Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project
Oral History Initiative

Interview with Mary M. Boenke
6 October 2016

Interviewee: Mary M. Boenke
Interviewer: Mariana Araujo
Date: 6 October 2016
Location: Vinton, Virginia
Duration: 01:01:49

Transcription prepared by: Erin McWethy, Chelsea Hutton, and Mariana Araujo

0:00 = growing up in the Great Depression; high school (1929-1940s)
2:45 = involvement in Civil Rights movement; March on Washington (1963); housing desegregation struggles in Cleveland Heights, Ohio; attending graduate school (1960s)
5:27 = story of her child coming out as a lesbian (c. 1975), then as transsexual (c. 1995)
8:42 = retiring and relocating from Ohio to Southwest Virginia (1990); founding the Roanoke Valley chapter of PFLAG (1992)
13:20 = more on the Roanoke Valley chapter of PFLAG (c. 1992 – 2004), activities and programs; advocacy on behalf of Wasena Park police sting victims (1998-1999)
19:27 = on the dissolution of the group c. 2004-2005
21:45 = publishing the Roanoke PFLAG newsletter
22:58 = operating a gay support helpline (1990s)
24:33 = operating an annual "coming out" workshop
26:21 = adding transgender issues to the PFLAG agenda; founding the Transgender Network (within PFLAG); PFLAG becomes the first national gay rights organization to support transgender people
35:57 = discussion of growing transgender acceptance and backlash
38:49 = working on the books *Our Trans Children* and *Trans Forming Families* (2000s)
43:51 = involvement in the Ricketson LGBT Memorial Library (early 2000s)
46:02 = reflecting on PFLAG's contributions to the LGBTQ movement
47:49 = current status of PFLAG; desire for a local anti-discrimination ordinance to protect transgender Roanokers
50:45 = thoughts on social movements; Stonewall (1969); and the future of the LGBTQ movement
53:57 = the importance of global environmental issues
55:18 = final reflections; meeting celebrities; how her life has been changed by involvement in LGBTQ issues

0:00
[Checking of sound levels between Mariana Araujo, Chelsea Hutton, and Mary Boenke]

0:35
MA: Hello, my name is Mariana Araujo. Today is Thursday, October 6, 2016 at 5:20 in the afternoon. I am in Vinton, Virginia with Mary Boenke, and we are interviewing Mary for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ Oral History Project. So Mary, where did you grow up?

0:54
MB: Well, I grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania. That's up on Lake Erie; and I'm the youngest of three children. My father was the chief design engineer of a small company that built very large steam engines for power plants, and lake freighters. His engines were good enough that this company thrived all during the Depression; and I was born in '29 [1929]. So, my mother used to say that I brought on the Depression. I never really knew about it until I was in college and took an Economics course.

1:32
MB: So, I had a very comfortable childhood. My parents were Presbyterian. My father was an avowed atheist, from the time I knew him. So, I had a choice, theologically… and a very comfortable childhood. I mostly went to public schools, but then to a Catholic Girl's Seminary for high school. Very small, very poor academically, which I later discovered because I went to Wellesley College, which is one of the top women's colleges in the country, and I really had a major adjustment to make there. I was always rabble-rousing, even in high school. We were testing restaurants, and talking to them if they weren't serving negroes. You can tell the vintage of a person whether they say the nasty "N-word," or negro, or black, or Afro-American, it's by generation, yes.

2:45
MB: So, I was very active in the Civil Rights Movement. By then, I was married to John Boenke, and had three young children. We were living in Cleveland Heights [Ohio]; and we more or less helped desegregate Cleveland Heights. There were some home bombings in our neighborhood, and actually, I had gone to the Big March on Washington, in 1963, when Martin Luther [King, Jr.] gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. My Unitarian Church, social action committee, rented a bus, chartered a bus. We sat up all night, marched all day, sat up all night getting home; and that really motivated me to get active in the Civil Rights Movement. So, we started a group that first met in our living room, with about thirty-five women; and two weeks later, with fifty. Cleveland Heights is kind of an egg-headed community, just up the hill from Case Western Reserve [University]. So, we had a kind of a ready membership for that group. That's where I really learned about calling meetings, talking to group community leaders. We got the schools to make their by-laws more black friendly, and we got the city council to hire a person …. we were showing homes to blacks in our basically white neighborhood, and that got some people pretty upset. We got the city to hire somebody to support that effort, and it was a very successful experience.

4:40

MB: So, then I went back to school. I had graduated from college before I was married, but I went back to school at Case Western Reserve [University], and got a Master's Degree in the School of Social Work, but not in one-to-one interviewing. It was in what we called Community Organization, CO, and I knew that's what I enjoyed doing. By then, my husband had discovered that our activities were not helping his career in General Electric. So, he resigned and we moved to Dayton, Ohio, where I continued my Civil Rights activities, and raising our children.

5:27
MB: Let's see, I didn't get into gay issues until our middle kid finished freshman year at Oberlin, and came out as a lesbian. I thought for a while, "Oh, if we just hadn't sent her to Oberlin," which was a very liberal college, "maybe she wouldn't be gay." So, that's the kind of innocent background I started from, and of course, I learned pretty quickly that that had nothing to do with it. Nineteen years later, she came out again as a transsexual. Both times we had not a clue, and didn't have any clue that she was going to come out at either time, and knew nothing about being gay or transsexual. So, they were both pretty intense learning experiences for my husband and me. So, we were married and living in Cleveland Heights and had three small children, and that's when I got into the Civil Rights Movement.

6:50
MA: So, sorry to [interrupt]. You were talking about, you know, your children, and I was just wondering, well, you know you talked about how you didn't know about it at the time? How was it for your other kids or members of your family, your friends, your support network while you were learning?

7:13
MB: Well, we were very lucky because I was a social worker, and we were Unitarians, and very liberal in our theology and our social issues. So, it was not, neither time, it was not a problem for our family. It was scary because we didn't know much about it or what was in store for our kid, and we worried that she, and then he, would have a lot of problems to face. But actually, he was very lucky. He came out as a transsexual, while our other son was in the hospital for Leukemia. It was what my husband calls "a challenging year." We thought it was not good timing, on then Heidi's part, to come out as a transsexual just when Mark was so ill, life-threatening really. But we've often said it was like having two suitcases to carry, you know. You might as well be carrying two as just one; and we weren't free to worry full-time about either one. So, we were very lucky. They're both very healthy, happy adults, now. So, we got through a tough period in our life.

8:42
MA: Do you think being so involved with the Civil Rights Movement and … Do you have any lessons that came from that, that kind of translated to your involvement with LGBTQ rights and going through this challenging year with your family?

9:03
MB: Well, it was because of our kid and his journey that I really got involved in PFLAG and found it just so interesting. So, I guess if I had any advice to other parents it's learn about what your kid is going through. Read, talk to friends, make new friends. If some of your friends are

not able to accept this, then go easy on them. They get to take their time understanding and accepting, but then you need to find some support for yourself, as well as for your kid. So, I worked as a social worker for most of my career, planning and starting new programs. I started a lunch program for senior citizens in Warren, Ohio; and administered a grant for another agency setting up homes for low-income people in middle class neighborhoods. That was a challenge for them and for the neighborhood. So, I fell into an active role quite easily. It was my life, actually. I describe myself as a born rabble-rouser. If I'm working on various issues. Right now, I'm thinking of getting a little more active in the right to die movement. It's also closer to home [*laughter*], yes. But when we retired in 1990, and moved from Ashtabula, Ohio, up in the northeast corner of Ohio, we traveled around and finally selected the Roanoke area for our retirement. But I was bereft of a job and a career that I loved, and needed something to do. I started taking little seminars out at Roanoke College… no, Hollins… and then leading some workshops there. I asked at one point "If I could do a seminar on gay issues for families," and the Director of the Women's Center said "Well, she would have to inquire." It went all the way up to the President, and the message came back down "Go ahead; it would be alright. They would be glad to sponsor such a seminar." So, we advertised that seminar and said "Now if there's interest, we would continue meeting." So, six brave people came [*laughter*] to that little seminar, and we did indeed continue meeting, and that became the PFLAG chapter then. I think that was about in 1992. I had moved here in 1990, and it took me a year or two to find support for doing such things.

12:28
MA: Was there a particular reason why Roanoke was the place that you and your husband picked to move to?

12:37
MB: We had a list of about ten things we wanted in our retirement community. We didn't have any friends or family here, but we wanted a Unitarian church. I wanted a beautiful area, hills and greenery and lakes, and so forth. We wanted good healthcare services, transportation, cultural facilities. We like classical music, and so forth. So, that's how we settled on this area, and we've never regretted it. We've met a number of other people who have moved here because of the facilities, and the beauty of the area, without, necessarily, knowing anyone here.

13:20
MA: You know, I find it really interesting with the group in Hollins and the workshops and that leading to PFLAG. Could you tell us a little bit more about how that got started, and how you got involved in your activism in the community to get the chapter started in Roanoke?

13:44
MB: Well, the six people that, the six people that were involved in the initial startup all had friends, and as I said I'm a Unitarian. We started meeting at our church, and my church was very supportive. So, some of my church friends started coming, and then some gay folks, these were all parents and families, but then some gay folks started coming, as well, and they had friends. So, it just grew by word of mouth, and it was not a huge group. I mean, we got up to a dozen people at a meeting, or whatever.

14:29
MB: We would usually have some kind of a program, a speaker, and a discussion, and refreshments, and then we would break up into a couple of smaller groups. One group would be a support group for people who were had problems, or questions, or wanted to share their story, confidentially, in a small group. We always had a leader for that group. The other people stayed on either to talk about the issues or the political situation, or whatever was of interest at that time.

15:12
MB: We continued for about twelve years, and then we stopped getting new people, and we decided to fold our tent and close down the chapter. There were no new people coming for maybe six months, and we were weary [*laughter*], I think, at that point. We thought, also, that gay people and gay issues had become much better accepted. That was part of the reason that people were not… we no longer got mothers crying [*laughter*] on our shoulder at meetings as we did many times before that.

15:59
MB: We were quite an active group. PFLAG talks about support, education, and advocacy. Support is meeting, and hugging, and telling gay folks, who didn't want to be gay, that they were beautiful just the way they are, and it's okay, and you can have a good life, and so forth. Education: we dispersed a lot of pamphlets, and printed material. We had speakers coming in talking about various aspects of being gay: medical issues, political issues, so forth. We had various gay people speaking about their own experiences. We sent out letters to churches, encouraging ministers to send us their gay folks who were hurting and needed support. We sent letters to doctors when we discovered that there were no medical facilities in Roanoke for trans, particularly for transsexual people, who were traveling all the way, you know, with a hundred-mile radius of Roanoke to get to the hormones that they needed, and so forth. We had an annual fundraising meeting. It was a dinner meeting; and we all contributed our give-away stuff, and sold it, auctioned it off, and we raised money. We gave away $500 scholarships to one, or two, or three gay students every year. We were quite active.

17:52
MB: When the Boy Scouts started refusing to let gay people become members, and they wouldn't let a gay man be a troop leader, we went to talk to the Boy Scouts. When there was a police sting in the park and a number of gay men were arrested, you know, we went to talk to City Council and to the mayor, and so forth.[2] One of our members was an out gay attorney, Sam Garrison, and he represented the men who had been arrested. He had an amazing day in court where we all came and packed the gallery, so to speak [*laughter*]. Of course, he didn't win that case, but he educated a few people in the process. [*reflecting to self*] Let me see, City Council, Mayor, the sting in the park, okay. So, we were a very active chapter. The current group, which has just pulled out of PFLAG, I think has been a very nice support group, but they have not been interested in outreach, and advocacy, political process, that sort of thing. Now, they are no longer a PFLAG group.

19:27

[2] MB refers to the Wasena Park police sting and subsequent legal affair (1998-1999).

MA: Just, you know, you were talking about the six months that there was no new people coming because, you know, things were getting better. You talked about how it might have closed down. What made you, you know, everyone, decide to stay, and then after that, did you see like new members coming, or like how do you see the issues and things that were about people getting better, or maybe getting worse through your time with PFLAG?

20:03
MB: Oh, we thought the country was becoming much more accepting of gays and gay issues, and that PFLAG was not as much needed as it was originally, and that since people were not, new people were not coming, we figured that being gay was no longer quite as big a tragedy [*laughter*] as people originally thought it was. So, we felt we were not as much needed and not accomplishing much. So, I'm in favor that some groups outlive their usefulness and just go on meeting because they like being together, but we all had other things to do. You know, we were active people. So, we didn't feel this was a good use of our time anymore. I'm not sure we were correct. I think maybe if we had done some more active outreach, we could have perked up the group again, but we were tired by then.

21:12
MA: And that was what year?

21:14
MB: That would have been, we started…

21:17
MA: Or around what time?

21:18
MB: That would have been about 2004 or 5, in that range. We moved here in 1990. We started the group in '92, and I know it went for about twelve years. We had a very big meeting for our ten-year anniversary, and then after that it sort of petered off. So, I think we closed down about 2004 or 5.

21:45
MA: Just to go back a little, can you—well, we were reading about it—can you tell me a little bit about the PFLAG newspaper, and how that got started, and how that kind of outreached to other people, and then, I guess the newsletter…

22:02
MB: Are you talking about the National PFLAG newsletter?

22:05
MA: No, this was the Roanoke one.

22:08
MB: Right. Oh, okay. I had forgotten that we did a newsletter. [*laughter*] I did a newsletter. [*laughter*] Well, we wanted something to be able to distribute in the community, and for the

people who came to visit us to be able to take home to their family, and something to mail out to people who had come in the past and were no longer coming. So, it was our way of outreach into the community. I'm trying to think what in the world did we print in that newsletter, and I must have copies of it somewhere, but I don't know where [*laughter*].[3]

22:58
MA: Well, one of the things I think we noticed, there was a helpline and it was your phone number from your home. Can you tell us a little bit about that? I know…

23:10
MB: Yeah, I think that was a fella by the name of John Goodhart, who is almost as old as I am. He was very good at answering the phone, and supporting, providing warm fuzzy support for people. He's the one who coordinated the support part of the group, you know, after the speaker and the refreshments, and then we broke into smaller groups. He coordinated the support group, and I guess I more or less stuck with the issues and organizational kinds of things.

23:50
MA: Right, and when people, did you get a lot of phone calls? Also, you know, at that side of it or was it just an added…?

23:56
MB: No, no we would have maybe two or three a month. Not a lot. And I was very familiar with covering the phone, but I was happy to have someone else do it. I had previously, when I retired, I was sixty—I retired a few years early—I was the director of a 24-hour crisis line in Ashtabula, Ohio. So, I was very familiar with running telephone support.

24:33
MA: What were one of the things you found challenging, or maybe also really helpful in this movement to have a support line of people to call and talk about issues with someone?

24:47
MB: Well, people who called the support line, or people who were just beginning to realize they were gay, and they had not found much gay support, frequently scared to tell their… not out to their family… and the hardest thing a gay person used to have to do was to come out to their family, particularly to parents. Siblings were sometimes easier, or aunts, or uncles, or cousins, but parents were the scary part of the whole process…. Oh, yes. We used to run, almost every year, a coming out workshop. We used to have quite a good crowd for that. We would get twenty, thirty, forty people to a coming out workshop, and it was very easy to put on. We would get a representative group of people, you know, some gays, some lesbians. This was before transgender. Men and women, old and young, and each spend five or ten minutes telling their story, and where they were in their process. Then, again, break for refreshments and go into small discussion groups. If people in the audience were in the midst of their own scary process, it was very supportive just to talk and meet other gay people. Yeah.

[3] Roanoke PFLAG materials from the 1990s are available in the LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.

26:21
MA: Hmm, that's interesting. You mentioned, the part before transgender, how did PFLAG add it? The transgender component?

26:32
MB: Ohhh, that's a story. Again, I was so lucky. Our kid came out gay at a good time. I didn't mention, I was one of thirteen regional directors working out of the national office. The country was divided into thirteen areas, regions; and I had a five-state area: Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, and D.C., that I covered. Every three months we would meet, the regional directors, would meet in an air hub somewhere: Chicago, San Francisco, wherever; and trade stories and help educate each other in this process. I had about thirteen, fifteen chapters in my region; and I traveled around to all of those every year. I would try to support them and suggest other activities that they could get into, and how they could strengthen their chapter, and so forth. That was a really fun thing, a lot of travel, meeting wonderful people who were all like myself, very dedicated and engrossed in the process at that time. So, I was a regional director for about, I did two two-year stints and then I was off for a while, and I came back and did another year or two. I have a nice little giften in my collection there for that.

28:13
MB: So, transgender. Our kid came out as a transsexual about eighteen years after he came out as a lesbian. So, he came out after his freshmen year. He was born in '50…'57 [1957] [*laughter*]. So, he came out in about '75 [1975] as a gay, and he came out in about 1995 or 6 as a transsexual, at a time when most people had never heard of this and didn't know what to do. None of the gay organizations in the country were accepting of trans folks in their group. They were turning them away and saying "No, this is not the group for you." Our son called us from—he was living in Portland, Oregon—and he called and he said "Hey Mom, what's wrong with this PFLAG chapter here? They kicked me out of their meeting. They wouldn't let me distribute a flyer about a transgender meeting." So, I called the President of the Portland chapter. We got along fine, had a nice conversation. Not too long after that, we made a trip to Portland. We would go every year anyway to visit our kid. Our formerly leukemic son was in California, our gay trans kid is in Oregon, and our daughter in Vermont, is where they all still live. So, we went out and met the folks in that Portland chapter. And then the president who had a beautiful home, she was an artist and it was filled with fascinating stuff, set up a special meeting, kind of a party for us and we got to talk about transgender issues to that large chapter. And our kid, one of his friends, and a third person, all came and spoke from their personal experiences about what it was like coming out trans. So that was when I thought, "oh, this is what we need to do, is to make PFLAG aware of and educated about and accepting of transgender folks." So, I came back home and started working on that. And, of course, luckily I'm not too far from Washington, I could do it in three and a half hours. So, I started visiting the National Chapter. The National Director was very supportive of trans. Most of the staff was okay with it, but we had several brown bag lunches with the staff and I developed a very dear friend, transgender, male-to-female, in the D.C. area and she would meet me and we would go together to the national office and talk with the staff there. So, then we started talking about how we make the whole organization aware, so we started doing a national newsletter and I developed a network within PFLAG which we called the Transgender Network. And I organized it just like the chapter itself was organized. I got regional people, who were either trans or straight but interested in trans issues in each of those

regions. Then we all started recruiting a transgender representative for each PFLAG chapter. And there were then about 500 chapters. Some of them were teeny tiny, two or three people meeting in podunk somewhere. But there were 200 very sizable chapters meeting monthly, and so forth. And I traveled a lot; and I, of course, was meeting with my PFLAG regional directors regularly, every three months. So, I was getting them to identify people and chapters. Eventually we had Transgender Representatives, we called them T-Coords, Transgender Coordinators, T-Coords in 200 chapters. My husband and I were putting together a newsletter, maybe two or three times a year, and mailing it out to every chapter and all the national board members. Eventually, we were getting the whole organization educated about transgender issues. I had maybe half a dozen close friends who worked hard on this with me. And then we met with the Bylaws Committee of the National Board and they drafted the changes that would be needed in the national bylaws to become officially transgender accepting. Then, I arranged a Transgender Conference in San Francisco to meet at the same time as the National Conference. At that National Conference, it was pre-arranged to vote on whether to change the bylaws to become transgender inclusive. There were maybe about 500 people at that conference. I was sitting at the back of the room, and I still get choked up talking about this because when it came to a vote on accepting the change in the bylaws, every hand went up except one fella across the aisle from me, and he just didn't vote. And there were no nays, there were nearly 500 yays. And that's how PFLAG became transgender accepting. And at intermission, I talked to the fella [*laughs*] who hadn't voted for it and he goes "Well Mary, I'm not against it, I just think we've got our hands full trying to get people to accept gay issues and gay people." So it was alright, I could accept one… what do you call it when they don't vote?

35:10
MA: absentee?

35:12
MB: … an absentee… not an absentee, whatever [*both laugh*]

35:18
MB: We were the first national gay organization to become transgender inclusion. So then we started lobbying other gay groups [*laughs*]. I went a couple times to talk to the HRC staff, Human Rights Council [Humans Rights Campaign]. You're familiar with that group? That was, at that time, the largest gay group in the country.

35:46
MA: Yeah, I think so.

35:48
MB: And we talked to them a few times, and a few other groups, and now it's just assumed, if you're a gay group you include trans.

35:57
MA: Do you think partnering with other organizations was part of that transition of not thinking of this issue as fully gay and lesbian issue but also transgender? And how did that help the community that PFLAG, all over the country, was working with?

36:20
MB: I'm not sure, what's the question? [*softly laughs*]

36:24
MA: Sorry. [*laughs*] I was wondering if PFLAG influenced, like you said with other organizations, and then spread… that when you talk about this issue you also include transgender issues. And how did that mirror the people that would come to PFLAG in Roanoke and other places that you have been to also be accepting of this new…?

36:52
MB: Well, I think national groups gradually blended. There was, at that time, also quite a gap between the M to Fs [male-to-female transgender persons] and the F to Ms [female-to-male transgender persons]. And they are emotionally very different groups. You know, the male to female, they like to dress up and flounce around in their high heels and make-up and fancy clothes. And the female to male, they're more into sloppy jeans and t-shirts, and so forth. So, there had to be a blending there as well as blending in with the gay groups. But I think at this point, although the differences still exist, they're not cause for any ill feeling or separateness… And yes, I think that having the meeting on the national level was important. I've been amazed, as everyone has been amazed, at how fast the country has moved towards gay acceptance, and now transgender acceptance. I'm waiting to see what's going to happen in North Carolina with this bathroom issue. I don't understand why a bunch of female-to-male transmen haven't started using the lady's room and waiting for the women to come screaming out the door, saying "There's men in the lady's room," and for them to say "Well, if you want us to take our pants down and you can see for yourselves that this is the gender we were born into and that's what your law says!"

38:37
MA: Exactly.

38:38
MB: So I think that's a law that just can't hold up. It's going to be very difficult to enforce.

38:49
MA: No, I agree. Let's talk a little about your books and the material that PFLAG has distributed. I know that you won an award, the American Eagle—if I'm correct—award with the *Our Trans Children* book. How did that… you know, having this material and others as well that you had contributed…?

39:20
MB: I'm not remembering the group you're talking about. I did get several nice awards and I'll show you my little collection [*laughs*] after we finish talking. But I became aware very early on that there was no material that trans folks, for instance, could take to their parents or their families and say "read this, this will answer a lot of your questions." So, one of my dear friends, Jessica Xavier, who lives outside of Washington [D.C.] and works now for the federal

government on transgender issues, was actually the main author for this little booklet[5] [*Mary pulls the booklet off of the table*] but it was my idea and I recruited Jessica to work on this. And we tried doing it by email and her first draft read like a doctoral thesis. And we said, "No, no, Jessica, this is for ordinary people" [*laughs*]. And I'd tell everybody, we discovered a better way to work than email and that was in person. She came down for a weekend [*laughs*] and we went through it sentence by sentence and made it readable, you know. And we printed ten thousand of these. We did it on—this is just one grade above newsprint—so we could do it very inexpensively and we sold these for three for three dollars or twenty-five for eighteen dollars including shipping. So, we sent these out free to everybody. Later when I did my own book[6], I sent a free copy for five hundred people, all the PFLAG chapters and board members and so forth. It's called priming the pump [*laughs*]. And that's how this got started and it still is a good quick read for families who are just starting from scratch to learn about PFLAG. Now we gave the copyrights of both these items to the National Office and they've rewritten this. And they now print out a beautiful, slick brochure that's—I don't know—a dollar and a half each or two and a half each, or something like [that], so they're not going to get the kind of bulk distribution that we got with these. When I would get a new edition printed, I would spend a couple of days counting out five of them and putting a rubber band around them, twenty-five, twenty-five, twenty-five, twenty-five… ten thousand into bundles of twenty-five. And then packing and mailing them as requested. And we made a little money on them even at that inexpensive price which is how we could afford other mailings like our national T-Coord newsletter, T-Net [Transgender Network] newsletter to all our T-Coords in all our chapters. The book… I started going to Transgender conferences and gradually met a few other families and parents, particularly, Karen and Bob Gross from the Cleveland area became very active, and realized that there was no substantial material that kids could hand their parents and I was beginning to meet other families who were accepting so I got them each to write four- or five-page chapters, little articles. And I collected those and edited them. I had to make them grammatically correct, but I didn't want to change the style so I would kind of play around. I did a lot, a lot, a lot of emailing those days. You know, I was corresponding with forty different authors and two hundred T-Coords. I was very busy for a few years.

43:51
MA: I'm sure. You were doing wonderful work. You know, when we talk about books and we read a little bit about how PFLAG created a library, could you tell us a little bit about that and how was that helpful for the community?

44:08
MB: Well, I would trade books whenever I went to a conference or buy other people's books and they started coming out suddenly with lots and lots of material. So, I brought them back and [at] our PFLAG chapter meetings, one of our members would carry a cardboard carton to every meeting with various kinds of books and people could borrow those and so forth. So, it was available to our members. And then there was a very wonderful guy, Ed Harrison [Harris], who was actually a gay Baptist minister, Southern Baptist minister. And Ed started collecting a library and that was available at this place on Grandin Road where a number of health-type people and

[5] "Our Trans Children", 4th edition, a publication of PFLAG. A copy of this booklet was donated by Mary Boenke to the LGBTQ History Collection, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library.
[6] Mary Boenke, *Trans Forming Families* (2008), PFLAG Transgender Network.

Tai Chi and massage, and so forth, offices are; and he had an office in a little library, a room in that building for a couple of years. Then they needed that space for something else and Ed died and that library sort of folded up and it was all packed up in boxes, sitting in the Metropolitan Community Church for twenty years… fifteen years, anyways. And I understand now that they finally made a library room in the church which is again available. I don't know how much they're advertising it or how much it's being used, but I understand it is now there.[7]

46:02
MA: Absolutely. What do you think were PFLAG's most valuable contributions to the community?

46:10
MB: Most valuable?

46:11
MA: …contributions to the community?

46:16
MB: I think the most valuable single thing is that we supported people who were then more comfortable coming out publicly as gay people. And I think that we could have never gotten the country to be as supportive as it is now and to pass positive legislature without a lot of gay folks coming out and saying "Here I am," and "I'm okay," and "I didn't choose this, it chose me." I think for people to understand, I think the best analogy is like being left-handed. It's the way you're born. Now you can be forced to learn to write with your right hand, as one of my brothers did, but it takes its toll emotionally, making that effort to do what's so easy for other people and for people to understand that people don't choose to be gay, they are born. One of the things we used to say if somebody was saying "Why did you choose to be gay?" we would said "Well, when and why did you choose to be straight?" And then they would begin to understand it's just so natural, it's just gotta be the way we are. So, I think it's the personal one-to-one contact that makes the biggest difference.

47:49
MA: Absolutely. You mentioned PFLAG today has changed a little bit, could you tell us about that? And also, what is your involvement today with PFLAG?

48:03
MB: Is there what?

48:04
MA: What is your involvement today with PFLAG, if any?

48:08
MB: I've gone to speak to their chapter a couple of times, but I no longer have wanted to be active. It has been a very nice, comfortable support group and it is mostly gay and transgender

[7] For more information on the history of the Ricketson GLBT Memorial Library, see http://lgbthistory.pages.roanoke.edu/library/.

folks themselves rather than family members. So the complexion of the group, I think, has been a little different than the original PFLAG emphasis as it's in the title, Families and Friends of Gays. So, they're a very, very nice group of people and they support each other very well. But I don't notice… I haven't heard that they do much outreach or community-wide education or that sort of thing. I think they've been content to focus on support whereas PFLAG was very strong on education and advocacy.

49:14
MA: Would you like to see more of that or do you think that's more helpful or do you think the situation now… or why do you think that has changed? Should there be more advocacy as well and support?

49:30
MB: Well you know, I personally don't want to be involved again. I have very low energy and physically getting around is a little more taxing. I don't see as much need for it. I would like the City of Roanoke to adopt formally a transgender non-bias or non-discriminating ordinance. Bill Bestpitch, one of the council members, is a friend of ours and goes to our church. I have asked him a couple of time "Bill, when are you going to do this?" and he says "well, Mary, we have to have some transgender folks come and ask us to do it." And, of course, that's tricky because if you are not "out" as a trans person, you risk, you have to "out" yourself in order to do it and then you have no guarantee that the city is going to adopt it so it hasn't happened. But I think it's not as crucial as it used to be.

50:45
MA: Speaking a little bit more in general terms, in what direction do you see the LGBTQ community going?

50:59
MB: Hmm… I really don't know. I think we are over the hump and I would have to ask them. It is more like the mopping up procedure, there will always be racial discrimination and I think we just have, certainly in the police force, we've been made to understand that is it still a very critical problem. And I think there may be some areas in which transgender people are feeling discriminated against but I am kind of out of touch to tell you. I have been content to lean back and let somebody else do it at this point.

51:47
MA: Do you think the hardest part is over? You know when you say "over the hump," you think it's definitely better now than it used to be during the years you were active?

51:57
MB: I think so. I think it is better in some parts of the country and in some cities like San Francisco and Provincetown and so forth. It is tougher in some other areas where there just has to be more trans folks coming out and doing things, breaking down some barriers. I see movements as kind of like a wedge, and the people who are way out in front here are generally seen as kooks and crazy people, they did things like chain themselves to the street barriers or whatever. But that

was necessary to get awareness of the problem, or like… what was the first riot in New York City?

52:52
MA: Stonewall?

52:53
MB: Stonewall! It is what I am trying to think of, which is now a museum. But it was a violent reaction at that point. They were seen as really strange people at that point. Then behind them come others who say, "no, these are my friends, my sons and daughters" and behind them comes a wider yet group, and when this wedge gets wide enough then we can pass legislation and then we still have to work on individual people who are not quite with it yet. Legislation gets passed when probably three quarters of the public are in favor of it nationally, but there is still that twenty-five percent that you can only work on it individually. You can't pass laws to change people's mind and hearts. It is an individual thing.

53:57
MA: What do you think would you like to… I guess a big message you would like to give to the next generation of activists? You have been an activist your whole life, so what would be something from your experience [that] you would like them to know?

54:20
MB: See, I think that the battles have been won for GLBT people. I think the next issue has got to be environmental. I think that we have got to start saving the planet. And I am personally interested in the right to die. I wish you didn't have to be within six months of death anyway. I wish people could die whenever they are ready. I guess I think it's almost time to move on to some more pressing issues. In terms of our environmental problems, gay issues are not so pressing.

55:18
MA: Well, thank you. Is there anything you would like to add? Maybe anything I've missed?

55:22
MB: Well, I would like to say my husband and I… first of all, I couldn't have done any of this without a very supportive husband. He is a wonderful person and he babysat [our] kids at all ages while I went running around the country, local meetings, country meetings, all over, you know. So he has been wonderful. It has opened up and broadened our lives and made life so much more fun, interesting, exciting. We are really indebted to our kid for opening up a lot of doors for us. But I think, also, at first I thought I was doing it for him; I was really doing it for me. I had a wonderful time, met a lot of wonderful people, got enough stuff printed and well known that it fed my ego very nicely [*laughs*]. I have met a lot of neat people in the process. One of the projects that national PFLAG did in conjunction with a conference in the D.C. area—we had our national conferences in different parts of the country—but when it was in D.C. the local chapter baked a bunch of apple pies and we all went in in groups of twos or threes and took an apple pie to every senator and said "gay is as American as apple pie" [*laughs*]. In the process we met John Warner, and Barney Frank, Virgil Goode, we talked to a couple times about gay issues. We were

there the last time the full AIDS Quilt was assembled on the mall in Washington. We looked for a quilt for the one… Adrian had a close friend in high school who was also gay and Tom had no quilt so we came home and made a quilt for Tom. We talked to his family first and then worked on his quilt, so that was fun to do. I rode up in an elevator one time with Ellen DeGeneres's mother and gave her one of my books [*laughs*]. She is a real sweet lady. Cher came to talk to one of our conferences, and I got to meet her and chat briefly. Oh, and one of the last big gay marches on Washington, this would have been fifteen years ago I guess, we got to speak from the platform [the Millennium March on Washington in 2000?]. But everybody had taken too long and we were very late in the day and people were leaving, but nevertheless we got to do our thing briefly up there on that platform. So we just had a lot of fun. It has just enriched our lives immeasurably. We are indebted to all these neat gay people.

58:46
MA: Do you think your son also grew throughout the process of learning more about his own identity, and how you as well as your husband learned about this process and how you both were very involved?

59:07
MB: He's been grateful to us but he is not at all politically inclined. He says, "I am no longer transsexual. I am just a guy and I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to be outed. I just want to live my life." So, he is now married to an Afro-American lady and I think "well, how much diversity can one kid bring to the family? Gay, trans, interracial!" [*laughs*] He is a great person, he's just very talented. He works fulltime for IBM in their computer department. Without any training, he just picked it all up on his own. He plays flute in a symphony on the west coast. He grows almost all their own vegetables, he does all the family cooking. He is just very talented, loving, smart, energetic, about as neat as they come.

1:00:09
MA: Absolutely!

1:00:13
MB: The other two kids are pretty nice, too. Our older son is also a computer person and our daughter has a Ph.D. in electrical engineering and leads a group at… it was IBM for years but then her group's been sold off to another company. She is a neat lady. I met her in Amsterdam in April and we went on a cruise up the Rhine River together. That was fun [*laughter*].

1:00:50
MA: Sounds wonderful.

1:00:52
MB: People say, "Oh, did you go alone Mary?" and I said, "no, I took my walker" [*laugher*]

1:01:00
MA: Well, thank you so much! I don't want to miss anything because this is a wonderful story, a whole life of stories to tell, but I think we covered…

1:01:16
MB: We covered a lot! We covered everything on my little list, I think.

1:01:23
MA: Again, thank you so much for sharing everything you've shared with us. We really appreciate it and I am sure the future will also appreciate it [*laughs*].

1:01:34
MB: Well, I appreciate your time and effort on doing this project. You've both been very nice to meet and to work with and we thank you.

1:01:44
MA: Likewise! Absolutely! Thank you so much.

1:01:49
MB: Sure!

[END]