Carter.

- And Mandy, you're right. And Patty Zang.

- Yeah, she's, she's a much-loved character.

- Although you are way more on the internet than Mandy is. Although she is on there, she is on there.

- Yeah, that's because I've written and made, you know, I think, once you write a couple books, people are.

- All over you, yeah.

- Yeah, you get a level of attention that is often more than you deserve.

- Not necessarily, I think you're in every women's studies textbook I ever taught.

- Yeah, you know, that's, it's really been interesting, Rose, I remember when I first wrote the homophobia book in particular, Barbara Smith said to me, you know, what you need to, you know, being that it's Kitchen Table, she said, Suzanne, what you need to know is that books have a shelf life of five years. And, so, she said, you know, just be prepared for that. And I was. And now it's excerpt for publication. But for years, probably 15 years, it was still being taught as a book.

- Yeah. Because nobody else had done it. I mean, really, you want to go get that subject dealt with, that's where you're gonna find it.

- This is what interested me, and there's been plenty of opportunities for people to do it. It's like, well, what's up with that?

- Yeah, and you know, I think it's part of this whole business of intersecting oppressions, bigger picture, seeing the connections, which people have been talking about. Like you cited Barbara Smith and Audrey Lord talking about it. You have been talking about it forever, but doing it. You know, that next step, there seems to be more energy around single focus, single focus issues. And not--

- I think that's true.

- Not as much big picture. But SONG does that.

- Yeah, yeah. SONG really holds that, holds that close.

- Now, did you know all of the SONG co-founders? I know you knew Mab.

- I didn't actually know Pat very well. The people I knew the most were Mandy and Mab. And I knew Pam a little and Joan a little. And then Pat. I think I had met her but didn't really, I couldn't say that I knew her.

- So, was Mandy the? I'm wondering, who was the person who knew all the other people, really? Was that Mandy?

- Probably. Mandy. (laughs) Mandy is one of the. She really does great relational work. She remembers people and she meets people easily, she chats with people easily. She keeps really good records.

- Yeah, yeah, she can cite dates too.

- She can, she can! I'm like, damn, where do you get that? Wish I could.

- Do you remember that speech on August 4th, 1960, you know?

- Me, I'm doing well at remembering my birthday. (laughs)

- So, one of the questions was your story of SONG. Do you think that's what you've just told?

- I think so.

- Mandy tells it from the point of view of organizing the Creating Change, and then, this coming out of it.

- And that's true, that's what I would say too. Is that, you know, that's how we came together, was in that, in that, you know, that moment of really recognizing how much something like this was needed.

- And she also connects it to the sort of anti-Southern bias she was getting from the phone calls about having it in the South.

- Yeah, that wasn't in my head. But she had gotten, she had gotten those.

- You weren't seeing, and SONG's mission is not to make people love the South.

- No. (laughs) No, no, no. I don't think so. Our mission is work in the South and change the world by doing it. I mean, I'm making that up. But I mean truly, it's. It's sort of like The Women's Project. We thought, what we did do is really great work on the ground, and then what we learned from that is to use that nationally. So like for years, we documented acts of violence, the killing of women, and the violence and oppression of black people and LGBTQ people. And religious minorities. And we put out quite a long report every year, showing all that documentation. It was from that that we were able to have to do national speeches and national writing about how women should be included in the Hate Crimes Act. You know, how could it not be a hate crime against women, when men were picking women up and taking them out and raping them and leaving them on the side of the highway. That's not a hate crime?

- I interviewed Cal and LaRose Felicity about some work they did in Kentucky, and that's one of the things they did, was gather data on how many, on all the domestic violence cases and what happened with them.

Which, you know, at that time in the '80s, ended up being acted on. And they got a lot of things done with that data.

- I'll bet.

- Okay, SONG and the historical moment. This comes at the end of our study period. 1994, which is when the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance closed its doors, it's the end of what we're studying. Although we talked about things that happened after that. But it seemed like, that much of the energy and enthusiasm of the women's liberation movement was dissipating by the early '90s, when SONG was founded. Probably because of all those years of Ronald Reagan. And that we had Backlash. And I'm wondering if you've thought about how SONG responded to that, or I mean, how it fits into Backlash, the end of Reagan. I mean, of course we also had the election of Bill Clinton, about the time that SONG was.

- I think we were probably, I don't know if we were talking about Backlash, using that particular language as much as we were examining the policies that came out of Reagan. That, you know, all of that anti-taxation, anti-worker, you know, the racialization of issues. You know, all of those, those kinds of things. And then the fact that globalization and privatization, all of that was having on the economy and on poor people. And then we also were doing a lot of analysis of the effect of the rising right wing. That it of course had been rising since 1964. Around '92, '94, '95, we were beginning to feel that impact in a way that people hadn't recognized it so much before, as such an enormous political force.

- And that's, you eventually wrote the book about that.

- Right, I wrote that in, I guess, '96.

- So this is part of SONG, then. What SONG is interested in?

- It's still interested in that, yes, yes. You know, 'cause it's had a huge impact, every step of the way in SONG. The policies of Reagan and the organizing of the right. When you think of the taking in, when it's on our own turf down here that we have Jerry Falwell. And that whole initiative to grab up the new evangelicals, and to introduce into faith arenas political, electoral organizing. And moving messages of oppression. That has had an enormous impact in the South, as you know. And in some ways, I know for me, beginning more and more to work on the right wing in the late '80s and in the early '90s, and all the way through now, it took me awhile to, to kind of get myself clear on it. Because, the South has been so much a bastion of the right. Of politics, historically over time, you know, forever.

- You've got something to say about that.

- And we're beginning to see some difference between this particular incarnation of the right from that of the far right and of just the conservative, conservative states rights, and you know. To be able to begin to parse those out was not, kind of an immediate place that one would go.

- That, that is so relevant to right now. And the, the dialogue, it's not really a dialogue. It's more of a sparring match that goes on between, and I'm thinking here about, just friends and relatives of mine, from other parts of Alabama. It's like we've created an alternate universe. For me it's like they've created an alternate universe in which Obama isn't a citizen, he's a communist.

- Right, right. (laughs) It is an alternate universe.

- Yeah, and yet, you know, I know these people, and they're good people, I mean, they're like my parents, you know, my brother. They're really, they mean well and et cetera. But they're Southern. And whatever happened to me, maybe it was because, you know, being a lesbian, didn't happen to them, and they can't see it. They cannot see, we cannot talk about any of this. None of it.

- And not only, they can't see it because of what didn't happen to them, but they also can't see it because of what has been fed them. You know, and the right bought up all the little radio stations in the '80s under Reagan. And you know, the great right wing thinktanks in the '70s. It began all of that messaging. And then you've got your Limbaughs, and you've got your Fox News, and you've got it through your churches. If you can create this sort of nonstop messaging, and then link it to, you know, church, hearth, and, you know. So-called values, then it really builds that barrier that keeps people from being able to see. It becomes a sea change in their own thinking. But you know, I have family all over the South. Not all over, that's not quite true. But I have a lot in Georgia and a lot in Florida. And a few other places. And I've seen them make remarkable change. And they're country folks that now live in these little towns and cities. But they've changed not just on LGBTQ issues, they've changed enormously on that. They, some of them, not all of them, but some of them have really changed on their ways of thinking politically. So that, now I can sit down with most of the Republicans in my family and have a conversation. That's a step forward.

- Yeah, that is a huge step.

- Yeah. Because, and then a couple, I'm like, there's no need for me to bother. I mean, they got the, they're Tea Party, you know? They don't want conversation. I'm like, okay. I don't want it either. And this kind of conversation, you know.

- So, is SONG, from what I've been reading and talking with Mandy about SONG is working with other organizations, or is SONG working on trying to reach those, across those barriers, and deal with the messaging?

- We're trying to do some of the messaging. But what we're about to do is more on the ground solid organizing than we've done before. So we're beginning to initiate a campaign to work on transforming education. And so that's gonna have, it'll have a lot of local organizing in it as well as, we're gonna do it under the overall framing of building beloved community. And you know, we take that right out of the last two years of thinking of Martin Luther King. And, so we're working both at cultural change, and trying to move the way people frame and see and think of things as well as trying to figure out some concrete things to do in terms of education and what's happening to our children across the board in that.

- That makes me--

- Go ahead.

- That makes me think of a line from the other interview. Toward the end, you said the center of your political thought now is, how do we resist and how do we create vision and action that is connected both to resistance and vision.

- Yeah, yeah. You know, so it's kind of how do you hold one in one hand and one in the other. You've got to resist, but you've gotta create at the same time. And what are we resisting? Are we resisting the messaging? Are we resisting?

- We're resisting the oppression, resisting the violence. Resisting the conditions that we live under. You know, so, in some ways it's kind of slammed at people. You know, that's, this is the level of violence, remains high in this country. In every aspect of people's lives. And it does, and so it does. And then there's homophobic violence mixed in that. So that's resistance. It's like stopping the bad laws, the don't say gay law in Tennessee. All these, we have these now, super majority legislatures in the South that are just wildly passing such repressive laws, so that's resistance. But the creation is creating ways of living or ways of schooling, or ways of, you know, ways of worshiping, or ways of whatever it is that hold within them a whole different set of values.

- Our hour, we have used our hour. I kind of feel like at least we got to the end of my questions.

- Well good.

- And I will, as fast as I can, type up excerpts. What I do is not transcribe, because it takes way too long, and it's boring. I pull out pieces from the tape, I listen to the tape. And I edit it as I go along. And then I send it to you.

- Okay.

- And you can do anything you want to it. Including, you know, just create another document.

- All right.

- Add anything we didn't say. We can have another interview if you wanted to. But I want to warn you, I will edit it, I will move things around, so that they come together. I could ask you to do that, but you probably wouldn't feel like it. (laughs)

- No, I don't think I would quite have time to do any of it.

- Right, okay. So that's what I'm gonna start doing right now. And it went really fast with Mandy, so maybe I'll get that turned around quickly.

- Okay, well I look forward to seeing it, whenever it does come.

- Okay, and we are working on trying to have a draft ready for Sister Wisdom in May. So we're trying to get these things turned around in April. But our final deadline is later than that. But they're gonna tell us whether we have a single issue or a double issue, after what we send them in May. So we want to get everything we can by then.

- Great.

- Okay.

- Sounds terrific, I'm so glad you're doing it.

- Thank you very much, I'm enjoying doing it. And I enjoyed talking with you.

- And where are you living now?

- I live in Huntsville.

- In Huntsville.

- That's where I'm living.

- So, it might be good for some of our folks to get in touch with you.

- Sure, sure.

- When they're working over that way.

- I would love to be in touch with some of them.

- I'll give them your email.

- Good, that would be great.

- Great, well, thank you so much.

- Okay, thank you.

- You bet, bye now.

- Bye-bye.