

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project  
Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with Kathryn L. Beranich  
January 17, 2017**

Interviewer: Julia Greider  
Interviewee: Kathryn L. Beranich  
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Location: Roanoke College Library, Salem, VA  
Duration: 97:03 total

Transcribed by: Kerri Taylor

0:00= Childhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and schooling (1953 – early 1970s); studying telecasting at Milwaukee Area Technical College (1974-1976)  
1:44= Finding work in the television industry (c. 1976)  
3:40= Moving to Roanoke at the age of 23 (c. 1977) to work at WSL; waitressing at Macado's  
5:23= Looking for other lesbian women in Roanoke (late 1970s)  
6:36= A women's softball league in Salem (late 1970s); dating players on the softball team  
11:47= Taking a job at WDBJ-7 (1980)  
12:50= Getting into a car accident in Bedford County (1981); lesbian gatherings at Community Hospital while she recovered  
15:15= The early foundations of First Friday (a lesbian organization) in 1981  
16:46= Childhood in Milwaukee (1950s – 1960s)  
18:30= Attending various high schools (late 1960s / early 1970s), including Milwaukee Independent School; exploring a heterosexual relationship (early 1970s)  
22:56 = Involvement in women's theater, women's cooperatives, and the feminist movement in Milwaukee (mid-1970s); coming out as a lesbian  
25:46= Reflections on her family; relationships with mom and dad; her Slovenian heritage  
27:47= How she first realized she was a lesbian; coming out (early 1970s)  
30:24= Exposure to feminism  
32:00= Reflections on family and having a gay aunt  
37:45= Coming out to her family (1980s)  
39:42= The lesbian community (or lack thereof) in Roanoke in the late 1970s  
43:10= First Friday: origins; the Roanoke Valley Women's Retreats (1980s); publishing *Skip Two Periods*; internal dynamics and leadership  
49:58= First Friday demographics (race, age)  
51:10= First Friday and bisexual women  
52:28= First Friday and men  
53:44= First Friday activities: Fabulous February Fling; publishing *Skip Two Periods*  
57:38= The role of lesbian history (or herstory) for Kathryn and First Friday  
59:28= The Roanoke Valley Women's Retreats (1980s): activities; structure; the feeling at camp, and upon leaving

1:14:12= Struggles finding a location to hold the retreats  
1:15:19= Lesbian Herstory Archives  
1:17:05= Conflicts within First Friday  
1:18:40= First Friday meeting spaces  
1:20:26= The effect of the AIDS crisis on Kathryn (or lack thereof)  
1:22:15= Butch/femme lesbian culture; lesbian gender expressions  
1:27:47= Leaving Roanoke and First Friday  
1:29:55= Kathryn's life now

0:00

JG: All right, this is Julia Greider, and I am with Kathryn L. Beranich, in the Roanoke College Library on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017 for her oral history. So to start out, just tell me a little bit about when you were born and where you were born, and a little bit about your childhood.

0:21

KLB: Okay, I was born on Thanksgiving Day [*laughter*] in 1953. My mother was thrilled because she didn't have to eat my grandmother's dressing. I'm the oldest of five kids. We were raised kind of middle-middle class to lower-middle middle class. Raised Catholic, went to St. Sebastian's grade school. And a couple years of Catholic high school. Ultimately I dropped out of high school and went to a free school called Milwaukee Independent School which was formed by a handful of students from around the Milwaukee area and some educators from the University of Wisconsin.

So I went there for the last year and a half of my schooling and they had something worked out with the colleges that they would accept our graduates since we really weren't graduating, we were just leaving. So then I was a theatre major for about a year and a half, and realized, "Okay, I'm not gonna be an actress, this isn't going to work out," and decided I wanted to go into television production to help change the way women were portrayed on TV. So I signed up for the telecasting course at Milwaukee Area Technical College and I entered there in 1974. It was a two-year program.

I graduated with honors in 1976 from the telecasting program and while I was there I worked for the public station, which the school owned on a part time basis, as well as the local NBC affiliate. And every job that I've had, starting with those two, I was the first woman that they had hired in that position. And so not the first woman in the universe, or the world, or the state, or the country, but at that particular institution. And so it really set the stage for my career because that continued throughout my career, that I was always the first woman that they had hired in that role, so I was constantly proving myself and always having to be 150% rather than just 100%.

So I graduated in 1976, and I took a trip across the country interviewing at different stations and where I stopped on this trip was based on where I knew people, so I could stay for free. I

got an Amtrak pass and took the train. What I didn't know at the time was that nobody needed to hire somebody as green as I was for a director's job, which was what I wanted, and they didn't need to hire someone from out of state for a production assistant job, which I didn't really want anyway. So needless to say I had a great trip, but I never got a job from that. So next I sent out 75 resumes and for some reason I decided I wanted to live in the Southeast, so I sent out 75 resumes and got a call from a station in Roanoke, and they flew me down for an interview. It was WSLS, and I was offered the job. And so I went back to Milwaukee and packed up my stuff and moved down here.

I was 23 years old. I was a producer/director, just what I wanted to do. And there was one particular engineer at the station who was just aghast that they would bring a woman in, so he took a week's vacation my first week on the job. Then he came back, and of course the first week, I just observed, I didn't do anything. So, my first week on the job was his week back from vacation and that was... I got a good laugh out of that because he was just a jerk throughout my tenure there.

So, they didn't pay very well. I remember that I started out at \$7,200 a year, and in order to have enough money to live, I also took a job waitressing at a new restaurant in town that had just opened called Macado's. I would do that, I'd work the lunches, and then go change clothes, and go in and direct the 6 and 11 o'clock newscasts [*laughter*], and in between the newscasts we'd do other programming, so there would be church shows and various public service stuff. I did some commercials, but my favorite was doing these church shows that would air on Sundays and they would always send their youth director in to talk to me and try and get me to come to their church, and all I would have to say really was that I had been raised Catholic and that would usually shut them up [*laughter*]. So that was that.

I was also "out" as a lesbian, not out to the world—I, you know, was a practicing lesbian at the time, and had a really hard time finding women. There really weren't any bars at the time, and I remember I wrote a letter to a friend of mine in Detroit and I said, the only thing I know that I said about it was that, "I am really having trouble finding women, there's gotta be women around here." There was nothing salacious in it, there's nothing about sex, I mean nothing. That was basically what I said. Well, because I was 23, and really a dope, I wrote it on company stationery and the letter came back. For some reason my friend didn't get it and the letter was sent back, and so the upper office people opened it. The woman who saw was appalled and she left it in the women's bathroom so other people would see it, and I found this out years later, I had no idea. As hard as I was trying to not be a lesbian—well, not *not* be a lesbian, but to look straight [*laughter*] and act straight, and not have that come up, they already knew which kind of cracks me up.

6:35:

JG: So how did they respond to that?

6:36:

KLB: Well, because I didn't know that they knew, I couldn't tell. But I was friends with a reporter there, and she told me years later, that's how I found out. And so, even though we were friends, every now and then she was probably a little weird, because again, this was '77.

So, it happened sometime between '77 and '80 that that happened, but it didn't really affect anything. It finally came to me that oh, if I want to meet women, [go to a] softball field. So that's what I did is I found a women's softball [league] in Roanoke and they would play at Salem Field [Oakey's Field], and I went and I would take pictures and la la la and next thing you know I was dating the pitcher [*laughter*]. And then I ultimately met my best friend of many years, and she was dating a second baseman or something, I don't know. But we would sit on the hill at Salem Field and just get drunk and cheer and it was a great time, but it was all about just sitting and watching sports and most of the softball players were totally closeted, I mean I think they probably all were, actually. They were almost flaunting it to have their girlfriends come because then other players would think, "Oh, ah, she's a dyke." You know, but I didn't care, because here I was this Yankee coming down here and I just had a different attitude about it, you know, and I thought everybody should be out and as happy about being gay as I was.

And then there was also the bowling leagues, which I would sometimes go and watch them bowl. It was funny because I was talking about my pitcher girlfriend, we'll call her Dee. Dee owned a 1976 Cutlass Supreme—black. Loved that car, she loved that car, and it was the last year that they were allowed to make the big cars, so this was a big prize for her. We had very little in common and she was older, she was 30, and [*laughter*] nonetheless, we dated for a while, and I can remember one day we were in the car and she took my hand and sang along with the radio, "Three Times A Lady," and I thought "Oh my God, what has happened to me? Where am I? I ain't no lady!" [*laughter*]. It was pretty funny.

Anyway, that relationship didn't last, so then I started dating an outfielder. That lasted for a while, you know, maybe three years. Then, I got a crush on a different ball player and she was from Danville and I had gone to a tournament in Danville with my outfielder and I remember the moment when I saw this woman and it was like the world stopped. I mean I've never experienced that before or since, where everything went away except here was this woman running in from the field all dirty and dusty and stuff, and I was like, "Who is that?! I want to date someone like her!" And I didn't know how to make that happen. She was in Danville. And so I asked around and found out who she was, and then I was asked to do a show for Channel 10 about the Roanoke Park System. So I did my research and stuff, and I went around and I shot, cause at that point I was a one-woman band. I shot, I edited it, I wrote it, I, I directed it, that was it. Nobody usually was with me. In my research, I discovered that there was a very beautiful park in Danville [*laughter*], so I went to Danville for this shoot and I contacted her and I said, "Oh, I'm gonna be in Danville on this shoot, would you like to meet for lunch?" Well, because I was making \$7,200 a year, well, the next year I was making \$7,600 a year. When I left there, I was making \$8,100. I mean it was—that's unbelievable—I mean cost of living was less, but still. So I get down there, we meet for lunch and I don't have a cent. So I had to kind of cop to that, and she was stunned because she was a teacher and she didn't make much money

either, but she was like “Well, okay.” And nothing happened after that basically...and then... I don’t know how this goes... we finally got together.

But because of that show, the park show, the chief photographer at WDBJ-7 saw it and needed a photographer and they were like, “Wow, who shot that? It’s beautiful!” Thank you very much! And they contacted me and I had to make a decision if I wanted to move over to the “good station,” because at the time it was clear that WDBJ-7 was the best, for a lesser job, or stay at Channel 10, and I took the job and went over there and it was really fun because being a news photographer, you’re in the thick of it. There was a big murder trial for example, and Keith Humphry’s picture was on the front page of the paper talking to, trying to get a sound bite from the guy and you can see my arm holding the camera lens and I was like, “That’s me!” *[laughter]* It was great, and there were just lots of cool moments during that time.

So I started in September of 1980, and in January of 1981, on Super Bowl Sunday, I was coming back from a story at Smith Mountain Lake with a reporter, and had a really bad car accident. I plowed into a tree and took down a mailbox. It was on a country road in Bedford County. It was pretty bad. The reporter braced herself on the windshield and her arm got all cut up, and I kind of jammed on the floorboard with my left foot, as if that was going to stop anything *[laughter]*. But, my hipbone was destroyed, it just got slammed into my pelvis.

I was in the hospital for three months, and during that time, all of my buddies would come see me, so it would be like this big lesbian party in the hospital *[laughter]*. My aunt, who was a lesbian, and my favorite person in the world, was visiting from Arkansas once and she brought a case of champagne in. The next morning the nurses come in and I’m like hung over in the bed and there’s just empty champagne bottles everywhere, but we had had a really good time. My sister came to visit from Milwaukee, so she and my friends wheeled me out of the hospital into Elmwood Park, and Keith Humphry coming up again, he came to visit on his motorcycle, so I’ve got pictures of me lying on a gurney with a bunch of lesbians *[laughter]* ignoring me because Keith Humphry was there talking to me *[laughter]*, cause we weren’t out. So it was really hard because people from Channel 7 would come see me, you know, my lesbian friends would come see me. It was like the worlds would collide and I still wasn’t out, but it became apparent to people who got it, or who were kind of smart, but still it’s like 1981.

So after that, I was still off work for months and months and I was on crutches for a year or two. During that three-month period, I had three or four surgeries. It was a whole ordeal. And while we would all be visiting over my hospital bed, community started developing a lot—it was just a continuation of what was going on at the Taylor House<sup>1</sup> and everything. But there are some of us who really bonded in the hospital like that. That’s not where the genesis of First Friday was, but it certainly was a big part I think, like [Kathleen] Brehony had just started coming to Roanoke, and she was seeing one of my friends and they would come visit me a lot, and everything just started to coalesce there beyond the softball field or Taylor House, or whatever. So, when I got out of there was May of ’81, and then Barbara [omission], somebody

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<sup>1</sup> A restaurant in Salem where First Friday would often gather.

else, she's cool with me saying this, she turned fifty in November and that was really one of our first big events was Barbara's surprise fiftieth birthday party, and that's that. [laughter]

16:30

JG: So I'm just gonna backtrack a little bit.

16:32

KLB: Oh okay.

16:33

JG: Tell me a little bit more about growing up and what was your relationship like with your family? And how did you feel about school and how did you fit in? Stuff like that.

16:46

KLB: Well, I wasn't part of the... what I consider the in-group in grade school because I lived on one side of 55<sup>th</sup> Street and they all lived on the other side of it, so they were all like on 50<sup>th</sup> Street. There was just this neighborhood that a lot of the girls lived in and they were all really good friends, so it was not that they necessarily excluded me, but I just wasn't proximity-wise part of that. So I had a best friend who lived near me and I absolutely adored her. And she would do things like if I had a crush on a boy, she would get him to like her. She was horrible, she was just horrible, but I was blinded. There was nothing sexual about our friendship, or anything like that, and her parents actually couldn't stand me because her dad was the president of the John Birch Society in Milwaukee and, you know, I was not of the same economic class as they were, and I don't know, whatever.

So, when it came time for high school we went to different high schools, but a lot of the group of 50<sup>th</sup> Street girls ended up going to Divine Savior, where I was too, and I don't know, it was fun. I was class president. Not class president, home room president sophomore year and you know, I was doing okay, but I was not, you know, one of the main people. It was an all-girls school. I also was on financial aid, so I had to do things like clean the blackboards, the erasers and stuff, so I couldn't take the school bus, so I would have to take the city bus. So that kind of kept me separate from people, too. I mean I had friends, but it wasn't... high school was not that great for me.

Well after the two years—I think it probably had a lot to do with finances, but I'm not positive—but anyway, I left Divine Savior and was going to go to a public school, but I didn't want to go to the public school that I was supposed to go to cause it was kind of tougher, you know, greasers and stuff. So there was Wauwatosa East which was closer to me, but I lived on 59<sup>th</sup> Street and 60<sup>th</sup> Street was the deadline, was the cutoff. But, my original best friend was going there, so I totally wanted to go there. So I gave a fake address, a woman in our parish, who was obese, like literally obese, and so I would have to clean her kitchen and do whatever she told me to do in order to use her address. So after a semester of doing that, and it was just horrid, a postal deliverer saw my name on a piece of mail to this woman's address and said, "Wait a minute, she doesn't live here," and sent it back, and that clued the school in, so I was

going to get kicked out anyway, but I left to go to Milwaukee Independent School. And that was just a bunch of hippies. I mean, we were located in a number of places, but the first one was an old house, in sort of an industrial area, and we were fixing the house up. So we were scraping paint and doing stuff to make it habitable and the school was such that if I, say, wanted to take Spanish, there was rolodex of people who had volunteered to teach things so if I was looking for someone to teach Spanish, I would see if anybody else wanted to learn it and then we would set up a time. So it was, of the many things I didn't learn, the things that I did learn at that school were self-reliance and how to make things happen for yourself.

So the school moved around a little bit and we ended up close to downtown Milwaukee and for theatre class we called somebody who was at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, and a young actress who was there said, "Oh, I'll teach acting," and she came and she taught us and a few years later I was watching television and I saw her on there on a soap opera and she went on to a very illustrious career. Judith Light is her name. She's on *Transparent* now. She's had a huge career, and so that was pretty cool. I ran into her once in L.A. [Los Angeles] and introduced myself and said, "You probably don't remember me, but you're probably going to remember this: I went to M.I.S and you taught theatre there," and she lit up and her husband said, "Oh my gosh! She's told me all about this!" and it was a real cool moment. Anyway, I'm skipping ahead [*laughter*]. [At] that high school I wanted to continue in theatre and so we could take classes at the university, and so I did that, and met a guy named Wiley. I never really had any boyfriends, or dated any guys, and he was a freshman and I kind of got in with him and his friends. So he and I dated for a while, but because I was Catholic and frankly not into intercourse I don't think—I didn't know for sure, you know, I wouldn't go all the way, and so he turned to other people for that [*laughter*], and so the relationship ended. But it was kind of on and off for two or three years.

By that point I was in college and I was a member of a women's theatre group, and I was also working with some feminists in Milwaukee and we had a newsletter called *Amazon*. It was great. And it was clear that I was a lesbian, I mean, in my head. I just hadn't made that happen yet [*laughter*]. I was real involved with the political movement at the time, and so there was a lot [of things], like there was the food co-op and the babysitting co-op and the children's co-op. In the children's co-op were all these young families that provided day care for each other and they had a whole thing worked out. Well, I remember I went to one of their picnics and I was like the only one there who wasn't one of the parents and it was because the two women who did *Amazon* had kids, and anyways, it was all just one big happy little political group.

Eventually I came out during that period and then started going to school for telecasting. At that point I was living on Newhall [St.], that's all you'd have to say was "Newhall" because we had this very notorious lesbian upper flat. I came out in the second wave of it. I took over a bedroom of a woman who was moving to San Francisco, and she eventually had a baby with the turkey baster; she was one of the original lesbian moms via turkey baster [*laughter*]. And that was in 1976, so that was pretty cool. But anyways, I moved into Newhall and we just had parties, I mean it was what you do in college.

25:08

JG: So this was like a dorm? Or...?

25:11

KLB: No, no. It was, there was a street, Newhall Street, and this was just a duplex.

25:17

JG: Okay.

25:18

KLB: So we lived upstairs and just, you know, a lot of pot smoking, you know, drinking. Just being happy. Now, I was really the only student there though. So they'd all be partying and I'd be in my room studying because I was determined that I was gonna get the heck out of Milwaukee and I was gonna be a producer/director. And I did it [laughter]. I mean, yeah. And then I was here.

You asked me about my family... [pause]... I had a really beautiful mother. All she wanted was to be a mother, but she didn't really have mothering skills. So she had five kids, and I always felt like we were accessories. I was never the daughter she wanted. I mean I was not into wearing a lot of makeup, or you know, I didn't shave my armpits [laughter] and she was appalled [laughter]. Yeah, so we were not that close, for sure. I think I was closer to my dad. We're both Sagittarians and I just was always closer to him. But not like he'd show me how to fix a car. I could care less! You know, whereas I do know how to sew and stuff from my mom.

I'm Slovenian and the Slovenians weren't very active in Milwaukee, but the Croatians were. My mother got us, my sister and I, into the American Croatian Silver Strings Tamburitza Orchestra. And so from 7<sup>th</sup> grade through high school I played this Yugoslavian instrument and wore the costumes and sang the songs and did the dances and we performed all over. Then we were also in Plave Jadran, a Croatian dance group, and my mother was in that too. So despite the fact that she was doing it too, I was involved [laughter]. It was really a lot of fun actually. I really respect cultures that are trying to continue their cultural backgrounds while in this country, or elsewhere I guess.

27:40

JG: So when and how did you first realize you were a lesbian?

27:47

KLB: You know, I came out as a lesbian feminist. I mean, my feminism had a lot to do with when I came out, I think. I think I always would have come out, but I was just more aware of it and not as afraid of it as when I was in high school before I was really involved with feminism, like when I was 15 and 16. I had summer jobs in Illinois and in the suburbs as a mother's helper and so I would watch rich people's kids and live there and stuff, and I can remember going to, it's called Ravinia, and it's like Wolf Trap or something, but it's in the Chicago area, to see Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention and [laughter] this woman came up to me and she had a



rainbow pin on or something and asked me for a light, and I was mortified. So at 15 and 16, I was not at all comfortable really with any sexuality. I wasn't a sexual being at all, but that scared me. On the other hand, when I'd be babysitting in Milwaukee for families, I would, as soon as the kids were in bed, I'd go looking for the *Playboys* [magazine]. I didn't know why I liked looking at them [laughter] but they just made me feel good. It took me years to put that all together.

Yeah, so it really was when I was working on *Amazon* and in the Milwaukee Women's Theatre Group where it was, you know, I had a crush on one of the other members, but she was straight and stuff. There was a woman in Milwaukee who kind of as her duty, she felt it was her duty, she would bring out young lesbians who needed to be brought out and I was one notch on her belt. She was seeing somebody else [laughter], and I knew that and I knew that it wasn't going to go anywhere, but I was so in love with her at the time. And it wasn't a very happy experience. But, at least that was over with, you know. I don't know what year that was. I think I was about 20, so maybe '73, '72 or '73... I don't know.

30:21

JG: So how did you first get exposed to feminism then?

30:24

KLB: Oh, well, it was just happening around me, you know? At Milwaukee Independent School we would go to protests against the war, women's lib[eration], the gay rights movement was starting to happen, the Black Power movement. It was everywhere. I just was always a women's libber, you know? I mean in high school I had the pin with the fist, and the woman's [symbol] with the... and it just spoke to me. Again, it wasn't in reaction to my mom, but she was high femme, and I wasn't, and I was sort of repulsed by it and didn't want to be anything like her. And even when she would come to visit me in Roanoke and a bunch of us would be out to eat, and she would be flirting with the waiters... Oh God, it's just like, stop it! [laughter] But she needed that I guess. So then I came out and had a couple of little bitty relationships in Milwaukee, maybe because I knew that I was getting out of there, I don't know [laughter]. But, I mean my first real long-term relationship was with the Danville softball player and that lasted nine years.

32:00

JG: Wow. So, I think you mentioned that your aunt was gay?

32:02

KLB: Yeah, yeah!

32:04

JG: So how did that affect you?

32:05

KLB: Well that was interesting, because of who she was, she was an artist and she was bohemian. My mother's family was not your typical family, like the father left when my mom was three, so she was told her father had died when she was three. Her mother was struggling; she had three kids, and my mom was the youngest, so she had the kids in a home for children. She got a job there doing laundry, and so my mother would go down and visit her in the laundry room, sneak down and visit her so she could spend time with her mother. And when my mom was 14, my grandmother died. Then my mother went and lived with a friend of hers and finished high school, and then met my dad. This was in Fort Worth, Texas, and my dad was in the Air Force down there. So they met and got married when she was barely 18. She was 19 when she had me. I mean, she didn't know what the heck she was doing, and she was unmothered. So I understand it on an intellectual level, but still, emotionally it's hard.

Oh, so my aunt. I can remember when we were growing up one of my brothers or sisters called another one "queer" and none of us knew what that meant, but my mother totally overreacted, she said, "We do not use that word in this house! That is not a word we use!" Okay... well, again, it took me years to figure it out, but she was kind of protecting her older sister, who I met I think for the first time when I was about five, and, oh God I just loved her! And then didn't see her again until I was maybe in high school.

When I was 13 we took a train trip—she lived in Denver and we took a train out there, the whole family. And saw her there, and then later I visited her a couple of times, and one of those times I must have been right out of high school, or something, but I came to visit her and they had tickets to go see Bette Midler at Red Rocks, which was this, it's this great outdoor amphitheater in Colorado. It's just gorgeous. And they had an extra ticket, and I got to go, so everybody was gathered at my aunt's house. Two of the people who were there was a woman about my age, so like a teenager, and then this older woman who was her "coach" [laughter]. And I started putting it together then, and I wasn't out yet, but I was older now and kind of getting it. And we all went to this concert and it was just gay people, I mean it was just this huge gay concert and it was so much fun, but I was just exposed to all these gay men and you know, I was with a bunch of dykes and it was just great, but never talked about. And so that was when I finally started putting it together that my aunt was a lesbian, and so when I did come out I remember writing her a letter and saying, "Oh, la la la, this and that, I'm doing this, I'm doing that, oh and I came out and blah blah blah." And I just like buried it, buried the lead. Totally. We laughed about it since [laughter].

She passed away a couple years ago, but she was something else. She didn't identify... it was hard for her to say "lesbian" or anything because she was raised in Texas and she went to some Christian school college. I can't remember the name of it, and it was just not something that she was comfortable with talking about. Nor did she really identify with feminism. So that just killed me. I just wanted her—but because she was just this woman who took care of herself, she had her own business, she was a florist and an artist, and then she moved to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, which has this big gay community now, and lived there from the mid '70s until she died. And it was great because it was a lot of Vietnam War vets growing pot, and other artists, and people fixing up this little town that is so picturesque, and it's just beautiful. But

somewhere during that, I had that memory of my mom saying that about “queer” and realized, “God, she was protecting her sister,” who was not a part of lives, really. I mean, like I said growing up, I saw her maybe three times, because family wasn’t important to her because she didn’t have family, and I’m sure she created her own family, like we did in Roanoke. But, yeah, it was not part of what they knew how to do or be. She didn’t care that much about her sister or her sister’s kids.

37:45

JG: So do you think that helped when you came out to your mother and your family?

37:50

KLB: Well it was funny, cause when I came out to them, I had lived in Roanoke for a while and another friend of mine and I decided that we were both going to come out to our parents while we went home for Christmas. I don’t remember what year it was, but it was after my accident, I’m pretty sure. And so Christmas came and went. I remember I went into the kitchen and my mom and dad were in there, and I said, “There’s something I want to talk to you about,” and they said, “Okay.” And my mother was stirring some batter, which it’s not like she was Betty Crocker or anything, but at that particular time, she was making something, and I said, “I just want you know I’m gay!” [*Laughter, imitating sobbing*] And I just started sobbing and I thought, “What is the problem here?” because I wasn’t sorry. I was happy about it, but I was so scared and everything. My mom just started stirring faster and leaned in a little bit. My father said, “We knew.” I was like, “Oh!” [*laughter*] Well then I stayed for a couple more days. It was pretty funny. But that was sort of the end of it. Then I would always bring my girlfriends home and stuff like that, but it was sort of a non-event, and I felt like I could come out to them at that point because if they disowned me or if it just went south, I had a family here. And so I was safe and I didn’t need them anymore because I had my own [family], First Friday.

39:42

JG: So tell me more about the cultural difference you felt when you came here, like you mentioned that everyone was really closeted and that seemed sort of different to you?

39:44

KLB: Yeah, nobody talked about it. Nobody talked—like the softball players—nobody talked about being together or anything. I mean you knew that people were paired up, but it was so hidden. Especially if it was two members of the same team or something. And I was all like, “Hey! This is great, we’re lesbians, we’re the best! We’re superior.” But that wasn’t how people felt, and really my best friend, who we’ll call ‘A,’ she and I had that in common. I don’t know if she would have called herself a feminist at that point, but she certainly was. We were happy with who we were, you know? Now, I couldn’t come out at work. I still couldn’t do that because I was so afraid that I would be fired. You know, that would be the worst possible thing to happen, would be for me to lose my job, and that was sort of the only reason that I could come up with that I could lose my job.

So, yeah, the cultural difference, there was not just a group of lesbians who did other things, it was all—I later heard that there were some professors and stuff at Hollins [College] or wherever and they would get together, but I had no access to those people. So, the only people that I knew were these softball players, were all these jocks. They weren't feminist, they weren't comfortable with themselves, and yet they were working jobs. It was a time when women were entering the work field, and so like there was a police officer. I don't know what all these other people did, a lot of people just had blue collar jobs. But they had no affiliation or affinity to women's liberation, or the feminist movement.

When First Friday started getting together everybody was feminist, and it wasn't something that we talked about because First Friday wasn't a political organization at all, and that was okay, because I think its mere existence was political. That's the cultural difference, and also again the Yankee thing which didn't really mean much to me, and then I would hear things like "The War of Northern Aggression" and I'm like, "My God, these people are still fighting the Civil War," and for me it was like a paragraph in my history book in 5<sup>th</sup> grade; it meant nothing to me. So there were those kind of cultural differences. And I was loud and I didn't behave the way a lot of Southerners felt women should be. I wore dresses, and I loved just dressing up for work, and doing my thing.

43:10

JG: All right, so tell me about the beginning of First Friday.

43:15

KLB: Well... I get really confused about the very beginning of it because I was thinking that Taylor House was after we'd been doing stuff [*laughter*], but it wasn't. So really it was around at the Taylor House where we were getting together once a month, or more often, but definitely the first Friday of every month. Sometimes women would play music. It mostly was just a party, you know, there was always a lot of drinking going on too. When we had Barbara's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party and pulled it off, I mean it was just, it was a big event. We got people from all over the state because Barbara was so old she knew so many people, and so we just filled [the place]. People came from Richmond and Norfolk and probably the Outer Banks and Lynchburg. Anyway, all came, everybody dressed up. You didn't have to twist anybody's arms or anything. We had fancy invitations for it. We even had a fake birthday party for her the day before [*laughter*] so she wouldn't know that we were having this big surprise party for her.

Once we pulled this off with aplomb, we thought, "Hey, what else can we do?" So we would just have these ideas, and somebody had an idea about the retreat, and it was like, "Yeah, that would be fun!" And everybody had different skills that they brought to the table. It all just kind of worked together, whether it was theatrics, or cooking, or electrician, or directing people where to park. You know, I mean everybody took on different roles. It was a ton of work. Like I don't remember the retreats much because I was working the whole time, and I think you'd hear that from a lot of the organizers, and that's okay because this is what we wanted to do. We pulled off that first one and it was little and sweet, and, "Boy, let's do this again," and it just grew and grew. Word of mouth... we also sent out flyers and stuff and before

*Skip Two Periods* it was pretty much just a mailing list where we would send the retreat flyers to people, but then we started compiling this pretty big mailing list and decided, "We need a newsletter!" And so we did a newsletter! And again, everybody contributed what they could, from doing research to laying the paper out, because it was way before computer stuff, everything was done with an Exacto knife and wax and lining it up and all that. It was pretty [laughter] primitive you could say, but we did it and they looked good and [omits name] came up with a masthead that was beautiful, and all the little drawings in it. She added so much to the look of First Friday and how we presented ourselves to the world, and it was really important to us that we looked professional because we were.

We were very careful about all the details, and we always went out of our way when we would produce concerts or theatre or whatever to treat the artist as best as we possibly could. At that time there were a lot of musicians traveling around the country doing women's concerts and they would be thrown, like, "Okay, well there's a futon over there, and around the corner is a restaurant," you know, not treated like they were stars, and we treated them like they were stars. We were celebrating them and ourselves and our culture.

Yeah, how did First Friday start? It was conversations and, "Wouldn't it be fun if...," and then we just did it, you know? And we would have meetings throughout the week probably, but definitely once a week, on people's porches and living rooms and stuff, and there wasn't a lot of fighting or jacking for position or power plays, which was really cool. I mean there were some bossy people in it and I would be one of them, and Nancy would be another, and Brehony, I mean, no, Brehony's not bossy. But she's real smart and knows how to deliver a message well, whereas if I disagreed with something I would be on my feet and "ah!" But there wasn't a lot of that going on.

There were a couple of things, and I think that I was a big part of one of the issues that in the moment didn't seem that big of a deal, but came back to haunt us later. I can hear myself saying it, and that was in that retreat flyer, we were trying to decide about kids being there and stuff, and sometimes people wanted to bring their pets and stuff like that, so anyway I'm like, "No kids. No dogs." And that's what it said, I think [laughter]. It was "Sorry, no children, no pets," or something, but it was like people were mad about that, like mothers. Well, there weren't that many lesbian moms that we knew and like, who knew that lesbians had kids? [laughter] I mean it was just wrong. I was absolutely wrong and it never occurred to me and I don't like dogs, so [laughter] I don't take that back, but I'll take the kids back! Yeah, so other than that, pretty much at least in the first bunch of years, everything just worked out the way it was supposed to and we were all in it together and we were all exhausted and we all reveled in its success. And I think that it made money sometimes, and we didn't set out to make money, but we always just put it back into the next event.

49:58

JG: How would you describe the demographics of the group?

50:01

KLB: Uh white, white, and white. I could name the number of black women, African American women, that I can remember here, and I'm sure that they probably had their own social things that they did because there had to have been more black lesbians, I'm sure. But, you know, none of them were really involved in the organizing, like socially. I just saw some pictures from Barbara's birthday party and I was like, "Oh I forgot about her!" and then she was with another woman who looked a little familiar, but I wasn't sure. So I didn't know either of their names, but yeah, it was very white and pretty much we were all in our twenties or thirties. There might have been a couple women who were a little older, but, in terms of younger, you know, twenties-ish, like right out of college.

51:10

JG: So would you say that pretty much everyone identified as lesbian? Or were there bisexual women there as well?

51:25

KLB: No, because, well, I didn't want any bisexual women around. Now I've learned to accept them, but at that time when you had so much at risk, you couldn't get involved and fall in love with a bisexual woman because she wasn't risking anything. She could just go back to being with a guy, and you'd be left broken hearted. So it was an emotional investment, but it was also a commitment to taking care of each other and being there and I didn't want anybody wishy-washy or anything involved in this. And really there was not a bisexual movement as such, or bisexuals speaking up for themselves at that point. I think that came later. Like at that time it was probably just LG [lesbians and gay men] [*laughter*]. So yeah.

52:28

JG: What was the group's relationship with gay men, or men in general, or attitude towards them?

52:35

KLB: I personally was a social separatist. I've described myself like that forever. You know, if I had to be with men—which I did because I worked with men mostly, almost exclusively—I could handle it and do it and all that, but I didn't want to waste any of my social time or my off time being with men, nor did I want them infiltrating our group or our parties or our events. Even if they would come to a concert or something—get out of here! You have every other place to go, you know? Yeah, I was pretty adamant. I don't think that I represented everybody with that, a lot of people were nicer and more accepting and realized that we live in a [*laughter*] world full of both men and women, but back then you just kind of had to be protective and extreme.

53:44

JG: So tell me about the kinds of activities that First Friday did, other than the retreat I guess.

53:51

KLB: Yeah, well after Barbara's party we had so much fun, we decided to have more of these dances, these fancy dress balls. I can't remember when the first fling was, so we started doing them in February and it was First Friday's Fabulous February Fling [*laughter*] and we did them for years, all at the Roanoke County Women's Club. I would emcee it and bands would play, and we would have a dance contest, and it was just a load of fun. We would have a lot of food, and people came to expect a certain level of... entertainment isn't the right word, but just that the party was going to be really nice. There wasn't going to be a keg of beer. And pretty much I think it was an open bar, I think, but I don't remember. There was certainly alcohol, but I don't remember if we provided it or not. I know that that came up with retreats, whether we would provide free beer, because we did for a long time, and there were some people who were really adamantly against it, and I don't remember which way it went. I think at some point we did stop having it free, but still people brought it. We weren't saying "no liquor," just that First Friday was not going to provide it.

What else did we do? Well, the newsletter was a big thing because my outfielder and I laid it out for a long time and that was a huge undertaking. We also wrote a column for it and that was fun [*laughter*]. We were the "Condor Sisters," and we wrote just like a gossip column using first names or initials, I think we used initials, and it was just silly as it could be and never mean-spirited, but poking fun. Never meaning to be mean, but poking fun at people. You have to be able to laugh at yourself, and we tried to include that, just poking fun at ourselves in it as well. I was very influenced by a column in the *Village Voice*<sup>2</sup> that, I think it was, Michael Musto. I think he took it, there was another one and that guy died, then Michael Musto had one. I had been getting the *Village Voice* for years and years starting in Milwaukee, and I just really liked that column. I would go to it every time and I would read it along with all the other stuff, so I thought that that was very important for the paper. And that was my only contribution, was writing that column and then laying it out. But other people wrote thoughtful articles or researched articles or different things. There was a big article in one issue about Eleanor Roosevelt. And at the time, I had no clue that she was a lesbian or had a relationship with a woman. So that was kind of neat because if I didn't know, then there were other people who didn't know. I think Nancy [Kelly] wrote that. What else did we do? I mean, when I was in the hospital people were awesome, coming around and everything.

57:38

JG: Well going back to the Eleanor Roosevelt thing, actually, I did notice that there were a number of articles in *Skip Two Periods* about history and lesbians in history. And plus I know you guys had the Lesbian Herstory Archives<sup>3</sup> come to a retreat and everything, so I was just wondering how history played a part in the group or in *Skip Two Periods*, or how it was or was not present in your mind.

58:04

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<sup>2</sup> An alternative newsweekly particularly focused on the arts in New York City.

<sup>3</sup> A New York City-based archive of lesbian history founded in 1974.

KLB: Because we were pro-women and pro-lesbian we wanted to celebrate any lesbians and so coming up with historical figures, because we didn't have too many role models or examples or people that we could even disagree with but then [say], "Well, at least she was a lesbian" [laughter]. So I think it was a way of trying to educate people about our ancestors and also just interesting, you know, because there wasn't even women's studies then, you know, much less gay and lesbian studies. Or women's studies maybe were just starting to happen, I don't know, but it really was a way of making the newsletter more valuable. You can have a little gossip column [laughter], you can have the directions to the next First Friday party and whatever else we would have in there, but adding something historic like that gave it some meat I think.

59:24

JG: All right, so describe the retreats for me.

59:28

KLB: Mmm. We would get there early, maybe the day before. I can't remember, maybe we'd get there on Thursday night or something, but we would work our butts off all day Friday getting ready for it, and the food committee was one of the most important committees. So people would go and they would buy the food—I was never on a food committee [laughter], but I did enjoy it. So I know that they were very well organized and had people who were, well first they would come up with the menu and then people would go to buy the food and then there was all the food preparation. We also asked everybody who came to the retreats to volunteer. They could volunteer for all sort of things and certainly working in the kitchen was one of them, and so it wasn't just First Friday people cooking, it was campers too. And some campers loved it and that's what they did every year, or if there was somebody who was sort of by herself and didn't know what to do with herself and was maybe nervous, it was like, go to the kitchen, you know, there would be music playing and people chopping and dancing, and it was just a good time. So we had registration. People had to register in advance. I don't think that we necessarily had people come without registering, maybe we did, but we had people assigned to parking. So people would drive in and somebody would be there to greet them, tell them where to park, and then they would go to registration and just get whatever they needed, like the stuff to make their name tags. Have you ever seen one of the name tags?

1:01:06

JG: I don't think so.

1:01:07

KLB: They were little pieces of wood. Circles of wood from a branch with a hole in it drilled in, so tied with yarn, and people would just decorate it with their name. You would wear that all weekend. So you'd get your nametag situation. And then if you were tenting, find a place to camp, or we had a lot of buildings, whatever they were called, where you were assigned. There was always at least one heated building and the organizers got it, I mean that's just how it was [laughter]. We would all try to leave work, or take Friday off to get there, cause there were just trashcans to be put out, and we would try to sweep out all the cabins. You know just little



things, making sure that everything was taken care of, deciding where the Olympics was going to be and making sure sound systems worked.

And I always did an opening. The retreats opened with two things. First Kathy Brehony would come out and give a really soulful welcome to people, and she's great. She's a psychologist, and she's so well spoken and always made everybody feel like, "I'm where I'm supposed to be right now." It was just awesome, she didn't try to make jokes, she didn't try to do anything but give this nice welcome and appreciate what we have and what we're doing. Lovely. And then she would introduce Sister Mary Catherine and I would come out. And for Sister Mary Catherine I spelled Catherine with a C so it would be Sister MC—that's my own little thing, and every year I would do it, and I had the same outfit and it was really cobbled together [*laughter*]. It was not in any way a real nun's habit, but I had all the right pieces because I had been, you know, for ten years of schooling sitting there looking at a nun teaching me, so I did have the right shoes for sure. Usually there would be some point that I would just pull myself away from what was going on with registration and just the activities of getting ready and sort of sequester myself to write what I was going to say.

It was really my responsibility to give out any rules, like the one that people always remember is to trail strip your cigarette. And then because every year I would say it, I would have to come up with different ways of telling people how to do it. One year I had some dancers and they had giant cigarette butts that they would trail strip. And see, people were willing to do it, all I'd have to do is ask them, "Would you please be my dancers?" and, "Yeah!" [*laughter*] It was great. So it was things like that, to be respectful of each other, and not make a lot of noise, and when we leave it has to be clean, and all the boring stuff, but I would say it like I was some sexually deprived old nun. I was mad and angry. You know, it was fun.

I've had a lot of surgeries on my hip over the years, and one year I was on crutches for the retreat. This was after my first go-round, this was maybe five years in or something. And I just was not up for doing Sister Mary Catherine on crutches. I couldn't. And I started sort of putting it out there and seeing what people thought, and the backlash was incredible. Like clearly everybody wanted me to do it, but there was no way I could get them to understand that Sister Mary Catherine doesn't use—and I have the Canadian crutches which are like the polio crutches—you know, that's Kathryn, that's not Sister Mary Catherine. But I couldn't put weight on my leg for a year and it was really important for me to adhere to that. So I talked with some of my buddies and said, "So I was thinking, could you make something like a booth? Like the Wizard of Oz, but it would be Monster Mary Catherine," [*laughter*] and so it would be on stage and it would just be this giant nun head, and then the mouth would move. So I would be inside of it with a microphone doing the whole shebang, making it talk and all, and then at the end of it, somebody would come over and open it up like the Wizard of Oz and there I would be [*laughter*]. And then, so that's what we did, and I mean they made it, and it was just beautiful and maybe the eyes even lit up. I can't remember. We talked about that, I don't remember if it actually did. I have a picture of that [*Kathryn gets picture to show Julia*].

1:06:07

JG: I would love to see that.

1:06:11

KLB: It was just amazing. To me, that is just the best example of people being willing to do just anything. All I had to do was ask them.

1:06:26

JG: [*looking at picture*] Oh my goodness!

1:06:27

KLB: Look at that! Papier-mâché head, with a movable jaw.

1:06:34

JG: That is amazing!

1:06:35

KLB: Yeah, right? Yeah, here's Pam working on it.

1:06:37

JG: Wow!

1:06:38

KLB: Yeah, and Sue B. working on it.

1:06:38

JG: Wow [*laughter*].

1:06: 42

KLB: Yeah.

1:06:44

JG: Oh my gosh, okay, I want to see these after we're done! [*laughter*]

1:06:47

KLB: Okay. Yeah, this is who I interviewed while you were talking to Nancy.

1:06:50

JG: Okay [*laughter*].

1:06:51

KLB: Anyway, so people were always willing to do stuff. So they ripped the thing open and then two people came up and grabbed me by the elbows and carried me to the microphone stand and put me in place, and then I talked as me for a little bit. But it was great because it was a

way of almost saying goodbye to Sister Mary Catherine even though I may have done it again after that. I probably did. But that to me was the cherry on top [*laughter*].

So what else with the retreats? Well we always had a named performer—a big name performer—open. So Sister Mary Catherine would introduce the performer. So one year it was Kate Clinton<sup>4</sup>. So I introduced Kate Clinton and she came out on stage and said, “How about that Sister Mary Catherine?” And I whipped off my veil and went over and gave her a kiss! So inappropriate for a celebrity, but it was still a moment in time I’ll never forget. So then the performer would perform and often they would stay for the weekend, which was nice. Kate didn’t, but Split Britches<sup>5</sup> did, and different singers and comedians did.

At that first retreat we had the Herstory Archives. I don’t know if we also had a performance, I can’t remember. So that would be Friday night and then there was always food available on Friday evening so people could eat first. And then on Saturday we would have breakfast workshops, lunch, I think some workshops, and then the Olympics. And the Olympics were, again, just the pageantry that we pulled off was amazing. We would always have a theme. Like one year it was sports, and we just told everybody. The people who were in the parade were all the organizers so they could get recognition. You know like, as it were. So like for the sports thing, everybody just had to come wearing—and somebody showed up in a wetsuit and flippers. And somebody else had a kilt on and a hockey stick. I mean it was great. People just did it and... like, the one in the kilt, she worked for Ma Bell and she would go around to the different payphones, or else she was installing lines [*laughter*]. People who you wouldn’t expect to do something crazy like that. So that was really fun and I would do a commentary of what people were wearing and stuff just to fill in, and then it would climax with Nancy coming out dressed as either a goddess—a Greek goddess carrying the flame and lighting the torch at the end. Or one year the theme was water sports or something, so she did it as a mermaid and I made her a mermaid costume that was beautiful. She couldn’t walk in it [*laughter*], but it was really well done.

1:10:06

JG: Mermaids don’t need to walk [*laughter*].

1:10:07

KLB: No, no, no. And one year the theme was old TV shows, and so I just brought all these costume pieces because they just didn’t know what to do with them. So I dressed somebody up like *I Dream of Jeannie*, you know, just dressed people up like different heroines on television shows. Mary Tyler Moore would be somebody throwing her hat up in the air the whole time. You know, different shows that meant something to us, that we had grown up with or whatever. And so then after the parade the games would start, and so the games, I never really was part of making up the games, that wasn’t my strong suit [*laughter*]. That was really more pageantry. But they were fun, they were all funny and silly and sometimes they would require a

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<sup>4</sup> A lesbian comedian.

<sup>5</sup> A performance troupe focusing on lesbian and feminist issues.

bit of athletic ability, but pretty much not, they really were for everybody. I know that one of the first years we did a frying pan toss. And I had brought my big black skillet, and *[laughter]* this woman who I'm going to interview tomorrow who was a P.E. [physical education] teacher in Roanoke, she threw that thing so far and damn if the handle didn't break off and I didn't have a pan anymore, but it was still so funny. She kept that pan for years. I don't know if she still has it or not. But people would keep things like that.

And then we had the awards ceremony that night before the dance and the awards were as ridiculous as anything that we did. There was one that was pictures of Anita Bryant<sup>6</sup>, cause this was in the era of Anita Bryant, and there were autographed pictures of Anita Bryant *[laughter]*. I can't remember what that was for, and I don't have much of a memory for the prizes except that people cherished them. They just loved them and they kept them on their mirrors or wherever for years, and that was so cool, I mean it made all of our work so worth it that people had a good time and that they treasured this stuff.

So then after the awards ceremony there would be a dance. After the Olympics there was probably some downtime and then dinner, then the awards ceremony, and then a dance and the dance was a blast. You know, we would have some lights going *[laughter]*, and music. And then the next morning was breakfast and maybe some more workshops and just winding down, and we always took a group picture and so everybody would get together and, you know, put the cameras up, and run back into the picture, and you couldn't tell who anybody was because it was so little, but still it was cool. And then people just saying goodbye to each other, and you know, nobody wanted to really leave, it was always a long goodbye and a long drawn out leaving the camp, and we had to leave it, we wanted to leave it in better condition than we found it always just because that's who we were and we wanted to make sure that everything was nice and they couldn't throw us out for any other reason other than being lesbians *[laughter]*. And hopefully they wouldn't find out, but that was the retreat pretty much.

There was this period leaving the camp, like once you got on the highway again, or you'd pass a 7-Eleven and just go, "Oh my God, we're back in reality." And so this magical world where you were safe, where you were respected and loved and with people like you... poof was gone, and then you just were back to the same old thing, back to work the next day *[laughter]*. And you couldn't tell anybody what you did over the weekend, I mean you can [say], "I went camping," you know, unless you were out at work and nobody really was, so.

1:14:12

JG: So I think I remember that you had some struggles finding places to have the retreat. Can you tell me about that?

1:14:20

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<sup>6</sup> Anti-gay activist who became nationally known for speaking out against an anti-discrimination law in Dade County, Florida, in 1977.

KLB: I wasn't really involved with that. I mean I can share one story that, and if Nancy [Kelly] already told you this stop me, but another woman was going to go find a camp for us. Gail was going to go find a camp, and she found one and it was decided that we were just going to— because we had been kicked out of the first camp, after being there twice, for being lesbians— let's just tell them up front and then we won't have to deal with it. She went through the whole thing with the woman, "And la la, oh, and by the way we're a group of lesbians," and the woman said, "No." And just, we couldn't. And so we just moved on to the next camp. Talking to Gail, she said that now, thirty years later, "I know this woman." She's now in her 80s and she's a big supporter of gay and lesbian rights and stuff, but at that point in time there was no way. But I never was involved with the choosing of the camp.

1:15:19

JG: Let's see. Do you remember the representative from the Lesbian Herstory Archives coming?

1:15:28

KLB: Mmhmm.

1:15:29

JG: So what exactly did they do?

1:15:32

KLB: They had a slide show I remember, and I don't remember much of what was in the slide show and what they talked about, but it was cool. It was more of that history and it's like, oh, I didn't know that. Their whole reason for being there was to educate us about the archives, to stress the importance of saving stuff, and how we're creating our history now, and it's really important to save it, and to stress that they needed money [*laughter*]. And you know that's cool, we didn't really have any money to give them, but it was great because I think we all left there with an appreciation for the work they were doing and then later when a group of us went up to New York, some of them went and delivered a whole bunch of things, mostly *Skip Two Periods*, to the archives, which then your guy [Dr. Gregory Rosenthal] came across. So it's nice, it's nice to know that it's still being preserved and it's still there all these many years later. But that's about all I remember. I remember that I just thought that what they were doing was really cool, but of course you keep everything [*laughter*], just because I have files of stuff, you know. Not everybody necessarily does it, and now that I'm looking for things too, realizing that people, even if they had kept it, sometimes fire damage or just losing something in a move or flooding or whatever, that stuff gets ruined and it's gone.

1:17:05

JG: So what kinds of conflicts arose in First Friday?

1:17:12

KLB: [*Pause*] I don't recall many conflicts... [*pause*] We pretty much got along, I mean we would have, you know, little disagreements about things but it was never like two sides of something and people would... I don't remember any of that. I think later as more people started coming

in and the leadership changed a little there may have been a little bit more in the way of conflict, but we all pretty much got along. Once I remember at a [Fabulous February] Fling, somebody telling me that so and so is back there bad mouthing you, and I was like, “Fuck her, tell her to get up here and be the emcee.” You know [*laughter*], but it never came—I didn’t approach her and say—it was so stupid, cause I just thought, “Are you jealous? You can do it!” We were all working so hard to make it happen and welcomed people joining us, and so we certainly weren’t perfect. And I know that I wasn’t as sensitive as I have become later in life. But yeah, I don’t remember lots of conflicts.

1:18:39

JG: Well that’s good.

1:18:39

KLB: Yeah.

1:18:40

JG: So what were the gathering places that you used. I know you mentioned Taylor House.

1:18:15

KLB: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

1:18:53

JG: I think there was also the Cornerstone, is that right?

1:18:55

KLB: Yeah. The Cornerstone was, I think, it’s near 5<sup>th</sup> and Campbell or something. [*Editor’s note: it was the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Church.*]

1:18:59

JG: Oh, yeah.

1:19:00

KLB: And it was a church and at one point it was for sale or something and some women invested in it and opened it up as a bar. Well that was interesting because a lot of women wouldn’t go to it because they had been raised Baptist or whatever, and they would not go to a church to drink [*laughter*]. So there was one of those cultural differences. Really? And it was a beautiful space and we had some nice concerts there and stuff, so that was a place. When we produced Split Britches we rented [the] Roanoke College theatre. It was really lovely; it was a great place. People’s houses, you know... We had a surprise birthday party for Alice and that was downstairs at The Park, cause they have a downstairs bar, but we never really had meetings or gatherings or any real official First Friday things at The Park or at any bars. We would go to Macado’s and a bunch of people would go, but again, it wasn’t really necessarily a First Friday event, but it all kind of blended together. First Friday and your friends were all the same [*laughter*]. So yeah, then just different people’s houses for the parties.

1:20:26

JG: Were you aware of the AIDS crisis going on at that time? Or did that affect you in anyway?

1:20:37

KLB: It did not affect me in any way. It was interesting. This is how it affected me, cause in 1981 I was lying in a hospital getting blood transfusions and then hearing about this and wondering, "Oh..." But it was fine because we were in Roanoke, and Roanoke was pretty isolated. I lost one friend to AIDS way later, and I had worked with him, he was an anchorman here in town. And then he left and he was in D.C., and that's where he died. But I kind of lost touch with him and I had left Roanoke by then so it was in the '90s. But I personally did not... but I wasn't socializing with men, gay men, at all really and whereas some people who had lived here longer and they had friends, like my friend Alice, who was my best friend, she owned a T-shirt shop with a guy named Robert, and he was gay and they did a lot of stuff together. So she knew more people. She may have known people who had died of AIDS, but I did not, and I've often sort of marveled at that, that wow, that was like this huge plague, and it just, yeah, it didn't affect me.

1:22:15

JG: I'm jumping a little bit around now, but was butch/femme part of the First Friday culture at all or were you at all involved in butch/femme stuff?

1:22:25

KLB: It was not. I mean I think that there were probably some people who came to the retreat that might have been more into that. Like in recent years, where there's been a really healthy butch/femme culture developing among younger lesbians, and I've got a lot of friends in L.A. [Los Angeles] who are totally into it. I love it. I think that it's great, but at that time, those were old school lesbians. Those were like, you know, like butch dykes and their girlfriends who could pass. So when I was first coming out in Milwaukee at the bars, I would see these couples and I'd just giggle at them slow dancing to Barry White [laughter] at these little hole-in-the-wall lesbian bars. But that was not part of my... my pitcher [girlfriend] was probably pretty butch, but that wasn't part of the culture at all.

1:23:30

JG: So what were the markers of a lesbian at that time in your circle?

1:23:35

KLB: Yeah. You didn't really wear makeup, you didn't shave your legs, you didn't buy into Madison Avenue—the Madison Avenue woman—what they were trying to create or have created and continue to. You know, comfortable clothes. I mean I would dress up for work and I would have fun. I would wear heels and I would do whatever, but on off hours [laughter] you know, I wouldn't. What else? I mean our hair always sort of reflected what was going on in the bigger world. Like it was the '80s so everybody had big hair, you know? [laughter] But it wasn't necessarily lesbian big hair versus straight woman big hair. There weren't any things like pinky

rings or different things that had existed in other decades that was a clue, a signal. Yeah, I can't really think of anything.

1:24:50

JG: Yeah. Umm...

1:24:52

KLB: In Roanoke. I mean cause once you went to New York it was a whole different thing. A bunch of us went to New York. One of the things we did was we went to the WOW Café. It stood for Women One World and the Split Britches women had started that, that was their performance space, and was a gathering space and there, there was butch/femme going on and lots of leather jackets that people [wore], but that's just sort of [how it's] always been. But they were hipper. I mean, there was not a lot of style happening here [*laughter*].

1:25:33

JG: Were there other lesbian communities or gay communities in other parts of Southwest Virginia that you guys were interacting with?

1:25:43

KLB: No.

1:25:44

JG: Okay.

1:25:45

KLB: I mean I knew some women in Abingdon because we had moved down from Milwaukee at the same time and shared a U-Haul and stuff and I [*laughter*] dropped off their stuff outside of Abingdon in Nicholsville and then continued on, and in that little moment in time when I was there, I met a couple other lesbians who in fact gave me Alice's name. And that's how I met Alice because they told me, "Her name is Alice. She owns a t-shirt shop. Go. Introduce yourself." And I was so scared. I went to that store like four times before I ever walked in it, and then when I walked in it, you know, I looked at all the t-shirts [*laughter*]. And then, "Can I help you?" "Well actually...." And she'll tell the story. It's just ridiculous how nervous I was and scared. And I don't know what I was scared of. I think maybe it was that if this didn't work out, then I really didn't know any lesbians. I didn't have any way—this was my one shot at meeting somebody.

1:26:37

JG: So was she sort of your gateway to the lesbian community here?

1:26:42

KLB: Sort of. Yeah... yeah.

1:26:45



JG: She already knew people?

1:26:48

KLB: Yes, she did. Because she was a business person she was really busy with doing that and with the guy that she owned the company with. And it turned out that they lived around the corner from me in Old Southwest, which was pretty funny. I lived on Albemarle at the time. They were literally around the corner. And so they were silk-screening t-shirts, and they had a couple locations. So there was a lot of work and then, you know, we just went to softball games and met people [*laughter*]. But that was one crowd and as much fun as it was and as much as I would be in love with whoever I was seeing at the time, it wasn't First Friday. It wasn't a group of friends. I didn't stay friends with the softball players or anything.

1:27:47

JG: So have your experiences since you left First Friday, left Roanoke, changed the way that you look back on it at all?

1:28:03

KLB: Well, in one of those "you don't know what you've got till it's gone" kind of ways, because I've never been in a community like this. I have a great group of friends in LA because a woman that I had met in 1975 lives there, and I ran into her right when I moved back, and she and her partner have included me in their circle of friends, and so we celebrate holidays together and things like that. But they all lived in LA for a lot longer, and I notice that every now and then that it's just a different thing. They're all west-siders which is... [*laughter*] most of them are attractive. They could pass. They're not necessarily shouting out, "Hey, I'm a lesbian!" [*laughter*] I think that's great, you know. So that's the only community that I can think of, that I can compare to, and it's not the same. It's just not. So it certainly contributed to my feeling that I can do anything I want, and that I could call on these people whenever I needed to. I mean Nancy and I didn't talk to each other for thirty years until in October, and boom, I mean it's like we didn't skip a beat. It's so comfortable and it's so nice. You know, she just brought her scanner and she's scanning all these pictures for me for the doc[umentary]<sup>7</sup>. It's wonderful.

1:29:55

JG: All right, I know we've been talking for a while, but if you want to just give a brief summary of what you've done since you left Roanoke and what your life is like now?

1:30:08

KLB: Yeah. I left Roanoke to follow my girlfriend to Alabama, where she got a job teaching at the University of Alabama, and I ultimately landed a job in Montgomery working at Alabama Public Television. And so I would commute on the weekends, and then we broke up. I'm not going to go into those details, doesn't matter. We broke up and there I was in Alabama... Ahh! [*laughter*]. Even though I'd made some good friends there. So I started looking for work and

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of this oral history, Kathryn was in Roanoke with Nancy Kelly to gather material for a documentary on First Friday.

there was an opening in Norfolk and I applied for that, and badgered the guy till he hired me because Alice had moved there and Kathy Brehony moved there and I had a lot of friends in Norfolk. So I moved to Norfolk and worked there for a few years, and then finally followed my dream and moved to New York. But I was already in my 40s and it's sort of a younger women's town. I mean not really, not like LA, but I remember often wishing that I had been there sooner.

So I was working for Time Inc. New Media. I was the production manager for this little... it was called the News Exchange, and we were working on an interactive television project that took place in Orlando. And we provided all of the news stories and the anchor people and streamed it down to Orlando, and then that was the news portion of this experiment. And the experiment didn't work. There were a number of different companies trying things out and so when this failed, then I was out of a job again [*laughter*], and like, damn. Well it was really, that was the first time, I think, that I was laid off. Yeah. And so I had also been working with Dyke TV in New York, so I did some work for them, it's all volunteer, and I met a woman there and we were seeing each other, and then she moved to San Francisco. So when I got laid off it was December in New York and all I heard was, "Another beautiful day in San Francisco! Oh Kathryn, you should be here!" and stuff. And so I thought, what would be better? To be laid off in freezing New York in the winter or "another beautiful day in San Francisco" without a job? And I thought, I'll move to San Francisco! And packed up and moved and the relationship [*sigh*], did not work out, nor did San Francisco work for me.

Of all the places I've ever lived that didn't work out for me. There were no jobs for me even though I had all this experience, there was just not that much television happening. I got a job as a headhunter for software engineers... as if! And I would talk to them and say, "Oh, so where are you from? Oh, you're from Michigan? Well I'm from Wisconsin!" I mean like I could talk and talk, but I couldn't place anybody because I didn't know what the heck they did, a network engineer versus a software engineer, it was pretty funny.

So I visited some friends in LA and it was a no brainer. It was beautiful here—there—and television was everywhere. Ann, the artist for First Friday, was living out there then and the woman she was seeing worked for one of the cable networks and so she passed my resume around for me. So I had a bunch of interviews at this cable network and within two weeks I had a job and moved down there, and that was in June of '97. So this is my 20-year anniversary in a place that I never thought I would be.

So I worked for this cable network—E!, E! Entertainment Television. I worked for E! for thirteen years and rose through the ranks. I was a producer on True Hollywood Story, and then a supervising producer on the show and on other shows, and then I was Director of Production and then I was Executive Director of Production, and I worked on the Anna Nicole show. When Anna Nicole died I was the person they sent to the Bahamas for the funeral, I mean, I was close to her. I knew her, and all that. And then in 2009, when the economy was still a mess, NBC Universal was about to buy E and so they needed to look better on paper, so they laid fifty of us off. Then a month later they let fifty more people go. I was laid off from there in 2009 and in 2010 I got a job, a dopey little job at Santa Anita Race Track. Who knew they had a little

television division [*laughter*]. I was the production manager for a little group of us. We were making documentaries about horses or horse people or owners or trainers or tracks or whatever.

And then about four years later, there was another horse sports network that wanted to buy us out. And so they did and we were all laid off, and that was a couple of years ago, and so I've been laid off ever since. And now I'm 63 years old, nobody's gonna hire me, you know [*laughter*], even though I've got all this experience and I'm a hard worker, so instead I'm working on freelancing and I've gotten a couple freelance jobs doing editing and shooting and whatever and working on my passion project, which is a documentary about First Friday. So, I'm so pleased at what you guys are doing, and it really kickstarted it for me because I was so excited that you guys were actually recognizing us and like we existed and you appreciate that and it was so great, and I was high on that for about two weeks and then I went, "Wait a minute! This is my story," [*laughter*] and so I finally was doing this. It was something I meant to do for twenty years, before people die or whatever or get rid of more of their ephemera. I'm here. And so it worked out well with this and so I've interviewed about fifteen people now and I've got more to go. And then the editing starts and then that's when it's gonna be a lot of work.

1:36:48

JG: Yeah, well I think that's a pretty good place to end. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about that we skipped?

1:36:57

KLB: No. Just thank you [*laughter*]. Thank you so much for acknowledging us, it's great.

1:37:01

JG: Thank you so much for existing [*laughter*].

[END]