

**Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**  
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

**MARTHA SHELLEY**

Interviewed by

**KELLY ANDERSON**

October 12, 2003  
San Francisco, California

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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## Narrator

Martha Shelley (b. 1943) was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, in a progressive Jewish home. Her mother was an illegal immigrant and worked in garment factories; her father was a machinist and accounting clerk. Martha graduated from City College in 1965, did clerking and typesetting until the mid-'80s; and is now a writer and medical/legal researcher for disability cases. The civil rights and antiwar movements radicalized Martha; her feminist activism began in 1967 with the Daughters of Bilitis, in which she was president of the New York chapter. In the 1970s Martha was involved with Gay Liberation Front and Radicalesbians, *RAT* newspaper, producing lesbian feminist radio for WBAI, and running the Women's Press Collective. Her early political writings are well known ("Gay is Good" and "Notes of a Radical Lesbian") and are collected in anthologies such as *Sisterhood is Powerful*. Shelley is also the author of *Crossing the DMZ*, a collection of her poetry, and *Haggadah: A Celebration of Freedom*. Martha Shelley currently lives in Oakland, California.

## Interviewer

Kelly Anderson (b.1969) is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. History at the CUNY Graduate Center.

## Abstract

In this oral history Martha Shelley discusses her family background, sexual orientation and coming out, and her activism in the late 1960s and 1970s. The interview is particularly strong on the topics of gay liberation and lesbian feminism, including Radicalesbians, Gay Liberation Front, the Daughters of Bilitis, and the Women's Press Collective.

## Restrictions

None

## Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Four 60-minute tapes.

## Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kelly Anderson. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Martha Shelley. See attached appendix.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

## Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Shelley, Martha. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, October 12, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Martha Shelley, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, October 12, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

**Bibliography:** Shelley, Martha. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, October 12, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Martha Shelley, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, October 12, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted OCTOBER 12, 2003, with:

MARTHA SHELLEY  
San Francisco, CA

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: I think the sound is working. So, this is Kelly Anderson and Martha Shelley on October – do you know the date?

05:25

SHELLEY: It's on my watch.

ANDERSON: It is the Sunday of Columbus Day weekend, so I think that makes it the 12th, maybe

SHELLEY: The 10th? Yeah, the 12th.

ANDERSON: I think today is Sunday, October 12. We're in Martha's apartment in San Francisco, Shrader Street, that she is giving up today as of today or tomorrow? Right? When are you going to be living in Oakland full-time? I guess –

SHELLEY: I guess we're in it. We're in.

ANDERSON: I guess you're in, since there's no furniture left here, except for the stool I'm sitting on and the chair you're sitting in. So, let's start with – we're going to do this as sort of – as a chronology, because I want to get that – I don't want to just do your activism and although we'll focus mostly on that, I want to get a sense of your family background because I think as you've indicated, that that played an important role in shaping your politics.

SHELLEY: Right.

ANDERSON: So let's start by talking about your family, where your parents came from, where you guys lived, the Brooklyn that you – I believe it was Brooklyn that you grew up in.

SHELLEY: Yes.

1:18

ANDERSON: So why don't you start telling me a little bit about your folks?

SHELLEY: Okay. My mother was born in Nowy Dwor, Poland, and she – it was – I saw a picture of her once. It was in a book of the Jewish life in the shtetl and it was a slum – not a city kind of slum, but what you might call rural slum, clapboard houses made out of scrap boards put together, wooden sidewalks where there were sidewalks, mud in the streets. It was really poor. Nowadays, if you saw something like that, you'd think it was the third world, and it was, I guess. Her family left when she was seven, which was shortly after the First World War, and there was nothing to eat right after the war, because that's what happens. You know, the place was devastated, people don't have a chance to plant crops. So, her father decided, it's time to move on. There was an immigration quota to the United States, so they moved to Havana and she lived there until she was sixteen. Her father worked in various factories and they lived in poverty. And then she and her brother got on a boat and came to Florida as illegal immigrants. Then they made their way to New York City where an uncle of hers was living.

ANDERSON: So the parents stayed behind in Cuba?

SHELLEY: Yeah. And she went to work in sweatshops here, you know, sewing garments, and did that until she met my father. In order for her to be legal, she had to go back to Cuba and he had to sponsor her to come over as his bride-to-be and they got married. And then later on, she was able to sponsor her parents to come over. I still have my grandfather's union book from the Amalgamated Kosher Meat Cutter's union or whatever it was called. But it says, you know, "We workers being oppressed and Jewish workers being even more oppressed, we have therefore decided to form a union." It says that in Yiddish and in English. So my mother's side of the family were very clear about class consciousness. And I think my father's side, too, although I don't have any documentation of that.

My father was born in Brooklyn. His family came – well, his father was from Kishinev, where there was this huge pogrom in the latter part of the, no it was the early part of the twentieth century, and in order to save themselves, he took his brother and swam across the river, you know, just his brother with his arm around him. So he wanted out of there. He had been on a trip to Odessa where he met my grandmother and fell in love, and then he made his way to the United States by going through Germany, and there he lost his religion. He was a blond guy and he went to a synagogue and they thought he was a government spy because he didn't speak their brand of Yiddish. He spoke with a funny accent and he was blond. So they threw him out of the synagogue and he became very irreligious after that. Anyway, he came to the United States in 1910, sent – worked for a year, sent for my grandmother, they got married here, or maybe they got married over there, I don't

remember. And anyway, in 1912, a year after my grandmother arrived – no, I think she arrived – she must have arrived in 1910 and he came over a year before that – because then in 1911, my aunt Estelle was born, so there had to be some interval there, and my father was born with his twin brother in 1912. Okay, so.

My father had an eighth grade education, my mother didn't even have that, because in Cuba, you know, it was...and then he had to drop out in order to go to work during the Depression and help support the family.

ANDERSON: What did he do for work? Do you know?

SHELLEY: Uh. His first job was delivering packages for a supermarket. He worked as a doctor's assistant at one point. He worked as an auto mechanic in a garage. And then, eventually, during the Second World War, he got a job as a machinist or lathe operator in an ammunition plant. After the war, he got his GED and then was able to go to work as a clerk for the government, a bookkeeping clerk. Eventually he worked up his way up to the supervisor of the accounting clerks, and that was his job for most of his adult life.

ANDERSON: So, he wasn't a member of a union then? Or were they unionized?

SHELLEY: No, they weren't unionized. This was the federal government.

ANDERSON: Uh-huh. So the union politics comes from your mom's side.

SHELLEY: Well, my father was a radical during the Depression.

ANDERSON: Uh-huh, right, but the union –

SHELLEY: Yeah. I mean, they both taught me “Never cross a picket line.” That was like engraved in stone. And at one point, I was talking to my mother about politics and she said, “What do I know about politics? All I know is that every child should have enough to eat and every mother knows that.”

ANDERSON: Very politicized view your mother had at that.

SHELLEY: So, she was really clear. She – when she told me – now, remember, this was during the McCarthy period when she was telling me things, so they were very careful about what they told me – I don't think they ever were card-carrying members of a communist party, because I would've found – I think they would have let me know that, but I think they were definitely socialists. They were really pretty angry with the government during the depression, and I heard that from other relatives, but of

course, they never told me that directly. They were trying to keep me safe.

ANDERSON: So what – how do you feel like, when you say what they told you and what they didn't tell you? How do you feel like the McCarthy period censored what they let you in on, or-

SHELLEY: They just didn't talk about stuff. What they would say was things like, you know, the Republicans want to grab all for themselves and the Democrats let a little trickle down to the poor guy. The idea of voting for a Republican was anathema and I think I picked a lot up by osmosis or from other people. I remember once when I was a kid and we were staying in a bungalow in the Catskills. Now at that point, Americans were a lot more prosperous than we are today. We have a lot more in the way of gadgets-

ANDERSON: Now you're talking about the 40s? 50s?

SHELLEY: I'm talking about the early 50s. I'm talking about the McCarthy period. I mean, we were more prosperous because a working class guy like my father could support a wife and a couple of kids and there was enough to eat and my mother didn't have to go find a job. He could take out a loan which he did at the beginning of the summer for 2-300 dollars and pay 3 percent interest on it, and rent us a bungalow and then pay it off during the winter. And then, he would drive his wife and kids to the country and we'd spend the summer in the country, and we'd be next to a farm and have fresh milk and pick berries and stuff like that. Nobody does that anymore, you know, nobody can afford that anymore. Not – certainly not working class people who were living – my father would say every time the government publishes statistics about middle class and working class – middle class and poor – the poor and the rich, is "I'm always on the line between the poor- the dividing line between the poor and the middle class. I never get up to higher and I never fall to the lower." But nobody like that could afford to send his wife and kids to the country these days.

ANDERSON: Uh-hum. And what do you remember about that community in the Catskills? Is it a place you went to every summer?

SHELLEY: Different ones.

ANDERSON: Oh, it was different.

SHELLEY: But I remember the different people and what I was going to say – part of this – was that I remember going berry picking with an old woman, I guess she was old enough to be my grandmother, and she was not exactly cursing McCarthy because she wouldn't use curse words in

front of me, I think I was nine at the time, and she said, "It's Subversive, Subversive. Anything you say, they call you subversive." [laughs] So, people were really clear about that.

ANDERSON: Right, right. So do you feel like, well I guess it's jumping ahead a little bit, but did that impact your political activity then?

SHELLEY: Oh, yeah.

ANDERSON: Did you –

SHELLEY: Yeah, there were other things that people said that I don't remember, but it gave me an attitude. And the other thing that gave me an attitude was all the stuff about Hitler. Reading about the Holocaust and thinking about would I have had the courage, if I had been older and in Europe at the time, would I have had the courage, if I were not Jewish, to protect Jews? Would I have had the courage, if I were Jewish, to pick up a gun and fight? What would I have done? And the one thing that I was horrified of was the idea that I could have been a good German. That was, like, the worst thing.

ANDERSON: And that was a big motivator.

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: So it was something you talked about with your family as well? Do you remember?

SHELLEY: I don't – I never talked about it-

ANDERSON: -a conversation about the Holocaust at home?

SHELLEY: Oh, yeah, people talked about it some. They would point to somebody and say, "He was in the camps." I would see somebody had a tattoo on his arm, like, this one guy who married my mother's sister, they didn't last very long, and he was kind of whacked out and my father says, "Well, what can you expect? He was in the camps. It drove him crazy." Um, so the – even though people didn't talk in detail about what happened, they did give me enough information and I read enough on my own to have a pretty good understanding of what it was. Oh, and there was this other thing that my mother told me when we were talking about communism. She said that when she was a teenager, she used to go to dances in Havana at – there was the Jewish Community Center – she loved to dance, and there was the Communist Youth Group, so she would go to both dances. And there was this one boy that she really liked, she thought he was wonderful, he was handsome, and she said he was a communist and then after the – he went to Russia to help support



the revolution, and then during the purges Stalin killed him, so that disillusioned her with communism. And she didn't say specifically that she had been very sympathetic but she what she was saying was that communists don't like the Jews either, so.

ANDERSON: Right, right. So you would say the political affiliation would have been socialist, probably, not communist?

SHELLEY: Right. And when I was older, they sent me to summer camp and it was the Workman's Circle Summer Camp so all of the people they knew, all of her associations were people who had that kind of socialist background.

ANDERSON: Do you remember any incidences of people being fired, persecuted, or brought up before HUAC in your family or social circle?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: But probably a lot of fear in terms of the level of conversation?

SHELLEY: Right. Because nobody was that important. I mean, none of us had – nobody that my family knew had important jobs. They were all low-level clerks. Nobody was a schoolteacher. They didn't have college educations. They were just working class people.

ANDERSON: Right. So flying below the radar really.

SHELLEY: Yeah, I mean, they would have loved to have had a college education but they didn't.

ANDERSON: Um, so can you talk a little about –

SHELLEY: Oh, and there was a loyalty oath. I remember hearing about all these teachers being forced to take loyalty oaths and stuff. [laughs]. My first political act in junior high school. There were kids who were having fights with water guns, so the principal sent around a note that everybody had to sign, we all had to sign a little paper saying that you understood the rules prohibited kids from bringing in water guns. And I took it into my seventh grade head that this was kind of like a loyalty oath. I says, "I've never been in a fight. I have never brought a water gun to school. I have no intention of bringing a water gun to school and I think this is stupid and I'm not going to sign." [laughs] So they hauled me down to the principal's office and made me sign it. They put a lot of pressure on me.

ANDERSON: Yeah. You were in the seventh grade. What were you going to do?

SHELLEY: And I don't think - they were threatening to haul my parents in there.

ANDERSON: So, your mom was not working at the time when you were growing up?

SHELLEY: No, see – OK, she was taking care of me and my sister. Then she was taking care of my cousin, her nephew, because her – one of her sisters was somewhat retarded and couldn't deal with the kids that she had, so she raised him and then my – her parents got sick. So she was responsible for taking care of them. So she had way too much to do to go get a job and it was only after her parents died and those kids were grown that she went back to the workforce. And what she did – she was having a really hard time with math. She tried to go to night school and stuff. So what she ended up doing was saying that she had finished high school in Havana, which was a lie, and that the records were lost after Castro took over and we couldn't write to them because we couldn't communicate with the Castro regime, and so she couldn't get a copy of her diploma. And they accepted that [laughs] and she ended up being a time keeper in the welfare office, working in the – and she was happy. She loved it.

ANDERSON: Your mom liked working.

SHELLEY: Uh-huh. You know, she was hanging out with other adult people during the day and not having to take care of elderly sick parents and crabby kids.

ANDERSON: Yep. So you all lived in Brooklyn?

SHELLEY: We lived in Brooklyn until I got into high school.

17:05
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ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: What happened was, I think I was the only kid in Brooklyn that year who passed the test for the Bronx High School of Science and for the first year, I took – I commuted and it was miserable. I hated it. It was an hour and a half each way and I didn't know anybody and I was – you know, a teenager. So, my family applied to the – for a housing project and they got into what was called a middle income housing project.

ANDERSON: Was it the Mitchell-Lama program?

SHELLEY: I don't know. But I know that in New York City at the time, there were the low income housing projects which were mostly filled with welfare recipients and predominantly black, and there were the middle income housing projects which were filled with working poor-

ANDERSON: Mostly Jews, too. Right?

SHELLEY: No, Jews, Italians, some blacks.

ANDERSON: Okay. So that was more integrated –

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: And that was up near the high school in the Bronx?

SHELLEY: That was in – that was the Marble Hill housing projects in the northwest part of the Bronx. It was – are you familiar with the subway system in New York? You get off at 225<sup>th</sup> street. That was where it was on – I can't remember which line, but it was the furthest west of the subway lines.

ANDERSON: So how did you like going from Brooklyn to the Bronx?

SHELLEY: School was better for me that year, a little better. I didn't have that much – I missed the people that I knew, but I had lost touch with a lot of friends because I spent so much time on the subway the year before. I was still having a lot of psychological problems from the transition. Um, I did not like the housing project. I would look at it and think, it's like a beehive for worker bees, and you go in there, you work and you live in this little cell. We were on the eighth floor and one of my household jobs was to wash the windows and there were times I thought of throwing myself out. I was very miserable. I didn't know that I was gay at that point. I didn't know what was going on with me. I didn't fit in with the other kids. I did not at all understand what the other girls were up to and why they behaved the way they did. I remember one specific incident when this one kid – he was the guy most likely to end up in school in our housing project. His name was Joey Gonzalez and he was handsome and everybody – he was very handsome. And all of the girls squealed [laughs] over Joey Gonzalez. Well, one evening, he was riding his bicycle around the central plaza in the project and all of us teenagers were hanging out, and he would race his bicycle up to some girl and slap her in the behind and there was little concrete pyramid of – like a step pyramid, and they would jump up on the pyramid to get away, and everybody, I guess - it was flirting, but I didn't understand that. I thought, why are these people letting him do this? So then he went after me, and I stood my ground and when he came close to me, I grabbed the handlebars and threw him to the ground. And the people were just staring at me like I was the weirdest thing going.

ANDERSON: Did he retaliate?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

SHELLEY: And this one kid, Lenny the stutterer, started to admire me, and I swear, Lenny must have grown up to be gay. Lenny really liked me after that. [laughs]

ANDERSON: But when – but the not fitting in started when – your memories of that are in the Bronx, in that housing project, and not before it? But is that-

SHELLEY: Oh, before also.

ANDERSON: Oh, before.

SHELLEY: Hey, not fitting in started when I was a kid in elementary school. It started when I was the brightest kid in the class and – the weirdo. I mean, the other girls would want to play with dolls and I would want to play Captain Video Space Commander.

ANDERSON: So did you find that you had more boyfriends?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: -male friends as a child.

SHELLEY: No. I was a loner.

ANDERSON: You just didn't fit in with either side.

SHELLEY: Right. because the boys were, you know, bullies, and the girls were interested in – I mean, in – okay, when it was time to draw, and we'd have our little crayons, the girls would draw pictures of women in bridal dresses, and there was a standard picture and it was all like, there was this heart that came to a point here, you've probably seen these drawings-

ANDERSON: I don't know.

SHELLEY: Okay, so here's the heart and that's the bosom and then there's two thin things here with sort of fingers at the end. Then there was this big bell-shaped thing and that's the bottom, and there were these two pointy feet at the bottom and sort of a U, that was the face, and some globs of yellow hair. So there were all these blond brides. And every girl drew the same picture. What was I doing? I was drawing pictures of – undersea pictures that were octopuses and tropical fishes and stuff. Or I'd draw desert scenes with cactuses and birds and I was just different.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and it became more acute as you became more of a teenager, in terms of the gender issues and –

SHELLEY: Right. And the boys would draw pictures of airplanes, fighter planes, shooting bullets, so there was a very clear division between the boys and the girls and what they drew. And then there was me.

ANDERSON: And you were alone in that. You didn't have other like-minded outsider types that – except maybe Lenny the stutterer.

SHELLEY: That was in high school. But in elementary school was those - when we drew those pictures. And then, ah, when I got to middle school, I found a friend and a group. Because what happened, they skipped me a grade, and I was in the group of kids who had skipped a grade and we found – we had friends, and for the first time I had a group of friends. One of them was Lynn Rutledge. I wished to God I knew where to find her. She was the daughter of the math teacher. I was in love with her. I did not know that I was in love with her. I didn't understand what it meant, but I was just entering puberty. And I remember one day, we had to – we were in class and sat together in every class except for math class because I had her mother as a teacher and she had to go to a different math class. So this was in the sixth grade and she was just to about to leave and go to the other math class, and she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, and I went into – my skin was aflame. I did not want to wash my face. How old are you in sixth grade? I don't remember.

23:10

ANDERSON: 11.

SHELLEY: 11, something like that. And that's – you know. And then I remember one night, she came over to my house and visited and we were sitting and watching TV and holding hands and she was rubbing my knuckles and it was like – oh, I didn't want that ever to end.

ANDERSON: Did you know what it was?

SHELLEY: I didn't know that there was such a thing as a lesbian.

ANDERSON: You didn't know what it was.

SHELLEY: I had no idea.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Until when, do you think?

SHELLEY: It was only when I got to be 16 or thereabouts I began to understand that these, that there was such a thing and that this existed.

ANDERSON: How did you begin to know that? I mean, is it something you read?

SHELLEY: It must have been something I read because what does a loner do? Read. At least, a loner like me. I read voraciously. I haunted used bookstores. Anytime there was a bookstore I was there. That's where I spent my allowance. And then I remember discovering those trash novels, and I would read this stuff. And I remember going to the library and reading the psychology – the dreadful psychology stuff. I didn't really know for sure. I thought, well, maybe I'm bisexual. I didn't know, because when I did kiss boys, it turned me on. And I would have dates with boys and hang out in the movies and you know, we'd kiss and stuff and it was physically exciting. So I was confused.

ANDERSON: Yeah, so, but you were starting to piece together all of that at 16 years old.

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: In terms of the literature and seeking out and trying to figure out why you were an outsider.

SHELLEY: Right. It didn't – I knew that I was an outsider partly because of being brighter than most of the kids in elementary school. But that didn't quite – that wasn't what was happening in high school. In junior high, the gang I hung out with were all, they were all interested in things like that. We used to go to Alan Silverman's house and Alan Silverman – the family actually owned a house. In the basement, they had little animals in cages, you know, rats and hamsters and stuff, and the older brother who was in college was a chemistry major so there was all this chemicals and we were going to build a rocket and send it to the moon. So we did make gunpowder. We used this guy's chemistry set and we made gunpowder. But we didn't know that you had to compress it in order for it to explode. So we wrapped it in tissue paper, like bathroom tissue, made a rocket out of aluminum foil, put the tissue paper with the gunpowder in it and set fire to it. It burned but it didn't explode.

ANDERSON: Thank God. [laughs]

SHELLEY: But I was the one who found the formula for gunpowder. My father had a book of – a chemistry book that God knows where he got it. He was another book collector, and I found the formula. I thought, Ah-hah. [laughs] And Alan's older brother had these chemicals in his house. So there was him, there was Alan Warshawsky who turned out to be gay. There was Joseph Amoroso who turned out to be gay. And Melinda Felder, also. I mean this was our gang.

ANDERSON: Who turned out to be gay as well?

- SHELLEY: Yeah. Four of us out of that junior high school class turned out to be gay, and we hung around with each other. And Lynn – I don't know whatever happened to Lynn – I have no idea. And Alan Silverman, I think ended up being straight.
- ANDERSON: But then this was not your peer group?
- SHELLEY: This was my peer group at –
- ANDERSON: At that time, but then by the time you got to high school, you had gone to Bronx Science and so you were-
- SHELLEY: I didn't have a peer group anymore. I mean, there were all these other bright kids. At that point, Bronx Science was probably 98 percent Jewish whose parents were all neurotic pushers and apparently what happened, there were an awful lot of attempted suicides and so, they hired this school psychologist and the teachers were instructed to keep an eye out for kids who looked like they were heading in that direction. And I was picked out as – you know, they sent me to therapy, because I would sit there and look out the window and not pay attention in trigonometry class and I was pretty depressed. And that probably saved my life.
- ANDERSON: The therapy.
- SHELLEY: Yeah. I mean, they – it was later on that I got involved sexually. But the therapy, at least, there was somebody to talk to about my feelings.
- ANDERSON: Right. And have you – do you remember how that therapist responded to your questions about sexuality or your feelings about that? Did you talk about that?
- SHELLEY: Oh, yes. She said that I should – I remember, I started being sexually active and she said that I should masturbate and wait until marriage to be sexual, you know. But that – you know, she was an employee. This was the Jewish Family Service. She was an elderly immigrant woman. And what was she supposed to tell me?
- ANDERSON: And that was the prevailing wisdom at the time, it would have been highly-
- SHELLEY: It still is.
- ANDERSON: -unusual for you to have found somebody who gave you different information.
- SHELLEY: Oh, yeah. It still is. What are you going to tell an underaged kid?

ANDERSON: Yeah. Your parents – what kind of sense did they have of you? Do you remember? In terms of you not being so girlish or struggling with depression?

SHELLEY: My mother would nag me to do my hair up or make myself more pretty and so on and so forth. Do like my sister. Why I can't do this? Why can't I do that? She constantly nagged me about stuff like that. And then she would say, "I wish this was the old country, I would've arranged a marriage for you when you were 12." And of course, I was thinking, thank God it's not the old country. And my father was – his attitude was anything I wanted to do was fine with him. Many years later, when I came out to him, and he said, "So what else is new? I knew that already." And I says, well, I thought I was going to surprise him. And I says, "How did you know?" And he said, "Your poems, your drawings."

ANDERSON: Had you shared those with him?

SHELLEY: No. But he knew. They were just lying – they were around the house. I would post – put my pictures on my wall in my bedroom. And he says, "Just don't tell your mom." And when I did tell her, I felt I had to because I was becoming a public activist, she of course blamed him, which I'm sure is why he didn't want me to tell her. She blamed my sister. She would carry on, "What did I do wrong?" etc. Very traditional in a lot of ways.

ANDERSON: Did that change over time for her?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: Never did?

SHELLEY: Never did. When I was 31 she died suddenly so she never did have a chance to join PFLAG or you know, the culture hadn't changed to the point where she could have – it could have made a difference for her.

ANDERSON: Yeah. And your dad it seems continued to be positive and supportive?

SHELLEY: Yeah. He said he didn't understand it but, you know. He says, "I don't understand it. I like girls." And I said, "Well, so do I." [laughs]

ANDERSON: So what turned it around for you then?

31:50
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SHELLEY: Which?

ANDERSON: Well, the sense of isolation, the depression, I mean, was it going into college? Moving out of finding a niche in another way?



SHELLEY: Boy.

ANDERSON: Where did you go from there?

SHELLEY: All right. In my junior year in high school, I met – I made friends, I found a group. There was Judy Leiberman, Chip Delaney who later became Samuel Delaney, the science fiction writer, I mean that was his birth name, we all called him Chip because he was Samuel Delaney Jr. And there were a couple of other people – I don't know what happened to them. And of course, Samuel Delaney was gay. And what happened was I joined a creative writing class, so I was able to write about stuff and talk to other kids who were interested in writing, because at that point, I think I realized that science didn't interest me that much. It interested me but it didn't interest me as a profession. I still read a lot of science, but I wouldn't be interested in doing that kind of work on a daily basis. And I found these other people who were interested in writing, in literature, and we'd hang out together at lunch table and we'd go out for pizza afterwards, and then I started to have friends. I had a group again. So that made a big difference. And I was also of course, like all kids that age, thinking about sex. And then I got into college. I went to – I was 16 when I entered college.

ANDERSON: Because you'd skipped a grade.

SHELLEY: I'd – well, okay, I started elementary school half a year early because I was born the end of December, so I started at 4-1/2 rather than 5. Then – and that was when I entered kindergarten. And then I skipped a grade, so that when I entered college, I was 16-1/2. And too young, really, to be living away from home or have any desire to. So I ended up at City College and I was commuting.

ANDERSON: And stayed home.

SHELLEY: Right. Then I started having sexual relations. First with this guy, because I wanted to find out what this thing was that I'd read about. So I ended up having sex with this guy Tony in the back seat of a car at a drive in movie. It was totally nothing. Except that I had lost my virginity. OK, so that's what this is. And of course, I didn't look any different. Nobody noticed any difference, and that was the end of that. He wanted to continue having relations but I dumped him right after that.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Crossed it off your list. OK. Done that.

SHELLEY: Right. Then, I had an affair with a guy named Patrick. Well, I was dating this boy that my mother really liked, Eli. Eli was a nice Jewish

momma's boy who was going to be a paleontologist. I thought he was a slob. He played the piano. He played Yiddish songs. He was every mother's – every Jewish mother's darling that they would want their daughter to get married to. I found him repulsive. I hope- I hope he forgives me because I dumped in a horrible way. [laughs] I hope he turned – I hope he has a good life somewhere. But what happened was I started a judo class. It was the first all-women's judo class in New York. And there were all of these women – little did I know that half of them were lesbians because I was 17. You were supposed to be 18 and I lied to get in. [laughs]

ANDERSON: Following your mother's example. [laughs]

SHELLEY: Well, I desperately - you see, my mother – I wanted to leave home. In my guts. I knew that. I hadn't – if somebody had asked me, I wouldn't have said, "Yeah, I want to leave home." Because I really wasn't ready to articulate all of that. But what I said to my mother was, "I really need to know how to protect myself in New York." And what my parents had been telling me is it's not safe for girls to live on their own. Put two and two together and I saw this little ad for the judo class and I thought, this is the answer. And so I joined the class and there I am, wrestling around with these women.

ANDERSON: Was it downtown? Do you remember where it was?

SHELLEY: It was in the YMCA. And that was a big deal, too, because it was the Young Men's Christian Assoc- no, it was Young Women's Christian Association on 51<sup>st</sup> Street. And so, I was kind of entering into unknown territory there and worried that they might try to convert me which, of course, they did not, but what did I know? I mean, this was a new part of the world to me. And there was this teacher who I immediately developed a crush on, and there were all these other women, and we were wrestling with each other. And as it turned out, one of the women was at City College.

ANDERSON: Oh, a teacher or a student?

SHELLEY: No, she was a student. She was five years older than me. This is a very interesting story and you will get the end of it as we proceed.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: She had – she came from an abusive family. Her father was an alcoholic and an abuser. I don't know the total extent of the abuse but I can pretty much guess at some of the stuff that happened. I'm pretty sure he was a wife beater and I'm pretty sure he abused her sexually, too. I mean, abused my girlfriend. Anyway, as it turned out, she was at City College

so we used to hang out on campus together, and we rode home on the subway together. She would get off in upper Manhattan and I would go all the way to the Bronx. And so we got to talking about all of the things that you talked about when you were college students in those days. Existentialism and Buddhism and whatever. She had left home, got married directly out of high school to get away from that family, and her husband did his military service and so she was stationed – they were stationed in Missouri, and she was an Army wife for a few years. Then they came back to New York and she enrolled at college, wanting to finish her education. So that was why she was five years older than me and in college. She was not happy with her marriage and she started having an affair with some guy named Dana, who apparently wasn't much of a lover.

At the same time, I started having an affair with Patrick Fitzgerald, somebody who my Jewish mother's heart would've burst over. But I met him at a party, and he was gorgeous. He was very handsome, green eyed, etc. I later found out that he was living on his own, he got arrested for shoplifting and did 30 days or something. So I was taking care of his apartment and my girlfriend Louva moved out from her husband and moved into that apartment while Patrick was in jail. But before that happened, she and I had our first sexual relations with each other. She was – her husband was working as a civil engineer and he would get up at 5 in the morning and go to the job site, and then he'd come home and crash at the end of the day. She invited me over for dinner one evening. He comes home, he crashes, he's sound asleep, and we make love on the living room floor. And that was – I mean, I knew when I kissed her, that this was totally different from kissing boys. That the intensity of the feeling was so different, and I went home, and I thought, I'm a lesbian. This is what it is. And I knew it. It was like, I had just been given a vision of my destiny. And I called her the next day and she said, "Oh, it wasn't that big a deal." You know, "I don't know yet for sure what I am and don't make such a big fuss over it." She wanted to continue having relations but I don't think she wanted that label on it.

40:25

So, she encouraged me to leave home, which I did. I was working during the summer and I decided to switch to night school and I rented an apartment in Brooklyn which was not too far away from where I was working. Because my father had gotten me a job with the government as a clerk typist. And I would talk to her on the phone and we had this, you know, code, and I would pretend I was talking to George, or had a boyfriend named George, and this one woman who was in our typing pool, Teresa, one day picked up the extension phone and she turned white. She heard me talking to George. And then she came over to me and said, "Don't let anybody else know. Be careful." As it turned out, she had gotten pregnant before marriage and her family had arranged an abortion and she currently had a boyfriend and she was afraid of getting pregnant again. So I took her to the Margaret Sanger Clinic to get her contraceptives. So I saved her ass, she protected my ass.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Risky, risky business at that time.

SHELLEY: The one thing she was terrified was that she could get pregnant again and her family had covered it all up and of course, I had a security clearance. I mean, to type invoices for the Navy, you had to have a security clearance and say that you had not been a member of the Ukrainian People's whatever organization or the Nazi party, or you know, a whole bunch of other organizations I had never even heard of.

ANDERSON: But you weren't really politically active yet at this time at all, so that wasn't a conflict in terms of-

SHELLEY: No, and most of these organizations were – who knows what they were, and I certainly wasn't a member of either the Communist Party or the Nazi Party. And also it says, you're not a homosexual. Well, at the time that I joined, I wasn't, not as far as I knew.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

SHELLEY: But I suddenly realized that I could get into a whole lot of trouble. So we covered each other's butts and we became fast friends. Meanwhile, my girlfriend was screwing around with whoever. She wasn't about – she wasn't interested in being a – you know, in us forming a couple. She had gotten involved with this group called the Sullivans – I don't know if you ever heard of it-

ANDERSON: Uh-huh.

SHELLEY: It was a – based on the work of Harry Stack Sullivan and there was this – it was almost like a psychological cult group. And there were the therapists on top and there was the head of the Sullivanian Institute – well, there's this married couple who's the head of the institute, and they had this whole ideology about non-monogamy, that monogamy was bad. So they were encouraging Luva to screw around and of course, their thing about sexuality was you were supposed to be bisexual because if you're a homosexual, you're restricting yourself to only a small percentage of the world. Of course there wasn't any rule about heterosexuals were supposed to be bisexual. Just homosexuals were supposed to be bisexual. So, anyway, she encouraged me to leave home but once I had left home, she wasn't very supportive. She just didn't – never came out to Brooklyn to my apartment and I was miserable. So I ended up going back to my family again and being depressed and sleeping for about a month most of the day. And I picked myself up and one day, my mother found my diaphragm that I had used when I was having an affair with Patrick. And she raised holy hell. She had previously found birth control pills that I had used and I said that they

were Luva's and I was hiding them for her, so she was willing to accept that. And then, when she found the diaphragm, I wasn't going to say that. I thought, "Fuck it. I'm out of here." And I packed up and I left that day. I went downtown – really, uptown Manhattan. It was 103<sup>rd</sup> Street and I walked from one crummy hotel to another until I found a room that I could afford, which was \$13.95 a week. What did I know? It was a welfare hotel where immigrants, people in poverty. I rented a room. And I put a poster up on the wall. It was this Gaugin poster of two women and I locked the door and I had my boxes of books and I thought, "Here, this is a room that my mother can't get into and she can't search my effects and can't listen in on my phone or read my mail." Which she had gotten into.

So, I again – at that point, I had taken out a loan. I had a partial scholarship, I took out a student loan and was working part-time and going to school part-time and as soon as the – well, going to school full-time. As soon as the semester ended, I switched over to a full-time day job and was going to night school. And I got involved with the Sullivans and spent a couple of years in therapy with them. Which was actually helpful, because in spite of the pressure to be heterosexual or bisexual which meant I was screwing around with guys quite a bit, at least there were people there who were friends and I did end up, you know, having sex with a couple of the women. And people were supportive in their own way. We would rent a summer house in the Hamptons and have time shares so that I would get to go every other weekend and things like that, you know, so we had groups of people, we would go to the beach together and have parties together, and have people to hang out with or if you moved into an apartment, help paint the apartment.

And that continued until – okay, I finished college at night. I was taking twelve credits at night and working 9 to 5 in the day, so I was – I've got to get that college degree and I don't intend to spend the next eight years doing it. I finished college and I was working as a clerk, clerk-typist, whatever. And then, I got a job at Barnard College. I was the secretary – no, I'm sorry. The first job I had was with the Welfare department. It was in the Bronx, and they assigned me to a Catholic old age home and I had to visit people and just see that they were still alive and they could continue to send the welfare checks. And I was bored out of my mind. But the first few months, you can't request a transfer to any of the better places. I thought, where am I going to get transferred to that they'll take me and get me out of here without my having to wait to build up seniority. I went to my boss and said, "I want to go to Harlem." And they sent me to the Harlem Welfare Center.

Talk about getting politicized. [laughs] I was also getting politicized with the Sullivans because they took me on my first antiwar march. I didn't even know there was a war going on in Vietnam. And I went on this antiwar march and people were singing with guitars and stuff. All new to me at that point. And we had a little antiwar group called the

48:33

CIA – Citizens In Action and then underneath it in small print, “To end the war in Vietnam.” And I started reading more about what was going on there and in Harlem, I was learning more about that and oh, - I didn’t tell you about something else that was – I’m sorry that this is all mixed up chronologically somewhat. My friend Lynn Rutledge who I was madly in love with-?

ANDERSON: Yes.

SHELLEY: She was black. And we were best friends during the civil rights movement. Well, in junior high school, I could not pick myself up and go on a freedom ride. But I was reading about that and hearing about it and seeing it on TV and it hit me that if I were, if Lynn and I were in Mississippi, we couldn’t go to school together. They would treat her like that and me like this, and it was just – it made an impact.

49:25

ANDERSON: Yeah. Did your family talk about civil rights?

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Your parents felt similarly I imagine?

SHELLEY: Oh, they weren’t about to go down on freedom rides or anything but they thought it was pretty horrible, too.

ANDERSON: Uh-hm. So you had an awareness of racial issues, beginning with –when was that relationship, junior high, right?

SHELLEY: Yeah. And of course, you know, growing up in New York, I had an awareness of racial issues. We were in the neighborhood – my junior high school was 45 percent black, 45 percent white, 10 percent Puerto Rican. And you know, Lynn had her black friends and then she was – it was me who was a white friend. And I was really aware of the problems.

ANDERSON: And by the time you got to the Harlem job, then you had the history of consciousness around these issues so that this wasn’t a new issue to you. You already –

SHELLEY: Right.

ANDERSON: -deeply cared about racial justice...

SHELLEY: Yeah, and there I was in Harlem and seeing what was going on there. And, you know, working with people who were – like my supervisors were always black, and people had very different attitudes about the situation. One unit that I was in, Mrs. Harrell was our supervisor and

whenever we'd come into the office and say, oh, so-and-so needs a new mattress or so-and-so needs that, because you'd have to go into the home and inspect the home and write a – and then, it was just so fucking embarrassing, that if you wanted to give somebody – I would go into somebody's home I hadn't met before and she would open her closets and I would say, I don't want to look in your closets. Just tell me what you need, and I would just make a list and Mrs. Harrell would just sign the check, you know, sign the authorization to get a check. Well, Unit 2 was giving out more money than any other unit at Harlem Welfare Center and so they busted us up and they sent me to work for another – I can't remember this guy's name but he had a completely different attitude. Both black, but his attitude was to pull yourself up by your bootstraps thing. And he had an ulcer. So we had to really fight to get any money for clients. And at that point, I was thinking, I don't – you know, you go in there. They give you three weeks orientation, you were directly out of college and they would tell you, you are a professional. You are going to go out there and you're – and by your decisions, you're going to help people get out of poverty or manage their money or whatever. And I knew God-damn well I was a kid straight out of college, wet behind the ears. I was not a professional social worker or a professional anything. And I realized very quickly that all I could do for people was give them money. I could not – I did not have any kind of experience or anything to help them make any decisions about their lives.

The other thing that I did – about half my case load was black and the other half was Puerto Rican – was explain in Spanish – I learned the words for la diafragma, los pastelillos. I learned to explain birth control and how to refer people. And we were told that we were not allowed to do this because Cardinal whoever it was had made some agreement with the City of New York that we weren't allowed to give out birth control information. And of course, anybody who cared did. We would refer people, like I had this Puerto Rican woman with eight kids and she was going crazy, and I said, "You need some time to yourself." And I think I spoke to her pastor at the church and said, "Isn't there anything" – I know called Catholic Charities, she was related to them, and I said, and there was a social work there and I said, "This woman needs some time to herself. Is there anybody who can help her?" And they said, Oh, yeah, right, what an idea. You know, who was I? I was – how old? I was 21 years old and I could figure that out.

ANDERSON: And you were starting to figure out that there was something wrong with the system.

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: That political action is the next step, I guess, for you?

SHELLEY: Yeah. I wasn't quite ready for that yet except for those antiwar marches.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

SHELLEY: And then, I remember when Martin Luther King died and the whole place went up in flames. Of course, I was hanging out with the other people who were working as caseworkers. During that time, there were a couple of strikes and I was part of the Caseworker's Union. That was another political lesson. Because what happened was, initially the caseworkers had formed a union, and they had won a strike. They had reduced their caseloads to sixty, that was the limit, and gotten an increase in pay. The one mistake they had was they formed a separate union from the clerks. They didn't invite the clerks to join. This was going to be the professionals union. They bought the stuff about being professionals. Because they were college graduates and the clerks were high school graduates. And they were mostly white and the clerks were mostly black and so in the next – what happened was when they went out on strike again, we went out on strike and we lost, because the clerks wouldn't support us. What was in it for them? And what the city did eventually was phase out the caseworkers and replace them with eligibility workers and all you needed to be an eligibility worker was a high school diploma. And I saw that happen and it was a lesson. Anyway, after that, after we had lost the strike and before, you know, they started this new eligibility worker, I had transferred out of the union with the guy with the ulcer. I mean, out of the unit, and become an intake worker because then I didn't have to see, you know, sixty families every month or more. I would just take people in intake and then sign them up for welfare. And that was when I saw all the junkies, because they would get out of rehab, they would come in for a welfare check, and 99 percent of them would take that welfare check and shoot it up in their arms. And sometimes they wouldn't even – they would have shot up before they even got to the welfare center and they would be sitting there, nodding out. And I'd watch it. And then, there were people who'd come in, there were families who were unemployed. That thing is flashing.

ANDERSON: Yep. I'm going to turn it off right now. The tape's about to run out. It's just giving me a warning.

END TAPE 1



## TAPE 2

ANDERSON: OK. We're back on. Let's resume with that story then.

SHELLEY: OK. So, besides the junkies coming in, where I learned more about heroin than I ever wanted to know. There were families coming in who had gotten unemployed. Now I remember this one guy came in and he had moved with his family of six kids to Brooklyn and they had mislaid his check, somehow they hadn't gotten things right. So every day, they'd be sending him to a different welfare center and giving him exactly enough money for one day's food plus car fare to go home. And they just didn't know where to send him. And finally, he got furious, and this was at Harlem. He blew it. He tore one of those sinks, you know, that you drink out of, just a water fountain – he tore it out of the wall. He knocked down chairs. He threw something through the supervisor's plate glass window. And I don't know if the cops took him away or what but I could understand after six days, each day being sent home with a dollar for each kid for food for that night and car fare.

And I saw how people were treated there. And I remember the last day on the job, this family came in, a man and his wife and they had a couple of little kids and the guy had lost his job and he had – and he said he had been surviving by borrowing five bucks here and ten bucks there from friends but he had run out of people to borrow from and he was applying for welfare. So I filled out all the papers and I went to my supervisor and I said, Here's, you know, his application. And the supervisor says, go back and get the phone numbers of the people he's borrowed money five bucks and ten bucks each from and call them. And I said, No, I won't do it. I thought that was so humiliating. I says, You want to do it, you do it. I threw the papers down. I went back to the guy and the wife and said, This is what he wants. I'm not doing it. I quit. Good luck to you. And I walked out.

And then I applied to Barnard College and I got a job there as a secretary to the General Secretary. I did not know what a General Secretary was but they were involved in fundraising. [laughs].

ANDERSON: What was Barnard like at the time? This is what? The mid- to late sixties? You graduated in '65.

SHELLEY: This was in 1968.

ANDERSON: Oh, so it was a big year.

SHELLEY: It was a big year.

ANDERSON: So let's back track for one second. Politics at City College. You were there at night mostly so do you remember the atmosphere in terms of the issues – students were talking about civil rights, open admissions?

2:55

SHELLEY: No, only one class I remember where people talked about politics. This was the day that Goldwater got nominated for president. And the Republicans had their convention and they had little gold confetti in the shape of coins fluttering down in the convention hall. The next day our English teacher walked in and he was raging, um, he was – he had polio when he was a kid so he walked with crutches and braces and he sat down there and he raged for an hour about the Republicans and Goldwater and what they stood for. And at the end of his raging, he said, “Class dismissed” and he walked out.

ANDERSON: So you don’t remember campus organizations, banners, posters, rallies, nothing? OK. So, Barnard ’68.

SHELLEY: OK. Let me backtrack a little. 1967, after being, you know, with the Sullivanians and doing that, 1967, November, I joined Daughters of Bilitis. I found it.

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ANDERSON: Oh, 1967.

SHELLEY: And they met in this little room, a couple of rooms that they rented in a warehouse building, and I went – I had gone to a couple of lesbian bars and I found them very depressing, and I could never meet anybody there. I didn’t dress right, I didn’t act right. I didn’t know how to develop a butch-fem thing. That was not my style. I was as much an outsider there as I was in second grade. I remember once sitting down at the bar and drinking and these two women were on either side of me and I was – I didn’t even know how to start a conversation with them and finally I asked somebody what time it was and there was a clock in front of me, and these two women were clearly – I mean, they were dressed like stewardesses or something, both blond, and they started talking right across me. It turned out they were both German, and they started singing Deutschland über Alles I picked myself up and I walked out. I don’t remember if I ever went back to that bar, I don’t think so.

ANDERSON: Had you gone there by yourself?

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Wow. That was brave.

SHELLEY: Desperation. And it was the usual – the first time I went there, I had to walk around the block a couple of times before I said, OK, I’m going in.

ANDERSON: How did you hear about DOB? Do you remember?

SHELLEY: I read about it in a book. I mean, there was some book about the gay life in America, the homosexual in America, I think it was or something, and at the end of it-

ANDERSON: Donald Webster Cory?

SHELLEY: I think so. And at the end of it, they mentioned the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis. Well, I flipped open the phone book and there was a phone number. Called it, got their – I guess it was an answering machine or something that said when they met and I showed up. And you didn't have to – there was no alcoholic beverages. We sat around and talked. I can talk, obviously. Talk my head off.

ANDERSON: What'd the women look like?

SHELLEY: Uh, different. There were – some of them were very – dressed like the women in the bars. Some of them were older, some of them were younger, you know, fat, skinny, whatever, but there were different people, different intellectual levels but they got together and they had political meetings so to speak and I think once a month there was a dance.

ANDERSON: Did you go to those?

SHELLEY: Yeah. And I got to talk about issues. We talked about relationships. We talked about whatever. Mostly the stuff was about relationships and about gayness, and you know, we had different topics each month, there'd be a discussion. Coming out or forming a relationship or hanging onto your relationship, or sometimes they had guest speakers who were psychologists, the ones they'd invite who were saying, Yeah, there's nothing wrong with you, you know, with the rest of the world telling us that-

ANDERSON: Right, sure.

SHELLEY: So there were a couple of really sympathetic psychologists who'd come and talk once in a while. And the people who were running the organization at that point were OK, Eleanor Kravitz and Jean Powers. They'd had other pseudonyms that they used and they told me to use a pseudonym, and I said, Why? I was ready to sign up with my birth name. And –

ANDERSON: What's your birth name?

SHELLEY: My birth name was Martha Altman. And they said because the FBI might find the mailing list. So I signed Martha Shelley, because Shelley was the nickname that my first lover had given to me-

ANDERSON: Oh, OK. Why?

SHELLEY: Because I wrote slushy poetry to her that reminded her of Percy Shelley.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: So, Martha Shelley, care of Martha Altman. I put down my address and I said, this is totally stupid. [laughs] If the FBI wants to find me, they will find me.

ANDERSON: So you really didn't feel afraid of surveillance?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: Despite even your parents talking about being careful and McCarthy – you still felt like safe and –

SHELLEY: Well, you see, yeah. I don't know why. I don't know whether it was just stupidity or what. But I didn't know how else to get the mail to my address. [laughs] And therefore I got the newsletter.

ANDERSON: Do you know if you ever were watched by the FBI?

SHELLEY: Oh, yeah.

ANDERSON: You do know that you were.

SHELLEY: Later. Oh, yeah.

ANDERSON: But not because of DOB?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: I mean, I might have been because of DOB, what do I know? But I know for sure, later on.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: And I would go to the dances and dance with people and I think, had sex with this one woman that I met there who was living with her husband and two kids in New Jersey and that, you know, clearly didn't work out. And then one night I met Allison. We were at a DOB party and the two of us were drunk as skunks. She took me home to her place – I mean, I had never met her before and we made love, and in the

morning I woke up and I thought, I think her name is Allison. I hope I got it right. [laughs] She was living in Englewood, New Jersey and she drove me back to the city and we had an affair that lasted for about a year and we're still friends. She was seventeen years older than me and was, in a way, to a certain extent, a mentor of mine in gay life and it was really, it was really great. We had great sex. It was – I don't think it was really the kind of in love that – you know, it was clear that we weren't going to be partners because of the huge age difference and huge experience difference. And I was still involved with the Sullivanians and screwing around and she needed somebody who was going to be a monogamous faithful partner. And I was trying LSD and doing all those things. At that point, I had been introduced to – it was in 1968 I got introduced to LSD. But in any case, during that year, '67 through, like, November '67, I think it was nine months that she and I were lovers and then she met someone her own age who she's still with.

ANDERSON: That's impressive.

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Thirty-five years.

SHELLEY: Well, let's see. From 1968 to the present.

ANDERSON: Thirty-five years. Wow.

SHELLEY: So.

ANDERSON: So your involvement with DOB at that time was just as a member. You were attending events?

SHELLEY: Uh-uh.

ANDERSON: Were you president at that time?

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SHELLEY: Yeah. What happened was the – shortly after I joined, a couple of months after I joined, Jean and Eleanor picked me – they said, “Why don't you run for treasurer?” And I said, OK. I thought that was an honor. I had no idea that I was going to run unopposed because nobody wanted to do these things. [laughs] So, I became treasurer. And that lasted for a few months and I had no idea of bookkeeping either. So, what I would do is I would write down the money that came in and then if I was running short on carfare, I would write down borrowed, you know, fifteen cents for carfare and then the next time I got my paycheck, returned fifteen cents. [laughs] And I kept the screwiest books imaginable and then they decided they wanted me to run for president which I did, again unopposed. And I turned over the books to

Eleanor and she had worked as a bookkeeper and she said, "It took me two months to figure out what you did here." She said, "You didn't steal a dime but these are the screwiest books." I says, "I'm not a bookkeeper. I had no idea. I didn't know what to do, I just did it." So I lasted as president for a couple of months because I had no idea how to run an organization. Now I would. But I was a child. I was – what, 24. And I had no experience. You know, that you're supposed to call meetings and do this, do that. They just wanted somebody out there to do it because they were tired of doing the work.

But the one thing that I could do, and that I did do, was they had me go to these abnormal psychology classes and be a speaker, and that I did very well. And I also did it – I was also one of the few people who was willing. I didn't care whether I lost my job because I was at an age where, you know, you lose a job, get another one.

ANDERSON: So, you would be like the real-life homosexual that they would bring out to these psych classes.

SHELLEY: Uh-hm. And one of my favorite tricks in these classes was I would say, you know, You don't know it but there's lots of gay people- you know, you see me, I'm openly gay, but there's lots of gay people that you don't even know. And I would pass out little pieces of paper and I said, "Here's what I want you to do. Everybody write down X if you've only had heterosexual experience, Y if you've only had gay experience, and XY if you've had both. And then, fold it up, don't let anybody see it, and pass it up front." And of course, like 10 percent of the people would have had gay experience and I would say, you know, There's gay people among you. And I would give them whatever rap I gave at the time. And then,-

ANDERSON: So you became a public speaker?

SHELLEY: I became a public speaker-

ANDERSON: -through the DOB?

SHELLEY: Uh-hm. Although the first time, I had been the shyest possible person for years. I think that was when I entered adolescence, or even before that, I was just painfully shy. And what happened once in college was that I had to make an oral presentation on the relationship between Tennyson's "In Memoriam" and the Darwinism of that period. So I studied it all, made it – you know, figured out what I was going to do, and I was scared out of my mind. On the way to school, I downed a couple of Manhattans. And I stood up in front of the class and made my speech. And at the end of it, the instructor came over to me and said to me, That's the best speech [laughs] anyone gave this semester and I told him what I had done and he says, Why don't you tell it to so-and-so.

She has to speak next week. [laughs] And I thought, well, if I can do that on a couple of Manhattans, I can do it. And after that, I wasn't shy about public speaking anymore.

ANDERSON: Even sober.

SHELLEY: Yeah. I mean, some people would think they would need the alcohol but I just –

ANDERSON: Yeah, because you continued to really grow in that role. I mean, you became a really vocal person in both movements.

SHELLEY: Yeah, it just hit me. I can do it. So, it wasn't a problem doing it in front of those abnormal psych classes. And then, OK, what happened next was after I quit Harlem Welfare Center, I went to work at Barnard College. And at that time, it was a hotbed of radical feminism but I didn't know it. Backtracking a little, when I was with the Sullivanians, I had left home in 1963, and the therapist I was seeing there gave me a copy of a new book and she said, Read this, and it was called the *Feminine Mystique*. So I had already been indoctrinated into feminism to a certain extent, as far as Betty Friedan went. And then in 1968, there was all of the riots going on, a lot of more feminism happening, and there was a meeting at Barnard College during my lunch hour of the students and the placement office and the placement people were going to tell the girls at Barnard what great opportunities were available to them after they graduated. So I went to the meeting and during the meeting, I spoke up and I said, "Well, I finished college and I ended up being a secretary here." I came back to my boss's office and my boss said, "Look. Academic freedom applies to instructors and students, not to administrative staff." I wasn't about to buy that. I mean, if she had fired me, I would've had a problem but she didn't.

And then, not too long after that, I also got involved with the Student Homophile League. Of course, there I was, I was active in DOB, and there was a Student Homophile League on campus and the head of it was Bob Martin. He and I got together and we were being, oh, *epatée* le bourgeoisie. Sticking it to the bourgeois, right? We ended up having an affair. He considered himself bisexual.

18:10
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ANDERSON: This is Stephen Donaldson?

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: OK, Bob was his pseudonym, right?

SHELLEY: Right.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: Bob Martin was his real name.

ANDERSON: Bob Martin was his real name. OK.

SHELLEY: So we had an affair and he turned me on to LSD.

ANDERSON: Which was kind of odd for the two leaders of the Student Homophile League to be a heterosexual couple by appearances, right?

SHELLEY: Right. And we would go to meetings of the Eastern Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations of something or – no, the, there were seven groups in New York and we would go to meetings and we would be – and everybody knew we were having an affair and they thought it was pretty outrageous but on the other hand, we were the most public of anybody and what could they do? I mean, we were willing to stick out necks out and say, “I’m gay.”

ANDERSON: And this is my boyfriend. [laughs]

SHELLEY: Well, mostly.

ANDERSON: Yes, yes. So, you feel like you got mostly support.

SHELLEY: Yeah, I mean, people were annoyed by us but at the same time we were – like, not, later on, they would have thrown us out but at this point, because we were willing to be publicly gay, they didn’t care what we did in private. We were willing to stick our necks out for the gay movement.

ANDERSON: Right, the homophile organizations were all the other campuses in New York that you’re talking about?

SHELLEY: No, they were different ones. Some of them were just like two people and a mimeograph machine, you know, they were the Mattachine Society, there was DOB, and there were all these little groups.

ANDERSON: I see. So it wasn’t all student homophile groups, it was a bunch of different gay organizations.

SHELLEY: Yeah. In fact, I think we were the only – that was the only Student Homophile one.

ANDERSON: And you had members from Barnard and other campuses?

SHELLEY: Columbia.



ANDERSON: Just from Barnard and Columbia. OK.

SHELLEY: And anyway, one night I slept over in his dorm room and he turned me on to acid. And it was an incredible experience. It's the sort of thing – I don't know if you've every tried anything like – OK. We needn't go any further. [laughs] So, I picketed with them and I handed out leaflets and we marched against the war, and the other students were sort of – not wanting us to be in their antiwar march, and then one day, I got invited to be the representative of Daughters of Bilitis on WOR radio in New York. They were doing a program on the sexual revolution and they interviewed me, and the guy was a pain in the ass. I remember having a headache afterwards, the incredible stupid questions I had to field. Went home, went to sleep, got up in the morning feeling a little headachy. Went into the office wearing a miniskirt that day. I dressed pretty wild for a staid secretary at the college. I think it was a bright green miniskirt, too. And I had my hair long then. Anyway, I was sitting there drinking my coffee when my boss walks in and says, Guess what? WOR radio was here last night and they were interviewing the girls at Plimpton Hall, which was the first coed dorm, and they were talking about the sexual revolution and it's going to be on radio tonight and I've got to go listen to it. And I thought, oh, no. She will hear my voice. So I spilled my coffee. I was freaked out. People wondered what was going on with me. Finally, I called Jean Powers and I said, "What should I do?" And she said, "Why don't you call WOR and ask them to pull that segment. They'll understand." And I thought about it and I thought about the good Germans. And I thought, I can't. And I remember distinctly that day thinking about the good Germans. And if it costs me my job, I can't do it. So at the end of the day, when my boss was about to leave, I said, "Ms. Palmer" – her name was Jean Palmer, she's no longer alive, I'm sure. She was 65 then. "I have something to tell you." And she said, "What?" And I said, "I'm going to be on that radio show tonight?" And she says, "Oh, doing what?" And I said, "Representing the Daughters of Bilitis." And she said, "What's that?" And I said, "A civil rights organization for lesbians." And she gave me a big wink. And she said, "It's so nice that you young people are doing all these things for all these causes. Well, help me with my coat, dear. I've got to go." Later, I found that she was living with the woman who was the head of Catherine Gibbs Secretarial School at Barnard for years.

ANDERSON: How'd you find that out?

SHELLEY: Because I went to her house and visited. Found out that she had a roommate. And the – the woman in fact who founded Barnard College who was the first president – I don't think she was the founder but she was the first president – Virginia Gildersleeve, was a lesbian.

ANDERSON: But you and your employer never talked about that?

SHELLEY: Oh, I mentioned that to her and she said she thought Ms. Gildersleeve was bisexual.

ANDERSON: OK, but between – about your sexuality, you guys – she gave you the wink that time and then you knew it was fine but it was not something you talked about at work.

SHELLEY: Not in detail, no.

ANDERSON: No.

SHELLEY: Um, then, let's see, what happened. So much happened during that one year-

ANDERSON: I bet. Was Kate Millet on campus at that time?

SHELLEY: Yes. In fact, she got fired. And I went to her – she had been in that meeting where I was subsequently told that I didn't have academic freedom. So we got to know each other, and I said, You know, I would help organize the students and she said, Forget it. I've got this book I want to finish. I'm just going to go home and finish my book, which was Sexual Politics, of course. Catharine Stimpson was on campus, she was teaching.

ANDERSON: Uh-huh. Had she already started the Barnard Center for Women by then?

SHELLEY: Not that I-

ANDERSON: Not that you remember, OK.

SHELLEY: But, yeah, Barnard was definitely a hotbed of feminism.

ANDERSON: Yeah. So, do you think of yourself as getting really involved with feminism at that time? At Barnard? I know you'd read Freidan's book and you had been thinking about it but in terms of political activity?

25:15

SHELLEY: You know, I think I con- but not really in terms of political activity. I considered myself a feminist.

ANDERSON: Right. You weren't part of a feminist organization on campus or part of a consciousness raising group there?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: -or anything like that. It was just sort of in the air. OK. Loud motorcycle.

SHELLEY: No, that was the Blue Angels.

ANDERSON: Oh, was it?

SHELLEY: Yes, it's Fleet Week. The jets are going.

ANDERSON: Wow. OK. Well, that might come and go then while we're taping. So, it was just more of a feminist atmosphere. OK.

SHELLEY: OK. So, at the end of the semester. Now, the semester ended in June. At that point, I was offered the possibility of working the next – my boss was retiring, but I was offered another job but I turned it down. I had also been doing some part-time work as a typesetter in Greenwich Village and I decided that what I wanted to do- I ended up moving to the East Village and working part-time as a typesetter and spending the rest of my time as a political activist. I decided that that was definitely what I wanted.

ANDERSON: And did you know in what direction the activism was going to go at that point?

SHELLEY: I found out real fast. I didn't know quite, but by June 28, I did [laughs].

ANDERSON: Were you still involved in Student Homophile League then after you left Barnard?

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: You moved to –

SHELLEY: No, what happened was almost immediately, remember, the semester ends at the end of June.

ANDERSON: Oh, so it's June 28, 1969, now.

SHELLEY: Right.

ANDERSON: Yep. Got it.

SHELLEY: Um, I was still involved with Daughters of Bilitis and I remember that night in particular, it was hot. I think I've told this story before, do you want me to tell it anyway?

ANDERSON: Sure, yeah.

27:05

SHELLEY: OK. I had a date with Allison to come over to her place and take a bus out there to New Jersey later in the evening, but what I was doing, I was giving these two women from Boston a tour of Greenwich Village and the bars and stuff because they wanted to form a Boston chapter-

ANDERSON: Of DOB.

SHELLEY: Uh-hum.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: And we walked past Christopher Street and there were these kids, young people, throwing things at cops, and the people I was escorting were very startled, and I said, Oh that's just a riot. We have them in New York all the time. And I didn't know what it was. I didn't find out, like, for 24 hours later. When I got to the George Washington Bridge after touring them around and bringing them over to Jean [Powers] and Eleanor's [Kravitz] house where they were spending the night, I took the subway up to the George Washington Bridge and the last bus had gone. So I walked across the bridge. And I remember, full moon, this Hudson River totally black and shiny, and there's the moon reflected. And then I hitchhiked to Allison's house, and it was so hot – this guy was out, he was a – turned out to a neurologist, at least he said he was, at a hospital and he couldn't sleep and he was just driving around to stay cool. He dropped me off there. You know, I had no fear. Stupid. I was young and stupid.

ANDERSON: You turned out all right. [laughs]

SHELLEY: Yeah. But 4 a.m. I arrive at Allison's house and she says, What are you doing here at this hour? I said, "I told you I'd come." Slept for a few hours and then went to a DOB meeting. And I remember going home after the DOB meeting. There was some discussion of some kind, and finding out from the newspapers what had happened, and then the next day, still not having gotten enough sleep, lying on my couch, thinking, We have to do something. We have to have a protest march. And then I thought, Great, we're going to march in the street and I'm going to get shot like Martin Luther King. Again I thought, I've got to do it anyway.

So I spoke to Joan and I said, "We have to do this." And she said, "Well, why don't you talk to Mattachine Society and if they're willing to sponsor it, we'll do it. We'll co-sponsor it." So Mattachine Society was having this town hall meeting, they rented Town Hall, and there were like 400 guys in there, the place was jammed, and a few women, and they were talking about the riots that were happening in the Village and what should be done and so on and so forth. And I was sitting next to Bob Kohler who was there with his little dog – he always had his

little dog with him – and he was talking about these gay guys out on the street, the young street queens who were being thrown of their families and needed help, and I raised my hand and I – well, I had spoken to Dick Leitch before him and he says he didn't want a protest march. He didn't want anything like that. He said, "Why don't you put it up to the membership, you know, and if people are interested, you know, we'll see." So I made the suggestion, and he said, "How many people are interested in this?" And I don't think anybody's hand stayed down. Everybody wanted to do it. So, Mattachine Society and DOB took out an ad in the *Village Voice* saying they were sponsoring this thing. Marty Robinson who was a Mattachine Society member and I led the march.

ANDERSON: When was this? Do you remember the date of the march?

SHELLEY: No, I don't. But I think if we looked at the archives of – in June, well, I guess it would be July – of the *Village Voice* we could find it because there would be that DOB ad.

ANDERSON: Do you think it was about a week later?

SHELLEY: A couple of weeks, maybe.

ANDERSON: A couple of weeks later?

SHELLEY: It took a little time to get it together. *Village Voice* came out once a week so it wouldn't be that hard to find. I know it happened in July.

ANDERSON: Yep.

SHELLEY: Anyway, we marched around the West Village and then we got to that little triangular park, Sheridan Square, and we jumped up on the water fountain. That was our podium, and made speeches. I think Marty spoke first, then I spoke, and then I realized I had a mob of a couple of thousand people here and what do you do with them? So I said, "OK, you know, the march is over, let's all go home peacefully, but what we started, this ain't over. There's going to be more." [laughs] So people dispersed. And there was more.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

SHELLEY: And then we continued to meet for some reason.

ANDERSON: DOB and Mattachine?

SHELLEY: No, the people who were involved in, I guess, in the march.

ANDERSON: The march. OK, OK.

SHELLEY: Some of the people.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: And we, um, oh, wait a minute. OK, no, there was a meeting before the march and I don't remember what day it was, and it was on that day we were sitting in the Mattachine Society office and Dick Leitch, by the way who was a real misogynist.

ANDERSON: Was he president of Mattachine?

SHELLEY: Yeah, he was president of Mattachine and later there came out some stuff about him possibly embezzling from the treasury. Not a nice guy but the thing about Dick was he was willing to be a public person and everybody else was hiding in the closet. And so that's why people just let him be the dictator of Mattachine.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: But he was in the other room and we were sitting around and making plans for this march and one of my jobs was to find out-- to get a permit or something, to find out if we needed a permit for a march. I ended up having to call the police, which was scary, and asked them if we needed -- I didn't tell them what organizations -- I said, "Do we need a permit for a march?" And they said, "Only if you're going to use a sound system." And I thought, I don't need that. Because when I had been involved with those strikes at the Welfare Department, I found out that I could yell really loud and I would yell out whatever chants we were chanting. I thought, I don't need a sound system. And I didn't think there were going to be that many people there, anyway. So I said, "No, we can just march."

And at one of those meetings, we were sitting around and talking about what our plans were and I don't know who first said the words -- people think it was me, but I was drinking beer at the time so I have no recollection of this, but somebody said the words "Gay Liberation Front." And I started pummeling the table and said, "THAT'S IT. THAT'S IT. We're the Gay Liberation Front." And I remember the pop-top was right under my hand and I pounded it until I was bleeding. Feeling no pain. [laughs] So we did our march and then Dick Leitch was very upset when he heard the Gay Liberation Front. He said, "What's this? Another new gay organization?" I said, "No, that's just the name of our march committee." But of course that's what we were. We were an organization.

And at the same time, we weren't the gay people who were on the left, who were members of the gay organizations. There were all of the -- there were the Marxists and the Left people who were gay and who

34:18

were in the closet and part of their Marxist organizations. And they were meeting at Alternate University also known as Alternate U. We went over there, some of us, and joined them, and talked to them. And that was where we coalesced and really became the Gay Liberation Front. And we used to use Alternate U. for meetings and for dances. That summer we had a lot of dances, because people were sick of the bars. They were sick of being ripped off and giving their money to the Mafia.

ANDERSON: What was the ratio of men to women in the Gay Liberation Front?

SHELLEY: Probably 4 to 1, 3 to 1 or 4 to 1. But you should talk to other people because, you know, I think it would depend on whether, you know, whether it was a political meeting or whether it was a dance. Because the dances, a lot of men showed up and some of them weren't even – I don't think some of them were gay. Some of them were just – because the men who came there and groped the women were probably not gay.

ANDERSON: So maybe they were members of Alternate U. –

SHELLEY: Yeah, or something.

ANDERSON: Oh, OK.

SHELLEY: And we had these dances. We would buy a keg of beer and bunches of soda and of course, in those days, we would all be smoking pot and stuff. And dances went on till 2 in the morning. Bob Kohler was a hero. He was one of the organizers of the dances and he would work like a dog, cleaning up the place and stuff. I was a security person sometimes. I don't know why anybody asked me but I would show up there and make, you know, my thing was to keep an eye out for Mafiosi or whatever.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

SHELLEY: And years later, I would say, I'm 5'4" on the outside and 6'7" on the inside and I think I always had this attitude that I was bigger than I actually was. [laughs]

ANDERSON: So Gay Liberation Front turned out to be as social as it was political?

SHELLEY: Well, it was social and political because Bob was really into the dances. Some of us were into putting together a newspaper which we did, which was *Come Out*, and that was my big thing. I was very involved with that and I typeset it because at that point, I was working at a typesetter. And my boss had typeset stuff for the Black Panthers. Not their newspaper but mailing lists and things. So it was fine with her if I wanted to come in late at night and typeset the newspaper.

ANDERSON: And she knew for what organization?

SHELLEY: Oh, yeah. She was in her sixties then and she had been involved in radical politics. She was originally from Weed, California, and she moved to New York City and became involved with the Bohemians and the socialists and everybody else there. And had a child and broke up with the father of the kid, and so she did that typesetting business in order to support her kid. And he wanted to be an actor and so she raised him and sent him to acting school, whatever. And he ended – his name was Robert De Niro. So he made it big. Years later, I went and visited her and I said, Well, I'm glad now you can retire. And she said, Yes. All that paid off. [laughs]

ANDERSON: So was there conflict in the Gay Liberation Front over women's issues, feminist stuff? How do you remember that?

SHELLEY: There wasn't. But what was interesting was that there was a – the women perceived a certain amount of conflict because men were oblivious. They'd be – you know, they'd be busy groping each other and some guy would be groping a woman at a gay dance and we'd realize we had to have separate dances because they weren't paying attention. Why should they? They'd be drunk and you know. So they were mostly very supportive of women's issues and it was in that organization that the whole idea of gay liberation and feminism came together. That politics coalesced and people understood, both the men and the women, that feminism and gay liberation were intrinsically connected. And the way I formulated it was, the way I thought of it then and the way I think of it now is basically about the right to control your own body, whether it's abortion rights or who you sleep with or, as we put it at one point, the right to ingest the drugs of your choice. It's your body and if you can't control your body, that's basic. If you can't do that, you have no freedom at all.

39:37

ANDERSON: And I imagine you were one of the leaders of pulling that together, because you were doing the newspaper, because you were more vocal.

SHELLEY: Yeah. Right. Because I remember at one point, became – we had a meeting of the Eastern Regional Conference of homophile organizations and Allison, who I had had that affair with, and her partner, Marion, showed up. They were representing Daughters of Bilitis. I and I forget who else showed up representing Gay Liberation Front. And there were people from the other organizations. And this one guy, I don't remember what his organization was. I don't remember his name, even, but he apparently had been raised really Catholic. He was antiabortion. The Gay Liberation Front put out a platform in which we had these resolutions that we wanted the conference to pass, and one of them was



abortion rights, end to the Vietnam War, right to ingest the drugs of your choice, right to have sex with whoever you wanted, an adult, right to adult consensual sex. Nobody would have put in right to have sex with children at that point. So we had a whole platform. Antiracism. And this guy got up and he spoke about how terrible abortion is. And you know, abortion is murder and basically gave the Catholic point of view. Allison and Marion stood up and raised hell and here they were in their – let's see now, that would – they were in their forties. Allison had been raped at one point and gotten pregnant and got an abortion. I don't know about Marion. And they were bloody furious. And it was clear Daughters of Bilitis was, you know, not going to back down on this one, and because this guy had gotten up there and made these asshole statements about abortion rights, our platform passed. [laughs] But the essence of that platform was, besides the antiwar stuff, was the right to control your own body.

ANDERSON: I'm surprised by how interconnected you understood all the issues to be. I guess I didn't think of Gay Liberation Front as so multi-issue oriented at connecting racial justice and women's issues and the war and-

SHELLEY: Very clear. Yep. I mean, we were connected with the Black Panthers. We were connected with the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican group in Harlem. They were the first group that wasn't white that recognized us as – and then the Black Panthers later came around to it but at first they were very homophobic. But we formed an alliance with the Young Lords pretty quickly.

ANDERSON: And would you say GLF was mostly white at that time?

SHELLEY: It was mostly white but there was a strong nonwhite group within it that ended up forming a group called – we started splintering off. They formed a group called Third World Gay Revolutionaries. So there were a lot of people – I mean, even within the group that formed radical lesbians, there was Ana Sanchez, and you know, there were a number of people who were not white. I'd say a quarter to a third, maybe. Probably a quarter. And there were people of different class backgrounds, you know, working class and middle class, but certainly no very wealthy people.

ANDERSON: Right. And how long did GLF last?

SHELLEY: Probably a year, maybe more.

ANDERSON: And you said, the splinter groups – is that what caused the demise?

SHELLEY: I think so, and a lot of people went off into Gay Activists Alliance because they were dealing with New York politics and they thought we were just, you know, full of hot air.

ANDERSON: So, there wasn't combustion at the end of GLF? It was more of a trickle or falling apart?

SHELLEY: Yes, right. But I think the important things that we did were forming those politics, forming the ideology that was behind all of that. And doing those first marches and the newspaper. People got to write all of the things that mattered to them. And ...

ANDERSON: Did you save anything from those years?

SHELLEY: No. Somebody's got them somewhere.

ANDERSON: Yeah, but you didn't save any of it?

SHELLEY: No. I'm sure they're in archives.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Do you want to take a break before we start talking more about Radicalesbians?

SHELLEY: No, this is fine.

ANDERSON: OK. We've got 15 minutes left on this tape, so we'll do that and maybe we'll just take a breather, if you want.

SHELLEY: How long have we been going?

ANDERSON: Well this is an hour and 45.

SHELLEY: Then we do – after 15 minutes, we do have to stop because I've got to do some work around here. We can maybe do some more tomorrow or something.

ANDERSON: OK. So let's start getting into Radicalesbians. We'll get as much lesbian feminism in the rest of this tape that we can.

SHELLEY: OK.

ANDERSON: Radicalesbians begins at the end of GLF?

45:45

SHELLEY: It began – let's see. People decide – some of the women decided to split off. I thought it was a mistake myself.

ANDERSON: Why?

SHELLEY: Because I didn't think that the guys were that oppressive. We had women's dances. And I felt, in general, that splitting the Gay Liberation Front with all of these little splinter groups was not a good thing. I thought we had more clout if we stayed together. Because what we did-- the original idea with the Gay Liberation Front was that we were all -- that it was more of an umbrella thing, that if you wanted to do something, you'd get together with like-minded people and do it. Make a dance, write, do a newspaper, do a political action. Everybody didn't have to do it all together. And I didn't see why we needed to have separate groups if we can, if you could just get together within the group and do some kind of action, but--

ANDERSON: So you were not compelled by lesbian separatism then.

SHELLEY: I was never a lesbian separatist, ever.

ANDERSON: It wasn't appealing to you as an ideology, as an effective organizing strategy. You preferred to work with --

SHELLEY: No, no. OK. Here's -- I thought that separatism was a -- I always thought of it as a tactic. In other words, you need to -- I got together with women, I was very much in favor of women's consciousness raising groups, enjoying them, only-women's actions and only-women organizations, but the ideology of lesbian separatism as it developed later on, um, I have always been opposed to.

ANDERSON: Because you thought it was too narrow?

SHELLEY: Yeah. I mean, I was reamed out by some young lesbian separatist because I dared to have heterosexual woman friends.

ANDERSON: Well, and you also dared to have public relationships with men or one in particular.

SHELLEY: Right. Although actually at the time, that had ended by the time Gay Liberation Front started, so I don't think I've had -- I didn't have any sexual relationships with men after that, after 1969. After the Stonewall riot, really. And I had basically not been having relationships with men for a while, anyway. But I just felt that separatism is a tactic that you use to get what you need. To me, it wasn't an idea of a permanent-- like you form your little island and that's where you live with people who just agree with you.

ANDERSON: Yeah, it makes sense.

SHELLEY: And I remember people coming up with these theories that men are defective because the Y chromosome is broken and so on and so forth. Well, yeah, but we have to live with them. [laughs] I mean, we are not going to continue reproducing the human race, which is perhaps one of God's worst mistakes, but if we're going to do it, the whole world is not going to be reproduced by artificial insemination or cloning or something. It's just – high tech is not going to deal with it.

ANDERSON: Right. So are you one of the founding organizers or key leaders in organizing Radicalesbians? Do you feel you had a leadership role in that?

SHELLEY: Yeah, not because I – well, yeah. But the problem with it is it didn't do very much. We had dances but we couldn't get together to do anything else. We would sit and talk...

ANDERSON: The Second Congress to Unite Women – I mean, that was a pretty significant action.

SHELLEY: Yes but that was it.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: I mean, we didn't go out and do other things in the way of demonstrations. That was about it.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: Um, we talked a lot. I found that kind of depressing, because I wanted to go out there and make revolution. There was this one woman, Pat Maxwell who was an anarchist, so whenever we'd come up with some resolution, she would vote no. We had this rule that you had to do it by consensus.

ANDERSON: Of course.

SHELLEY: And so, whatever we did, she voted no. [laughs]

ANDERSON: So that stymied progress...

SHELLEY: Yeah, and we could never get around that.

ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

SHELLEY: Um, but I did make friends. And the Second Congress to Unite Women, that was important. I still have a picture of myself, which unfortunately

50:15

is not here, standing there holding a microphone and shooting off my mouth.

ANDERSON: At that action?

SHELLEY: In my lavender menace tee shirt, which I subsequently donated to the Lesbian History Archives.

ANDERSON: Oh, did you? Oh, good, oh, good. So, can you describe that event a little bit?

SHELLEY: Yeah. I think – I know Rita Mae Brown was involved in it originally, I think she was one of the organizers of that, and she or somebody approached me to be part of it. And what happened was we had our lavender menace tee shirts under our other clothes, and at a certain signal – I don't know who gave the signal, Donna Gottschalk flipped the light switch and threw the whole room, the auditorium into darkness. It was in some public school in New York. And when she flipped the lights on again, people had posted these "Take a Lesbian to Lunch" and other slogans around the room and we had taken off our other clothes and we were wearing our lavender menace tee shirts.

ANDERSON: How many would you say you were?

SHELLEY: About a dozen, maybe. And the women on stage who had this Congress to Unite Women had never of course invited anybody, any lesbian to be one of the speakers. So we threw the thing open to the audience. We ran up and grabbed the microphone and said, "We want our issue addressed." The woman who was in charge of the microphone up there said, "Well, what does everybody else think? Do we want to continue with the speakers that we've invited? Do we want to open up this issue?" And everybody wanted to open up the issue. So we made speeches. I was one of them, obviously, from that picture.

ANDERSON: Who else do you remember gave speeches?

SHELLEY: I think Rita Mae did but I didn't know who else. And then it was over and that was when NOW really started taking the lesbian issue seriously.

ANDERSON: Were you a member of NOW before then? At the time?

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Or any other mainstream women's organizations?

SHELLEY: I've been a member of NOW off and on but most of these years. I have never been terribly active in NOW. I just send in my dues and get the newsletter because what I was doing actively was different.

ANDERSON: But you were really more involved with the gay politics at that time. You really weren't part of any feminist organizations before Radicalesbians and the Second Congress?

SHELLEY: Not really – I was a member of a consciousness raising group.

53:07

ANDERSON: You were?

SHELLEY: And we would do – oh, yeah. And I would do things that – I would be involved in women's demonstrations of various kinds but I was never really involved in the day-to-day workings, like there was a Women's Center-- I remember the Socialist Workers Party tried to take it over and I was involved in stopping them from doing that. I came up with a strategy to get rid of them.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: Because at that point, they had a rule that open homosexuals couldn't be members of the party because it would bring disgrace on the party. So we packed the meeting where – we packed the meeting of the Women's Center with a whole bunch of people and I introduced a resolution that nobody who was an active member of a political party, like, that ran for elections could be on the board of the Women's Center. And of course, they wanted to take over the mailing list and the treasury and all that which was their MO, and they got very upset. They said, "That's discrimination." I said, "It doesn't just apply to you, it applied to, you know, active Democrats, Republicans, any, you know, the Liberal Party, if you are a political activist for a party that runs for elections, you can't be on the board." And they said that that was unfair and discriminatory and I says, "Look at your rule against gay people." The next time they had a conference, their national conference, they changed that rule. And the funny thing is, one of the women, Eva – I don't remember her last name, who was involved in trying to take over the Women's Center in New York, was a lesbian.

ANDERSON: Eva Kollisch?

SHELLEY: Who?

ANDERSON: Kollisch? K-O-L

SHELLEY: I don't remember who. But she was in the closet.

ANDERSON: Do you want to – this is about running out of the tape. So maybe we should pause here.

SHELLEY: OK.

ANDERSON: Is that OK?

SHELLEY: Yeah.

END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

- ANDERSON: All right. We're back on. Do you remember where we were when we turned it off?
- SHELLEY: No. Do you want to-
- ANDERSON: Was there something that you wanted to finish from that other tape, or-?
- SHELLEY: I don't remember what we were talking about at that point.
- ANDERSON: Okay. Well, let's start talking about – we were starting to talk a little bit about separatism as an ideology and whether that was something that you ascribed to and the ending of Radicalesbians. So let's talk a little bit about your career in lesbianism and/or feminism, not always married together as descriptors, lesbian/feminists, but in lesbian and feminist politics in the early seventies, beginning, I guess with Radicalesbians and – what your thinking was at the time and how those two issues came together for you. Socially, also. I mean, what were your friends like? Were you involved in separatism in any way, or? The Women's Press Collective. All that kind of stuff. So I'll let you start where you want to.
- SHELLEY: Okay, well, what happened for me, after the Radicalesbians, again, I sort of drifted off into a different direction. Nannette Rainone interviewed me and Lois Hart, and based on that interview, she asked me if I wanted to do a lesbian radio show. So, I did, and I called it "Lesbian Nation" which I don't know when Jill Johnston came up with the title of her book, but I know whatever it was, we came up with it independently.
- ANDERSON: Interesting.
- SHELLEY: So, the idea was to do, since they already had a gay male show, I wanted to do a lesbian one. And that began to take up most of my time. This guy, Gary, who was working there, showed me, he was one of the gay guys on the staff, he showed me how to use the tape. Now they do everything digitally but in those days, you would actually cut tape. So he showed me how to edit tape and how to work some of the basic machinery, and I went out and I did interviews. I did a tour at one point where I was making – I don't remember whether I had to make speeches or what, but I went all over the United States with my little tape recorder. And I even went backpacking and carried the damn thing with me, to Big Sur, you know, would not be separated from it. But I interviewed women in different lesbian organizations, and some of it was art stuff and some of it was music, and some of it was just political, just talking. But I remember interviewing the women who did this

1:08



Womanhouse in Los Angeles. And it was an art project where they took the house and each room was different. I never got to see the place but I just heard from the women who did it afterwards. The funniest part was the menstruation bathroom, where they filled it up with tampons and Kotex and all these menstrual products and some of them were dipped in red paint and people would come in there and some of – the reactions were pretty funny. Some people would go (gestures) you know, get nauseated. The people thought it was a wild thing, and of course, men would blanch.

ANDERSON: So you made a tape of all these...

SHELLEY: I made tapes of all these women and the one with the menstruation bathroom, I would cut in background music. You know the song “The Girl That I Marry Will Have to be as Pink and as White as a Nursery”? I just cut that music. It was from some musical. “The Girl I Call My Own Will Wear Satin and Laces and Smell of Cologne” and then I cut it in with this woman talking about people’s reactions to the menstruation bathroom. So I had a grand time with that. And interviewed – oh, there was poetry readings. There was Judy Grahn coming to New York. There was the time that these women, lesbians and their mothers did the thing at the fire house, and of course, the place was packed because all of these women wanted so much to get their mother’s approval and here were three lesbians whose mothers were actually there being approving of them. There was a time I did a martial arts thing, and what I had was, there was a martial arts demonstration and I was running around these women holding the tape recorder to the microphone to the mat when bodies were slamming onto it and interviewing, and you’d hear somebody talking. “And then what you’d do is you’d kick’em in the nuts and then you rip this and then you do that” and then BOOM, BAM, and you’d hear the sound effects, the thud. For that, I cut the “Moonlight Sonata” in.

ANDERSON: That’s great.

SHELLEY: So I had, you know, a ball.

ANDERSON: You had a great time with that show.

SHELLEY: Yeah, but every show – every half-hour show, I would spend, like, up to 20 hours taping and editing.

ANDERSON: Was it once a week, the show?

SHELLEY: Yeah. And people listened to it. Joan Larkin, the poet. When she – when she was wanting to come out, she would listen to that show and it was like a connection between her and there was this world of lesbians out

there. So, even though I didn't know it, at that time I was having an impact.

ANDERSON: Yeah, absolutely. So that lasted for how long? About a year or more?

SHELLEY: Two years.

ANDERSON: Two years.

SHELLEY: Yeah, '72 to '74.

ANDERSON: Describe your feminist involvement in the early 70s after Radicalesbians.

6:14
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SHELLEY: Mostly going to demonstrations and making speeches. Um, sometimes working with abortion stuff. I remember once taking a woman home, or going with her while she was - they had a saline abortion, and I just sat with her while the whole thing happened and then wrapped up the fetus and took it to the medical office to be examined to make sure everything had come out all right and stuff, and just took care of her. And then she went back to Canada where abortion was illegal at that point. She was a student who had gotten pregnant and that was when abortions were legal in New York but not elsewhere in the country.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: Um, so I can't say that I was, you know, like, specifically active with any one organization more than others but when there was some action that needed to happen, I would show up.

ANDERSON: Did you feel at home in the feminist movement?

SHELLEY: Absolutely, absolutely. I remember once we took over this building. It was an old welfare center. I participated in that and we occupied it. It was New Year's Eve. And the women who had organized it had a little New Year's Eve party and promised us that at the end of it there would be an action, and they wouldn't tell us what it was. So at the end of it, here we were, marching through the streets with the snow coming down and there was, like, a little powder and then a little more snow on the streets, and we're marching along carrying these things, sleeping bags and camping gear and stuff. And we marched into this abandoned welfare center right across the street from the 5<sup>th</sup> Street police station. No wonder they didn't want people saying what was going to happen. And we occupied it and turned it into a women's center until - and negotiated with the city until they finally rented us an old firehouse for a women's center.

ANDERSON: Wow.

SHELLEY: And that was the one that later on, the Socialist Worker's Party tried to take over.

ANDERSON: Right, right. In terms of the lesbian issue within feminism, you didn't feel silenced, you didn't feel conflict or homophobia?

SHELLEY: Of course there was homophobia. When I got involved with *Rat Newspaper*, I was part of Rat – the collective of women that took over the newspaper and then ran it as a women's paper. And there was one woman, I remember in one of the meetings who complained that she thought I was looking up her skirt. She was wearing a miniskirt and she was obviously heterosexual, and I was astonished. I had been staring at her, and the only reason I had been staring at her was that everybody else in that room was wearing overalls and no makeup and she was wearing makeup and this miniskirt, and I was thinking, What is the matter with her? Who is she? Where is she from? But I was certainly not attracted to her and, but she was very homophobic. I mean, here we all – we're trying to be serious revolutionaries and that's why we were all dressing the way we did, but – you know, I would encounter that occasionally.

8:43

And then, there was the time that there was this big speech in Bryant Park. Again, it was a – I think NOW had organized it, and I'll be damned if I can remember, it was a massive rally, thousands of people. Damned if I can remember what year it was, but it was during that period, and none of the speakers were lesbians, or at least they weren't out lesbians. So I was standing there with some of my rowdy friends and I said, "There's going to be a lesbian speaker. Let's go." And I organized the group into a little flying wedge and we just went through the crowd and went up to where a whole bunch of women had their arms linked surrounding the speaker's platform. And it wasn't just women who were attending the rally, there was a lot of different people and there were a lot of male reporters and TV cameras and stuff. And Kate Millett was about to take – she was one of the scheduled speakers – so I went up to Kate and I said, "Let me have some of your time," and she agreed. But no, I didn't get to her right away. What happened was, there was this bunch of women, like, linking arms surrounding the speakers and Kate was waiting for her chance to speak. I said that I wanted to talk to Kate and they said nobody goes through. I said, "See all those reporters? Do you want us to have a fist fight in front of them? Let me go speak to Kate." [laughs] So they did. And Kate agreed to give me some time, and she let me up on the platform and I didn't give my name. It was one of the – it was the time we were all doing this, you know, anonymity, nobody should be a star kind of a thing. So I got up and I talked about how there had been police beating up lesbians in the

street, whatever, and that the women's movement has to take up the cause of lesbians, and I don't even remember what I said. It didn't take very long, just a couple of minutes. But I found out later, it was that there was one woman from NOW who had gone down there with her girlfriends in their best frocks and this one woman, June Walker, heard my speech and was sufficiently moved by it that she came out. I found that out because I later had an affair with her. [laughs]

ANDERSON: Changing the world one person at a time.

SHELLEY: It seemed like that.

ANDERSON: Yeah. We talked about this when I first got here, but one of the things that you're most well-known for from that time is a quote that "I have met many, many feminists who are not lesbians but I have yet to meet a lesbian who is not a feminist." You indicated that you may disagree with that statement now.

SHELLEY: Right.

ANDERSON: Can you reflect a little bit about that?

SHELLEY: Yeah. I was young and naïve. I think that what happens in some women's heads is that it's kind of the exceptional me, like, women who are lesbians in terms of who they sleep with but identify more as – almost as men and don't quite – they don't see themselves as feminists. And we see that now with a lot of young people. Uh, and there were women then. The ones who you would find in kind of – a lot of times in working class bars. They were not involved in the women's movement, they were not political, but they wanted the house with the white picket fence and the wife and the dogs and the whole thing but not, um, anything to do with politics and very often these were women who didn't particularly necessarily like other women that much. They liked their friends and stuff but would often have contempt for the majority of women. Seeing other women as weak, and not seeing the whole social structure.

And I didn't quite understand that then. I thought that if you took care of your own life and didn't let men push you around, that that ergo made you a feminist, but that's not true. There's a step in political consciousness that has to happen.

ANDERSON: Right. After you did the radio show, is that when you did the Women's Press?

SHELLEY: Yeah, what happened was I was worn out with the radio show. I felt like I didn't have anything else to say with that show.

ANDERSON: You were doing that by yourself?

SHELLEY: Yes.

ANDERSON: That was just the Martha Shelley show. Nobody else produced that with you?

SHELLEY: Yeah. What I did was at one point, this friend of mine, um, Pamela Barnes, asked for some time and she would do this funny bit, like, I would give her five minutes or something and she would do a comedy thing. But stuff that I did, I produced myself. And –

ANDERSON: And so you were exhausted after two years of doing that show?

SHELLEY: I was just – it wasn't so much exhaustion as I'd had it. I hadn't had – I didn't have anything else to say and um, I'm not the kind of person that if I have nothing to say, will just go ahead repeating the same stuff anyway just so I can have a little space in the sun there. I had something else to do with my life and what that was, was move to California. I had been very moved by Judy Grahn's poetry, and I moved out to California and joined the Women's Press Collective.

15:15

ANDERSON: Did you come by yourself?

SHELLEY: Yep.

ANDERSON: You just left New York by yourself and...

SHELLEY: Uh-hm. Right.

ANDERSON: Had you ever been out here before?

SHELLEY: Yeah. In fact, the first time I came out was that year when I was working at Barnard College. I came out and visited and I remembered New York was under snow and San Francisco, there were plum trees in blossom and I thought, I've got to move here. But then, by spring, was the Stonewall riot and I got very involved with all the political stuff and so it took another few years before I picked up and moved.

ANDERSON: Yep. So you came to San Francisco.

SHELLEY: Uh-hm. Also, I had had a love affair which ended badly and I realized I was still in love with this woman and I had to put as much distance between me and her as possible. California was a good choice. And that was Phyllis Chesler, by the way.

ANDERSON: The love affair?

SHELLEY: Yeah.

ANDERSON: OK. So you came to California-

SHELLEY: I came to California. I actually moved in with this collective of women which included Judy Grahn, Wendy Cadden, Alice Molloy, Carol Wilson, and me. There was five of us.

ANDERSON: How did you find them?

SHELLEY: By visiting the bookstore and you know, saying I was moving out to California and stuff, and the Press Collective had a little room in back of the Women's Place Bookstore, so I called on the phone and said to Judy that I was moving out West and she said, Well, we have an extra room in the house. I said, I'll take it. And I shipped myself and my cat out. [laughs] So, the first year was really, really hard because I moved out in October of '74 and in January of '75, my mother died suddenly and there was nobody who really knew me that I could just share my feelings with. So I was very depressed and then I got into therapy and that helped quite a bit. A year later, I became lovers with Max Dashu. I don't know if you're familiar with her?

ANDERSON: No.

SHELLEY: She's a feminist historian. Incredibly brilliant woman. If you ever have a chance, you should interview her. She does this thing called the "Suppressed Histories Archives." She does slide shows all around the country on women's history.

ANDERSON: OK.

SHELLEY: And she's also an artist. I have a lot of her artwork, which obviously I don't have on display right now. So, the Press Collective broke up.

ANDERSON: What kind of – talk a little bit about the Press Collective. What kind of work did you guys publish?

SHELLEY: -printed and sold books.

ANDERSON: But what kind of work were you printing and selling?

SHELLEY: Well, Judy's stuff, of course. They printed my book *Crossing the DMZ*. Alice Molloy's big work called in – sorry, *In Other Words*. Um, Pat Parker's poetry and a book by Sharon Isabelle called *Yesterday's Lessons* which was kind of a memoir. I still have a copy of that somewhere.

- ANDERSON: So was it exclusively lesbian material that you published?
- SHELLEY: Pretty much. And then there was that book *Lesbians Speak Out*. That was a Women's Press Collective.
- ANDERSON: OK. And the affiliation with the bookstore was that you shared space?
- SHELLEY: Yeah and that – the founders of the bookstore were Alice Molloy, Carol Wilson, and Carol's ex-lover Natalie, and the three of them operated the bookstores and Judy and Wendy did the Press Collective, but Judy and Wendy lived in the same house.
- ANDERSON: OK. So the Press Collective, you were involved with for a year or two?
- SHELLEY: Yeah. And what I did was I helped operate the press which I never really learned how to do that well. Um, folded books together, sold books, went around and did poetry readings, did a lot of collating. A lot of stuff we did by hand that would have been done if we'd had more machinery and more of a budget, you know, by machines.
- ANDERSON: What was the difference for you in the New York versus San Francisco scene, culture, politics? How did it feel different?
- SHELLEY: OK. I was pretty naïve then, too. Probably still am in a lot of ways but you know, it's sort of like shedding one's skin periodically like a snake. So what I thought was, oh, I have arrived in paradise. These people are more egalitarian, more laid back. There's not that kind of high pressure New York thing where you go to a party and you're talking to somebody and she's looking over your shoulders to see if there's somebody more important to talk to. Which to a certain extent is true then and true now. Um, but then, there was still, you know, the same kind of competitiveness in different ways, and no it wasn't paradise. Um, I loved the culture at first, still do. I like it a lot more than New York. There was just – and I think some of it just had to do with the geography of it, you know, sunnier, more space to move around, less noisy, although it's gotten worse with the increasing population.
- ANDERSON: But did you find big differences in terms of the political ideologies of the lesbians or women that you are around in California versus in New York?
- SHELLEY: There was more of a lesbian, actually more of a lesbian separatist movement here, and a lot – I found myself hanging out more with lesbians and not knowing as many heterosexual women.

ANDERSON: One of the strengths it seems of, not only your own ideologies and writings but of groups like GLF was being able to pull together so many different issues. Did you also find that that was true with the feminist or lesbian politics here? Was civil rights or racial justice, for example, as big of an agenda out here as it was in New York?

SHELLEY: There was a very strong consciousness about racism and a lot of talking about it and also, a lot of people of different races working together. And the Women's Press Collective was very well integrated that way. Um, there was one woman when I joined it that was Korean, there was a couple of black people. People came – you know, came and went but there were always people of different races.

ANDERSON: So what happened to the Women's Press Collective?

SHELLEY: Um, I think people got – OK, Judy and Wendy, I think, got burned out because for years they had been working and working and never making any money and constantly selling books and getting contributions but they never made any money. They were always living in poverty. And they were really burned out about it, and I don't think they quite understood – I know Judy didn't – that you can't do everything politically correct and expect the world to support you, and you're not going to get rich that way. It's not designed that way. The economic structure isn't designed that way. If you put in a huge amount of labor to craft each book, you know, lovingly and without high technology and then you sell your books cheap and you don't have an advertising budget, you're not going to make money.

ANDERSON: Right, right.

SHELLEY: Um, so they were getting pretty burned out with that. And what happened was FEN. Have you ever heard of FEN? The Feminist Economic Network?

24:22

ANDERSON: No.

SHELLEY: OK. Um, this is a long story and we may not finish all of it but I'll do my best.

ANDERSON: OK. You can give me an abridged version.

SHELLEY: Yes. The Feminist Women's Health Collective, which was not really a collective, in Oakland – there was one in LA, there was one in Oakland, and what they did was they did abortions. Um, Laura Brown and her lover Barbara Hoke ran it. There was Diana Press run by Casey and Coletta [Reid.] I don't know whose idea it was. Casey and Coletta were making money because they were taking in a lot of commercial work,



and being printers, and Judy and Wendy didn't do commercial work, but basically, Casey and Coletta supported their feminist stuff with commercial stuff. Abortion can't lose money. I mean, people will crawl through sewers to get abortions when they need them. And they would come there and they'd get abortions. And Laura and Barbara were making money hand over fist. So they got this idea of the Feminist Economic Network. They got together with Casey and Coletta and also with Joanne Parent and Laura Engers, I think her name was, who ran the Detroit Women's Feminist Federal Credit Union. The scheme was, they got the credit union which had, oh, hundreds of thousands of dollars in assets and it was just women loaning each other money and then paying it back – they got the credit union to loan eight women the maximum that you can make a loan for but then those women turned the money over to Laura and Joanne and Casey and Coletta and all those – those six women to buy a building in Detroit that was the Detroit Women's Building, which had the Detroit Women's City Club years ago and gone into disuse. Well, that tied up all the money in the credit union and so people – these were illegal loans for one thing because one of the women who was granted something like \$100,000 loan was on welfare. These women didn't qualify for any loans this size. But the whole point of it was to take the credit union money and use it to buy this building and then make a mint off of that by renting out space and having all these businesses in there. The credit union women were – and a lot of Ann Arbor women and Detroit women were pretty upset because they thought here was all – I can't even go in there to get a loan to buy books because I'm a student because all the money got tied up by these people making these decisions and this is supposed to be a public credit union. So, um, anyway, the whole enterprise failed because you can't just run roughshod over a community like that and then expect the community to come in and support your businesses. When the thing – the whole house of cards collapsed, the women from the abortion clinic in Oakland came out here and were talking about how all these downwardly mobile dykes had destroyed this women's enterprise, and they just didn't have any foresight and understanding of what it took to build an economic network and the whole thing was the Feminist's Economic Network.

So they talked Judy and Wendy into pulling the Press Collective into this thing and joining FEN too. And I was horrified and wanted out. Anyway, a whole lot of bad blood happened as a result of that. I cannot say that I shone in my behavior. I was not the nicest person around, and that's another long story, but you asked for an abridged version. Uh, anyway, I left the Press Collective and the Press Collective really disappeared at that point. They joined with Laura and Barbara and then, um, that all collapsed. It just didn't work. Judy and Wendy, I think, had the idea that these people knew how to make money. Well, the truth is, if you were in the abortion business, you could make money. And they bought the whole downwardly mobile dyke thing and all of that because they were just tired of being poor and this was – you know, it's like

holding out a lottery ticket to somebody and saying, this is your key to riches.

ANDERSON: Was that your last experience, or experiment with a collective?

SHELLEY: Yeah. What I did then was that Max and I – that historian I told you about – took off for the country for a year. I lived in Etna, California, this tiny little town in the mountains, there was like five hundred fundamentalists and me and Max. [laughs] Not quite as bad as all that but there were a lot of fundamentalists in that town. And I spent a lot of time reading in the library and driving over to the nearest big town, Yreka, and going hiking in the wilderness, and licking my wounds.

ANDERSON: To come back to politics a couple of years later?

SHELLEY: No. What I came back to when that year was up, was I moved back to the city and fairly quickly got involved with a woman named Ruth. Max and I broke up, I got together with Ruth. Ruth had a six-month-old, a four-year-old, and a seven-year-old. And –

ANDERSON: You were an instant parent.

SHELLEY: I was an instant parent of a very intense family and Ruth was going through a divorce, so my life became very crazy. And I spent an awful lot of time doing childcare.

30:05
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ANDERSON: Yeah. What kind of parent were you? Are you?

SHELLEY: What do you mean?

ANDERSON: I mean, did you find yourself parenting similarly to your own parents? Was parenting difficult? Did you have conflict in your relationship over parenting? Did you like it?

SHELLEY: I loved it. I loved it, I loved the kids. It was exhausting. My conflict was – there was a definite conflict in styles but not that big, and part of the conflict was that I felt like I had taken on a lot of responsibility but didn't have any real power or anything. Ruth was pretty – had made an agreement with her husband, in the process of the divorce, that she would take the kids and go raise them in Israel, because they're Israelis. And the idea was that I was going to go with her and by the time that happened, it was very clear I had no intention of going and she didn't want me to go. Her mother came. Her mother raised hell and raised hell because here she was giving up her nice engineering husband to be involved with me? And I wrote a short story about that which, uh...

ANDERSON: I don't know if I've seen that.

SHELLEY: I'm trying to remember the name of the book. I can't think of it right now. And anyway, um, Ruth wasn't really sufficiently separated from her mother to say Fuck this, I'm staying here and I'm going to raise the kids here and I'm going to be with Martha. For one thing, you know, she was coming out with me and she hadn't really made that break yet. So she did pack up the kids and go to Israel and she broke up with me by sleeping with somebody else. And I was very unhappy. I mean, I had not only lost her, I had lost the kids. I stayed in touch with the kids, though, even when I wasn't speaking to her, I would send them presents and my job – one of my jobs was the bedtime story teller. So, that happened because I couldn't stand them staying up late and watching the crap on TV, especially when I had other ideas about how I wanted to spend the evening. And wanted them in bed, not watching some violent show. So one day when the oldest boy, Ronnie, came home, I was standing behind the TV with a screwdriver saying, "It doesn't work anymore. We haven't got the money to fix it." Of course, the only thing that was wrong with it was the plug was out of the wall. And I just picked it up and put it in the closet and I said, "I guess we'll have to wait until we save money to fix it."

ANDERSON: And they bought that.

SHELLEY: They bought it. They were too young to know the difference. So I became the bedtime story teller and that was my job, and every night I had to tell stories. So after she left and took them with her, I would make tapes and every few weeks I would send them tapes of bedtime stories. Well, the four-year-old, the girl, is now at Hunter College taking her MBA, not MBA, MFA, Master of Fine Arts and we speak to each other pretty frequently. I haven't – the boys aren't in touch with me that much, but I've maintained a very close relationship with her.

ANDERSON: Were you also trying to work full time?

SHELLEY: Uh, huh.

ANDERSON: What were you doing for work at this time?

SHELLEY: Well, what happened during the time that I was typesetting, was – I was typesetting three days a week and spending a lot of time running around being an activist and my boss, Robert De Niro's mother, Virginia Admiral was her name, said to me, "Why are you working? Why don't you just talk your way onto welfare and be a full-time political activist? It's clear you don't really want to work." It's not that I was doing a bad job but, you know, I wasn't really into it. Um, so I did. I played crazy and was collecting social security disability, I think, for about a decade, and that financed an awful lot of movement activities. But when I got

involved with Ruth, I realized that I needed to make money, because you can't do that and you don't have money to pay for ice cream for the kids. So I went back to work -

ANDERSON: Typesetting?

SHELLEY: Actually, I got a job as a clerk in, as a typist in a place that did workers comp rehab?

ANDERSON: Uh-huh.

SHELLEY: And then later became a job developer, one of the counselors suggested I become one, and they trained me and I became a job developer, and from that, when that whole thing changed, when they reformed workers compensation, in order to supposedly save money they cut out a lot of the job development for injured workers. And so I was out of a job and I ended up doing what I'm doing now which is medical legal research on mostly catastrophic injury cases. So, the woman I work for is an expert witness. I don't have the qualifications to be an expert witness, but I'm the behind-the-scenes person who does the research.

ANDERSON: And you've been doing that for a few years?

SHELLEY: Hum?

ANDERSON: How long have you been doing that?

SHELLEY: Since 197-

ANDERSON: 197-?

SHELLEY: Sorry. 1997.

ANDERSON: So, can you fill in a little bit, then, between?

SHELLEY: Oh, yeah. So here, anyway, I went to work doing, you know, in this workers compensation place doing secretarial stuff. The kids went to Israel, and then I got involved – again, I did not get involved politically. Um, I got involved with a woman who was pretty – I wouldn't say exactly straight. She was more conservative than I am, and she worked for the phone company as a programmer, and we bought a house together – mostly her money, she, you know, had been living the financially responsible life [laughs] and I worked at building – actually ended up having my own workers comp job development business. I had other people working for me part-time and making money. And then she and I were together for seven years and then we busted up. The truth is, for both of us, I think it was a kind of settling relationship. We

had both been passionately in love with our previous lovers and that had not worked out and so we thought, well, let's find somebody who was comfortable but not that kind of passionate love that wrecks your heart. That's a mistake. That is always a mistake. Um, and it was – I worked hard.

ANDERSON: Were you letting politics go?

SHELLEY: Hum?

ANDERSON: You let movement politics go?

SHELLEY: Yeah. I really let movement politics go after the Press Collective, because I was tired of doing that, and I had other things to do and at that point, you know, parenting became important, and getting myself on my feet economically became important. I too was tired of being poor all my life and thinking, I'm getting a little older and I had always said to myself, If I survive until 40, I'd better start taking care of myself economically, and that's exactly what I did. At age 40, I started pulling it together economically, and that took a lot of effort. Because I had never held the kind of job where you have a pension plan or anything, and I still don't have a pension plan. What I've got is a house. And that's it. And my job.

Anyway, after that, after those seven years with Winona [Adkins,] when that broke up, I'd bought the house that [I'm moving back into] because our house had appreciated in value so she owed me some. My father died and left me some. I borrowed some from my sister, and I actually had \$12,000 I had managed to save up and bingo, down payment. Moved into that, kept the job development business going until that all crashed, and continued to write. Because I'd been – in my spare time, I'd been doing research and writing. And then, I'm giving you a very quick synopsis of my life.

Then I was working as a typist for workers comp, because the job development thing collapsed, I spent a year working as a typist again, a transcription typist for vocational counselors. The woman I was working for gave that business up and went to work for the insurance companies, the enemy, and I went around looking for work and then said the hell with it. I took a year off, I borrowed money against my house which – what I had done then was build a cottage behind the house.

So I was working my tuchus off, fixing up the house and building this cottage as a rental unit. I moved into the cottage, rented out the main house, took a year off and supported a year of writing during which time I was able to do the first draft of what is a trilogy. Then at the end of that, while I was doing that, there was the interlude during which I wrote the *Haggadah*. I don't know if you've seen the thing.

37:48

- ANDERSON: No, I know about it, but I haven't read it.
- SHELLEY: Aunt Lute Books published it. And then I was not quite ready to go back to work although I was running out of money and I thought I just needed one more month- but this job came up working for the woman I work for now and I thought, if I let it go somebody else will grab it because it was just too good to be true. So I took it, and within a month I met Sylvia, rented out my entire house and moved in here with her and two teenagers.
- ANDERSON: Yeah, wow.
- SHELLEY: Now when Ruth left, the six-month-old, four-year-old, seven-year-old were respectively four and what?
- ANDERSON: Ten?
- SHELLEY: Four and eight and eleven. When I met Sylvia, she had a 12-year-old and a 15-year-old. And I moved in with them, so it feels like I've covered the entire spectrum of childhood, and became step-parent to a couple of teenagers. Teenagers are hell. [laughs] I was an awful teenager, and so were these two.
- ANDERSON: So parenting teenagers was more difficult than parenting a little one?
- SHELLEY: Although the baby was really difficult because he didn't sleep during the night and I went around for a year being sleep deprived. The teenagers were difficult because you're sleep deprived at night because you wake up during the night wondering where they are and are they safe? [laughs] We'd have screaming fights with them. And then one of them got into drugs and that was a big problem. But he has been clean and sober for one year and three months now. He's not out of the woods but it's been a very intense period. And as soon as- I think when Solomon left when, actually we sent him to rehab, he was out of this house, I took off another year and did the final draft of volume one of the trilogy, which is now in the hands of an agent who's making the rounds of the publishers.
- ANDERSON: Terrific.
- SHELLEY: The name of it is *Jezebel, Queen of Israel*. So during all this time when I was not political-
- ANDERSON: It's fiction?
- SHELLEY: It's fiction. Historical fiction. But for the fiction, I - what I wanted to do was make sure that nobody could look at it and say, this is BS, because

42:34

there's so much historical fiction that -- particularly biblical stuff-- that's BS. And I wanted to make sure that everything was as accurate as I could possibly could make it, so I read everything I could get about Middle Eastern cultures, archeology, even things -- books with titles like *Mesopotamian Chemistry*, *Ancient Middle Eastern Med-* *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*, and piles and piles of notes. And that was what I was doing while parenting and, you know, building my business and everything. And the first volume is out there. Now I just hope that some publisher wants it.

ANDERSON: Yeah. Would you say that parenting is one of your most proud accomplishments? How do you feel about -- where does it fit in your -- the scheme of how you feel about your life?

SHELLEY: Um, just part of -- I think I feel like I've had a fairly well-rounded life. I mean, part of what I did during those years was spend a lot of time in martial arts training and that was an important part of my life. I'm still wearing one of my martial arts shirts.

ANDERSON: Does the political activism, is that a significant way in which you think about yourself or do you think about yourself as author, job developer, partner? I mean, do you think of yourself that way even though you haven't been as involved politically in the last couple of decades, it's still part of your identity?

SHELLEY: I haven't been involved, yeah, right. I've been -- I mean, what I've been doing is my writing, and that's political in its own way but it's not in the didactic sense that some of my essays are. I'm trying to convey something in fiction. The whole thing about *Jezebel* is if you read between the lines in the Bible, this woman got the worst press of anybody in history. I mean, well, maybe -- Hitler got worse press because he deserved it. What she really did was she brought her religion with her to Israel and that upset the people there. She defended her religion. She defended her husband, and she was very loyal to him. She gets bad press from the religious right, and an awful lot of other people, too, because she didn't sit back and knit and let him run the show. She was, you know, like Hillary Clinton gets bad press.

ANDERSON: Right, right. Is Judaism something that you've circled back to later in your life, was it always a thread?

45:50

SHELLEY: I've circled back to it but oh, in the sense of -- OK, after the Press Collective broke up, that was what brought me into it. I started reading into history because I felt such had felt such a reversal and such a blow when that all broke up to my idealism about, you know, we're all the sisterhood and everything. And I started reading history and I traveled around -- I spent a summer with Max before we moved to Etna,

traveling around the United States and she was taking photos for her slides. She has these slide shows about women, and she was taking them to different museums, and sometimes little museums on Indian reservations, of women's stuff. And what I got there was a picture of the terrible Holocaust that had happened to the Native Americans. And that kind of put my reversals in more perspective. And then I started reading about Jewish history and wanting to get some real historical perspective because when you're young, you think of what we were talking about before. What's happening is now and everything ancient is irrelevant and the struggles of people before you don't – you never even heard of them. So I was giving myself some historical background and I got captivated by the notion of Jezebel and in my book, she's one of the main characters but the real main character is her scribe who begins life as daughter of a fisherman. So I've got the working class perspective, the royal perspective, and the perspective of Elijah the prophet, who turns out to be a religious fundamentalist of sorts.

ANDERSON: So you became interested in Jewish history? In terms of Jewish practice, did you circle back around to that too?

SHELLEY: Well, Sylvia drags me to the synagogue periodically. [laughs]

ANDERSON: So it has a place in your life?

SHELLEY: It has a place in my life-- as community and as part of community. Like, we're really close to some people in the synagogue and the two people who I think we're closest to are Zionist Republicans. But when Sylvia's gotten sick, who are the people who show up with food? Who are the people who come to the hospital? Them. And we sit and have our arguments about politics. Sylvia doesn't. She doesn't want to hear about it. She walks out of the room when I get into arguments with Steven about politics. But we know we can count on each other as people. And that's another reason why I'm not a separatist because there's an awful lot of people who put their, you know, make a lot of talk about their politics and turn around and rip off the treasury of your little women's group when it's to their advantage – and I've seen it, you know. I've seen one woman take \$15,000 that was given to a Third World Women's Center by some heiress who had some kind of white guilt trip and she ripped off the money and went to Columbia and blew it up her nose.

ANDERSON: All in the name of sisterhood, though.

SHELLEY: All in the name of sisterhood and good politics.



ANDERSON: Right. So, um, let's spend a couple of minutes talking about where we've come in these thirty years. I'd like to hear a little bit about your vision and whether or not-

SHELLEY: Right. The crabby old lady gets to pontificate to the younger generation. Well, OK, -

ANDERSON: I mean, you probably couldn't imagine that we live in a world that we do, especially in terms of gay and lesbian rights, acceptance and-

49:35

SHELLEY: Um, I could not have imagined what I found out two years ago which was I noticed a little notice in the *Bay Times* about the gay and lesbian film festival that will take place on September 15<sup>th</sup> through the 21<sup>st</sup> or something in Tomsk. In central Siberia. I looked at the map of where Tomsk is and I thought, Oh, my God. I thought we had made it. When they have a gay and lesbian film festival in Riyadh, then we will really know we've made it. So, yes, I could not have imagined that. Certainly, none of us imagined AIDS. Um, what I am distressed about is the loss of the connection that the Gay Liberation Front made in those days between the economic system and the liberation of people. It's as if the whole gay movement has become a libertarian movement and there's not – it's – there are still plenty of gay people who are socialist, people like Tom Armiano, people who are on the left, but what seems to be the mainstream gay ideology is sexual libertarianism. And some of it makes me actually ill, like S/M.

I am sorry if I offend friends of mine, but I am opposed to transsexual surgery, partly because I'm opposed to any unnecessary surgery. They will argue that it's necessary. I don't agree. Having had surgeries and having seen my partner Sylvia go through some surgeries, and also in the kind of work I do, researching for malpractice suits among other things, I see what happens to people. It's dangerous.

ANDERSON: So does the inclusion of, you know, even our language has changed from gay lesbian to queer to transgender. Does the language of including transgender make you uncomfortable? Does that category--

SHELLEY: No.

ANDERSON: It's just the surgery?

SHELLEY: No, I just think – to me, forgive me for an old-fashioned term, I think it's false consciousness. Somebody will say, I didn't – you know, I was born in a man's body or a woman's body or I didn't feel comfortable with doing the things that people – you know. Well, to me, that kind of violates that early feminist notion. If you are born in a woman's body, you are – you can be any kind of woman you want to be. You don't have to amputate your body in order to be different.

ANDERSON: Because you certainly didn't fit into the model of what was expected of girls and women.

SHELLEY: No, but if I was born now, I might think that the solution would be to cut off my tits, and there's a lot of people – and I've known people who do that. I mean, personal acquaintances, sometimes even closer, who just – like this one woman I know has cut off her breasts and now refers to herself as he. I'm sorry, you don't look like a he. Um, I know one guy who's been really successful – I call him a guy, he used to be a woman and it's taken years and he made a transition and is now successfully a gay man, so to speak, except without the usual equipment. I think that the whole transsexual phenomenon kind of undermines the notion that you can be anything you want to be - either as male or female. And you don't have to surgically alter your body in order to do different things. Because what it does, is it says you have to be physically a man or a woman in order to do such and such.

ANDERSON: Yes. And it's short-sighted.

SHELLEY: Yeah, yeah. It reinforces the whole notion of sex roles.

ANDERSON: How do you feel about the label queer?

SHELLEY: I've been using it all my life. I'm not worried about labels. To me, it's just a word and it's not, you know, I don't feel I have to call myself a lesbian or a dyke or I'll get offended if somebody calls me something else. If I've been offended by all the things call- people have called me all my life. [laugh]

ANDERSON: Are there things that you wish you'd done differently?

SHELLEY: Oh, yeah. Boy, I could take up several more tapes telling you about those. The things I'm ashamed of where I treated people badly, um, the things where I made stupid political mistakes, yeah. Boy, that could go on for a long time. [See appendix.]

ANDERSON: Well, to save you the pain of doing that, is there something that you would want younger activists, the next generation, to know in terms of political mistakes?

SHELLEY: Okay. I think one of them, and this is a real problem because I don't know if people can avoid this, it's just maybe not in the nature of the beast, this factionalizing. I think what happens if you're oppressed is you get angry and hurt and you take offense pretty easily because people have been behaving offensively to you and you sometimes take offense where none is intended, where people are just being stupid. I

was an angry young dyke. There's an awful lot of angry young people who have been badly wounded in one way or another by the social structure and they lash out. We all do, and we lash out at each other. Oppressed people do that. So I'm not sure if –

ANDERSON: But your anger also was the source of a lot of motivation.

SHELLEY: Precisely. The source of a lot of the motivation for getting out there and making social changes. So I don't think that, you know, my saying anything about that is going to make young people change one iota. They're just going to do that. But what I would like to see is people paying a lot more attention to connecting the economic structure with the structure of sexual oppressiveness. And that's the same thing about feminism, what you were talking about before when we were having lunch, which is young women willing to be out lesbians but not calling themselves feminists, and feminism becoming a dirty word because it is a political word. It's talking about power.

ANDERSON: I think you also argued that lesbianism was a political word, too.

SHELLEY: It was.

ANDERSON: It's not anymore?

SHELLEY: No. It meant taking control of your own body but now people talk about taking control of their own body and what are they talking about? Piercing and tattoos.

ANDERSON: Right, right. I think this is going to end in just a minute. Any parting words?

SHELLEY: Nope.

ANDERSON: Have you said everything you can think of?

SHELLEY: No, but I'm sure I'll think of more later. It's just that, uh, you know, unless you have any other questions, that's – you know, I'm talked out.

ANDERSON: OK. You're talked out. Well, we'll continue this maybe by phone or e-mail or something. Thank you.

SHELLEY: All right.

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

ANDERSON: OK. I'm going to read this quote that I just read to Martha when the tape wasn't running. In *Out for Good*, the authors write, "Shelley saw no difference between the Black Panthers and the Nazi party. Both, she proclaimed, viewed women as little more than baby machines."

SHELLEY: That is a goddamn lie. I don't know who said that I said that but it is totally untrue.

ANDERSON: In what context would somebody have claimed that you said that?

SHELLEY: What was going on was that, um, the Panther 21 were in jail. People – a lot of liberals were raising money for bail money and it was something like a million dollars apiece. And it was totally outrageous act on the part of the state. Um, the Panthers were very derisive to the Gay Liberation Front. Um, one of their favorite things to call people that they wanted to despise, besides calling the police pigs and so on was to call people faggots. They despised us. And yet, people in the Gay Liberation Front were talking about whether to give a thousand dollars of our treasury, our little hard-earned treasury that we got from holding dances, um, to the bail fund. And I said, forget it, that the Panthers, you know, as long as they had that attitude towards us, what is the point of taking our little bit of money that we've worked so hard for and giving it to them. We have to have – you know, if you make an alliance with some people, it has to be an equal alliance. We're not begging them for favors or trying to buy their favor. And I was pretty livid about the whole thing. I said, you know, people like Leonard Bernstein are raising huge amounts of money for them and I'm sorry, I just don't – you know, we need the money for us. So that was what I was upset about.

ANDERSON: And was your reaction to it only in that meeting or was there something in print? Did you write something about it?

SHELLEY: No, I did not write anything about it.

ANDERSON: Yeah, there was no footnote to this, but it said, Shelley proclaimed women – they viewed women as little more than baby machines. I mean, it seemed like a very –

SHELLEY: It's a lie. It's not true. It's also not true about the Black Panthers. A lot of the leaders were women.

ANDERSON: Right. And, like, you making a link between the Black Panthers and the Nazi party-

SHELLEY: That was such a lie. Who wrote that damn book?

ANDERSON: I will tell you. It's called *Out for Good* but I will-- I don't have my bibliography here but I will tell you who the authors are because that's -- that seems like a misrepresentation of your politics to say the least.

SHELLEY: I'll say. Now I might say there's damn little difference between certain factions of the Republican party today [laugh] and the Nazi party but not all of the Republican party.

ANDERSON: All right. For the record. She denies it.

END TAPE 4

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