

Interviewee: Diane Walsh

Interviewer: Sam Ginther

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The following interview was conducted as part of the Nova Scotia LGBT Seniors' Archive's Lesbian Oral Histories Project.

SG: So, I'm just going to start with some very general questions. Just for the posterity of the record, that sort of thing. So, if you could just tell me like your date of birth, your name and like, sexual orientation or your gender identity.

DW: Yup. So, my name is Diane Walsh, and I was born December 22, 1961, and I identify as she/her and I also identify as a lesbian.

SG: And have you always resided in Nova Scotia, or have you resided elsewhere? Were you born outside of Nova Scotia or anything like that?

DW: Yeah, I'm originally from Quebec City. Yeah, I was, my biological mother, who I met many years later, I was adopted into an English family. So, it was a really interesting situation actually, throughout my life, in terms of the English, French politics thing. And so I moved here because of StFX, I was very Catholic back then, so I came to StFX for university because, basically, I fell in love with a nun and she had come here and said it was great, so *[laughing]* I came here.

SG: And like had you been in one place the whole time you've been in Nova Scotia like, or have you moved around a bit since then?

DW: Except for a, I lived in Mexico for one year, I lived in London, Ontario for a year, and back and forth to Quebec, but basically, I've lived here since then, so most of my adult life has been here in this little town of Antigonish.

SG: And were you like employed also during like that time, either like when you're moving to, I think it was London you said, like London, Ontario, like did you move there for work, or did you do work while you were in Nova Scotia?

DW: When I moved to London it was basically to, again, there seems to be a theme, I followed someone I had fallen in love with (laughing), and they were in London, so I was there too, and so I was just doing, you know, little jobs – tree planting and pizza parlour and Mac's Milk and stuff like that to earn my keep, but yeah, the whole reason was to be with this other woman. And, but since I've been in Nova Scotia, yeah, I've been working. I got involved in teaching adults in the late 80s. I took an, so I came here for my undergrad, my BA, then I did a B.Ed. simply because I wanted to stay in Antigonish, because *[laughing]* it was about the heart again, right *[SG: Right]*. So, it's all led to good things, so I became a teacher even though I had no intention to do so and didn't like the

school system and got into teaching adults. So, I've been teaching adults ever since, and it's wonderful.

SG: So, when you came to Nova Scotia had you already like kind of come out as a lesbian, or did that happen after you came to Nova Scotia, or did you come out later, more in life?

DW: I think – you know what, it's strange. I was so Catholic. It wasn't an option. However, I certainly knew that I had feelings for women every now and then, and I also had feelings for guys, but my strongest emotional attachments and attractions were with, to women, and not many, you know, just here and there, so it really never occurred to me that I was a lesbian at all, until finally it was that nun who really, I really, it was fairly strong on my part, so I think that the penny was starting to drop, but never the less, I went out west and had a, you know, had all kinds of fun with the boys and ah, then came to StFX, and still had my best friend was a guy and I guess people saw us as a couple. And so that happened throughout my university, however I knew I was in love with this woman, the one I eventually went to London with.

It was a slow awakening in my university life, so by the end of, my last year in university I went to Kenya with Crossroads International and that's when I realized. I'd get these letters from my boyfriend, and I'd get these letters from this woman, this friend, and hers were the ones I just ripped right open and *[laughing]* and that's the kind of funny little indicator that lets you know where your heart is. Although I loved this man, just, you know the thing was I realized it, it took into my 20s to realize that I loved people, the people I loved, man or woman, but I guess I started to identify as a lesbian then when, you know, there's a pattern. After your strongest attractions are towards women, I guess, I started realizing, well I guess that's what they call a lesbian.

SG: And like, just for the record, like, when would this have been, like, when you, when you entered into your undergrad and you kind of like fell in love with her, like, what kind of, like what time span, or what years would we be talking?

DW: So that would be when I was between 19 and 22, so 1981 to 1984.

SG: Ok. And your relationship with her, so was that something that was like really complicated on both ends, like obviously you brought up that it was like a slow awakening, but, for her were you able to continue doing correspondence or having a relationship with her even though she was like a nun?

DW: Oh no, this was a different one *[laughing]*.

SG: Oh!

DW: Yeah, the nun one was what got me to Nova Scotia, and she, you know, we never, I mean I never mentioned it to her. It was all completely platonic, and it was only on my end, right. So no, it wasn't – no complications there at all. That was just my first inklings,

you know, that I may have been kind of different. But no, when I came to StFX I met this other woman and she became a friend, and it was only after, really, four years, at the end of my university time that I really – it had been building and building and I really realized I was head over heels in love with her, and she's the reason I stayed in Antigonish. And, you know, I, I'm not proud of this because she was in a relationship, and I think neither of us was happy with the fact that, you know, she left her relationship and came to live with me eventually. And that was just really not, was not, a hap– it was happy for us, but it was not something I would want to do over in that way. But anyway, we had a lovely relationship and lived together for year, for about, for not that long. I guess I, I'm not very mathematical-numerically oriented, so I don't think in terms of numbers very often, but probably up until I was around 30. Yeah. And we're still best buddies.

SG: So, was she the only one that you like had a relationship with or were there any other women at the time, or afterwards that you pursued?

DW: Oh yeah, yeah. I cheated on her. I was young. She was 10 years older than me and very mature and stable and calm and I was just a firecracker, and it was almost, you know they talk of this phenomenon called lesbian adolescence, and I think that's what happened to me. It's like I was always as a kid really serious, not into, like really bored with my friends who would be talking about their love affairs all the time. I was so not into that. I was just into, you know, reading, and thinking and philosophy and all this stuff, so suddenly when I, after when I was with her, it was like I had discovered something in myself and so, I had 2 kind of flings, and it was, and that certainly is the thing I regret the most in my life, because I hurt her and to this day, I love her. She's almost, she's family to me, she's in a way my moral compass in the world in many ways, and yeah, I really do love her so much. So, the fact that I did that was not a good thing, and yet I had to do what I had to do. We do that. And I ended up being with another woman for about 10 years. That seems to be the magic number. And... yeah. Cheated on her and thought, something's gone wrong here, what am I doing? Why am I hurting people I love? So I went into therapy, and I feel I, a lot of resolution got, happened there. So, a lot of it stemming back to, I don't know, attachment issues, adoption and all this stuff. Anyway, suffice to say I can't imagine doing that anymore to someone I love. So, I've been with another woman. We've been together about 20 years now, and I anticipate that we're growing old, and we'll probably die in this relationship. So that doesn't sound crazy [*laughing*]. We'll probably both be in this to our graves is what I was trying to say.

SG: Yeah. So, you just like, trying to figure how to phrase this next question, is like, so like, meeting these women and developing these relationships with them, like, were you like deeply involved with the, like the LGBT community in Nova Scotia? Like when you met them? Like community groups, or friends of friends, or something of that nature?

DW: And there it is. That is a really good question Sam, because in the 80s it was still the time in Nova Scotia where, oh my god, I would go with my first partner, and we'd go to hotels and we'd still mess up the other bed. So, it looked like we were in two beds,

you know, that kind of thing. When I went to work overseas, well Central America, not really overseas, and she would write me every week. We had these, we had a great correspondence, and I, the priest- I worked at a school and there was a priest in charge and he kept delivering my letters to me, and he'd say "Oh this must be another one from your "novio", your boyfriend," and I said yes, yes and I never let anyone know that it was a woman because that really would not have been a good scene in that particular culture where I was at the time. So, you know, she'd come to visit, and she was just a friend, you know, and then we'd go off to places, but mess up the other bed if there was one. You know it was this whole charade that happened, so no I wasn't out, and I wasn't part of an LGBTQ community at all. Until the Rainbow Action Coalition I think started up at that time, and there were a few people who came to Antigonish, and they had a couple meetings. And I have a friend who is heterosexual, but she's such a great ally. She's the one who dragged me to this meeting – me and my partner. And neither of us were comfortable being because it felt like being out, and this again was in the 80s, late 80s, and yeah, so I was not out at all.

Anyone that I was with I met completely, just ran- you know, just randomly through work or school, or, not at all through LGBTQ formal organizations at all. And it's only really, I work for Nova Scotia Community College now, and I've been there about 20 years, and when I first started it was in 2002, and around 2003 or 4, I remember being in a class with my colleagues. We'd have to do this adult education training when you work for NSCC, and the instructor said, "So do you think NSCC is a safe place to come out for students?" And I put up my hand and I said, well I don't know if it's a safe place because I haven't come out yet." And so, you know, everyone laughed and, that was my coming out basically [*laughing*]. And then this woman came up to me after and said, "Oh I'm so glad you did that because I've always wanted to know... who's the man?" Anyway, so you know I got these kinds of questions right [SG: *Yeah*] but it was all good, it was all good. And certainly, NSCC has been so, so welcoming and the van guard of a lot of that LGBTQ work so it's, yeah, but I didn't come out 'til, I'd say that was in 2002. Yeah, that's quite a while ago and I was definitely in my mid-life by then.

SG: Did you do, like, 'cause you mentioned that a friend took you to, like, I think it was like a meeting with the Rainbow Coalition. Did you do, like any, did you frequent meetings or did you do any kind of like work or volunteering for them, or was it kind of just like I don't feel comfortable doing this so I'm just kind, 'cause it feels too much, too much like exposure to me, so I'm just going to like pull back.

DW: You've nailed it absolutely. I did not do much. I went to the meetings out of a sense of guilt and obligation that I needed to be part of change, but I was afraid because my partner and I lived in the country, on a dirt road in a rural area, in a Catholic community, and at that time Antigonish was really a, was pretty homophobic. You know there had been one man here who was one of the first to be openly out in the community and he, you know, was a, he was attacked at point and yeah, so it did not feel safe, especially because we were two women living in the country, and we already felt kind of threatened by that. You know like some night in the winter ski-dooers or snowmobilers would be lost and come banging on our door drunk. That, you know stuff like that would

happen and you definitely don't want to add fuel to that fire by being the, you know, two dykes up on the mountain, you know *[laughing]*. So it was fear. It was fear Sam.

SG: Yeah. I was going to say to you, cause like it's so, like nowadays it's, it's very different nowadays because, just even within dating there is a, more of an open culture with like, like presenting yourself as who you are, and like I'm looking for this, I'm like, I'm you know, like it's very like I'm going to, you know like I'm a lesbian looking for another woman, etcetera, etcetera, so back during the 80s when you were like, kind of like coming into your own a bit and exploring what these relationships with other women, was it difficult to like navigate who you thought would be like more receptive to that or was it just kind of like every time you started a relationship with a woman, like if there's a bit of fear like.

DW: There was never, I never seemed to have a problem with that because I didn't ever actively look. It seemed that I would just become friends with someone and then, then I would know, and I wouldn't impose myself in that way on anyone unless I was getting some kind of vibe in return. So, but I wasn't shy you know, so I seem to, back then I was a person that in some ways I don't even recognize anymore because I'm very different from that now. But I was pretty aggressive. If I knew what I wanted I'd go for it and I'd get it, and it, it's... there was no fear. It was all, you know *[laughing]* really just go for it, and yeah, again I, the downside of that is that I would run roughshod over people's emotions, and people's hearts and that wasn't good. But yeah, I was certainly discovering how I ticked. So, it was certainly all self-discovery, but now as an older person about to be 60, I would say that people's hearts and being thoughtful of the damage and the repercussions of your actions is a higher value for me now than just getting my needs met. But that's experience and older years speaking, you know.

SG: Was there also a shift when you, I guess, came out in 2003, and 2004 in how you kind of, like, interacted with other people from that point? Either with like, yeah...

DW: Absolutely, yeah. At, like when I first started working at NSCC I remember I'd be in the lunchroom with, I call them the old guard. They were the ones who had already been there for quite a while, and they'd be ta- you know we'd, they be talking about their families, what they do on the weekend, and pretty raunchy conversations sometimes and I would barely open my mouth because I felt so "other." It was like culture shock. I was not used to being with the guys, like the trade guys, and you know there's no way I'd come out to those guys, but, when I eventually came out at NSCC it was like, oh fuck it, you know. So, I didn't care who knew or not. This is who I am. I'm not, I wouldn't advertise myself or my lifestyle, but I ended up speaking more about my partner to people I knew would be open to that because they'd already established that they were not homophobic. And now gradually we're at the point where, well everyone knows. We don't talk about it necessarily, cause why, why bother. But I'm certain I, it's just a non-issue I guess is what I'm saying. It's become a non-issue, it's just like anyone else's life. You just live it.

SG: Would you say that, like your experiences like, now that you like have been more open and talking about it like since then, were your experiences different from other lesbian relationships? Or even relationships between like, like gay men for example. Like was there, did you kind of like feel unique in that regard? Or was it kind of just like, like Oh like the things that I'm doing are like the exact same things as like every other couple is doing?

DW: That's a good question. I have to say I think it's about attitudes toward privacy and sexuality in general that would influence that. Like I don't talk to people about their sex lives, and I don't talk about mine. I talk about other aspects of the relationship, but I think there's a, there's a veil of privacy over the more intimate aspects with other people, so I mean I talk to my partner obviously, but not other people, unless it's a therapist [*laughing*]. Already done that. And that's kind of too bad in some ways, but I think it's just kind of the group of friends that I would tend to hang out with. We talk about other stuff. You know, what's going on in the world, in our communities and our work, in our families, but not kind of our intimate lives. And the downside of that of course, is if stuff goes wrong, you feel very isolated and alone. And you're not sure who to talk to.

I guess it's sort of like, I don't know if you ever saw the movie *Kinsey* but, that was done quite a few years ago about, you know, the Kinsey sex researcher guy. I mean, he and his wife, it's in the movie anyway, as it was portrayed when they got together at first, they were both so in the dark about their own sexuality, that, you know they were fumbling and unsure and that's when he decided, you know, really, let's open this up, let's have people talk about this because otherwise they feel victimized by ignorance. So, I don't know if gay men have my experience. I don't know if other gay women have my experience. I've always felt kind of different anyway because my primary impetus in life is more of a, to embody, my philosophy is spirituality as opposed to, I guess I'm saying sex is not the big thing for me. It really isn't. It's part of a relationship but it's not the biggest part. And I've always thought maybe I think that's a woman orientation really. And yet there's a lot of women who are very sexually oriented, so, who knows. I don't have the research, the latest research on that so I don't know.

SG: Well, I guess like my next question kind of touches on that a little bit, but do you feel like, are, have you found like you're, like your experiences with like valuing privacy let's say, does that kind of come from your ex, your, like, your past experiences as a lesbian or do you think, like, other aspects of your personality have influenced that?

DW: Yeah, that's a great question Sam. I think, I'm an introvert, so maybe that's part of it. You know, I, there are some things I don't talk about, but I think, I think the Catholic church also, certainly being raised in that sexuality denying culture had a lot to do with it, in terms of, equating it with shame and guilt, and yet I got so many good things out of Catholicism that I'm not going to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I'm not a Catholic now, but it gave me so much, it was very rich in what I did receive there, but the sexuality part is really fucked up. Excuse my language, but [*laughing*] you know and now we see that. We see that it's so sad just in the abuse, sexual abuse scandals that

never seem to end. So, there's definitely a core issue there that's very unhealthy. And, you know, I think I've absorbed some of that where you, you don't talk about sex, you don't orient yourself towards that being the core of what you want in life, and yet, then it comes up to bite you if you repress, repress, repress, it comes up to bite you, so.

SG: Did you ever feel like, just on that note, did you ever feel that you need any sense of like, Catholic guilt for example, when it came to sex in general, or was it just the way that you are expressing your sexuality with other women, that was like the problem.

DW: Never felt that I had a problem. When I wanted to, and I never felt shame, because at the beginning I remember when I fell in love with my first partner, I actually remember very distinctly going up to communion, getting communion as a Catholic, a very devout Catholic, holding the communion in my hand and realizing I don't care if the Church doesn't like this, but my love for this woman was as sacred to me as that communion and what it stood for. It was a communion with God that I felt in that love, so, that's how I saw it. It was very much a spiritual love, as well as a physical love, but, yes, there was no shame there, however, I think shame also comes from other areas. I do have shame around sexuality in some ways and it's hard for me now to even untie and untangle where it comes from, but I was raped when I was 18, and I think that has something to do with it. You know, so we, yeah, all kinds of different things contribute to shame.

SG: But it sounds like at least that as, you said, you said that you're not like a Catholic now, but it sounds like you are very, is very easy for you to kind of like incorporate your background and who you are, are like with your environment into like a very seamless way. Like it was able to just, like there weren't, like there wasn't a contradiction.

DW: There was no contradiction. Absolutely. And I think others might see that there would be, but I remember thinking if a priest were to challenge me, I would challenge him right back. As I've been thinking about this, about how religion works and how we approach spirituality, that's my, that's, you know how we all have our themes we think about, some people just think about building bridges and engineering and this is, some people are artists, well this has been my thing, is to think about along those lines, so I've done a lot of thinking and reading about people and what they believe, and how they impose beliefs, or how they live beliefs, and it's a very big part of my life. Even though I'm not a Catholic now, I still see it as, you know, one expression for millions of people on this planet. But no, I never felt a contradiction. In fact, the opposite. I felt that I was on to something that was the real connection with God and the big spirit in this universe, and no one was going, no one was going to get me off of that because they had no right. So, I felt very confident on a deep level. And you know I don't stop going to church when it became too painful to go. It was like I kept getting angry every time I'd go. It's like "Aw Jesus, forget this" *[laughing]*.

SG: Did you ever like, at any point in your life, did you like opening challenge those types of institutions whether it be like the church or, like a public institution like, you know, like a university or government institutions, whatever have you, on the basis of your sexual orientation?

DW: I think the only time I did that, I'm not an activist by nature. I really, it's just not how I work. I have to really think about things a lot before I jump in. But I do remember, this was before your time I think Sam, but Roseanne Skoke was a politician from Pictou County who was running for the Liberal party, and she was on a platform of open homophobia, and it was really awful. And I remember joining the Liberal party just so that I could go to the convention, and a whole bunch of did from Antigonish. The Women's Centre here organized this. A bunch of got in a bus, we went to that convention and we voted her down and she never became the candidate. So that was a deliberate, targeted action because she was deliberately targeting homosexuals. And she call, it was really funny at the time, she said that there was a whole "homosexualist agenda". that's what she said we all had. And, anyway, I, she had to be defeated and I'm glad she was and yet, and yet I see all sides because I used to be pretty homophobic myself. And I think we all evolve through stages, but you just don't want to impose your stage on a whole bunch of other people as a politician, I think, *[laughing]* you know, if it's going to be hurtful.

SG: I, I, was just going to say I kind of sympathize with that completely. I'm not really familiar with her, but I am from Saskatchewan, and we've had a very long history, even recently, of like very open homophobia and it's very hard to not have that kind of become like internalized, even if you don't want it to be. It can become part of your, like, character and it can, like, take a long time to, like, work through that and like, you'll battle that and not let that become like who you are.

DW: That's a really good point, and that's an excellent point and I sympathize because yeah, what is it? It's like how can this exist still in Canada, but you know I don't think we can ever be complacent. We are, our victories have been hard won, and we, they may not be permanent. I think we always have to be vigilant to public intolerance and be careful to try and re edu- like constantly work on educating people, you know. Yeah, you made a really good point about internalized homophobia. I think you're right. Sometimes we're not even conscious of it, and I think I would have no doubt that I have internalized a lot as well.

SG: Yeah, it's a, I'm just now thinking about my own experiences, because, like, I'm a trans woman, so sometimes you can, you get the homophobia, but then you also get the transphobia internalized as well, and be like, oh well like all these people are saying that I'm not a woman at all, and have no right to claim any aspect of that, hence, like you know you get, you get robbed of it from both ways. You know, like, you don't have the, you can't have the sexual orientation or the gender identity, so, and like it, it just kind of like it becomes like this you might have the homophobic politician, and then when you see then in real life you're like, ok, I know what they're going to say because I've said this to myself, like a million times before.

DW: Yeah, I think it takes a special kind of bravery to be a transwoman because I would say, yeah, you're robbed of both ends and I used to, I did get involved in a Positive Space training, and a friend of mine here, this young lesbian came to town, and she

was a real firebrand and wrote a whole program of Positive Space training. So, I became a- I helped do some trainings on that and do you know when I stopped feeling comfortable was when it became more trans oriented because I realized I don't have the expertise or the understanding yet. And so, I've been kind of educating myself on that just because I realized it was a real, it was a real gap and I had, I was shocked and horrified to realize that I had transphobic attitudes which stemmed from ignorance. And so over the years I've really learned a lot, and that's the new frontier right, in, in... I think in some ways we're getting over homophobia in the sense that we see it more, it's become very much more mainstream, but it's, I think it's really hard, must be hard to be a trans person, especially a transwoman in this day and age even.

SG: I think it's, oh sorry. I was just going to say I think, I think it's like a, it's a process of becoming, and even with my own self, like I can't say that, like, that I, cause like, I think you brought something up along the vein of like, it's not like you woke up one morning and then you just said, like, "Ok, I'm a lesbian," right, And you kind of, you kind of came through that through just having those relationships with other women, right. And those relationships kind of formed and helped make you into the person you are today. I kind of just feel the same thing. Like, I couldn't have been the person I am now without actually having the experiences, the friends, the community, even personal self-doubts, and then coming out of that through the other end and being ok, like, I am who I am. And it just sounded like, when you, it felt like when you spoke on that a bit, it kind of resonated with me. So, yeah, cause it just sounded like you, like you actually had to go through it first and then you're like, and then when that, when that question, when you [laughing] came forward, like when you did out yourself, it's like "yes" you know, and you could kind of maybe, maybe you felt like you could only definitively say that once you already had those experiences. Like [DW: Yes] like someone else couldn't tell you that you were a lesbian, you had to tell yourself basically.

DW: Yeah, oh you're, you're really good at this. Yeah, you, that's really perceptive, and perceptive because you've lived that kind of experience, you know. Like that's really interesting, exactly, exactly. Just out of curiosity, how the heck did you end up in Halifax?

SG: [Laughing] I wish I could say if was for love cause that would be a more interesting story, but I came here for school. And then when I, for, like, my graduate studies, so I already did my undergrad and then when I came here I met someone, and I started a relationship with them and they're the first person that's actually known me as I've come out, so they only know me as my current identity right now. I've talked about my past with them, but like, when I talk about my past with them, it's, it's like it's secondary, right because they can only see me as I am now, which is really nice, since it's kind of like a nice breath of fresh air to be in a space where nobody else, nobody knows your past, nobody knows who you were before. It's kind of like with anything, right, but especially just to go through this whole change of identity and be with supportive people. It's like incredible.

DW: Yeah, yeah. You deserve that. That's a beautiful thing.

SG: I notice that we only have 5 minutes left, but was there anything else that I didn't touch on that you would like to bring up?

DW: Yeah. One thing just occurred to me, and that's the power of the galvanizing person. Like that, I built, my former partner who, once we split up, she helped me build a house. She gave me a piece of property and helped me build a house on it. And, we had a bunch of women just start kind of coming out building this house on weekends, and that is the first time, and that was in the mid 90s, when our little community of disparate lesbians around here started to come together. And we became a community, but it started because there was a woman from Alberta who came out, no, Manitoba, who came out here and she had put an ad in the local paper called *The Casket*, not an open casket I might add [*laughing*] and quite a closed newspaper, and she put a little ad in there, in the midst of the homophobic attitudes around here, saying "Feminist lesbian looking for like-minded people to room with," or something like that. Anyway, it was just hilarious, and she came around saying, "Where are all the lesbians around here?" And she was really loud and out and vocal, and she said, "And you guys, you're building this house, you women, I mean, you're not even a community, come on, get it together," and so she would have these parties, she was renting a place here, and invite us all and we, we became a community because of an outsider who was ahead of us in terms of her confidence and comfort with being who she was. And she encouraged us all that way, and so it was really a wonderful thing. And again that, the other person I mentioned, she was from away, actually I guess, oh I don't remember where she had been, but she was certainly from outside of this town, and she came here and started that Positive Space training. She had been a- she was a student at StFX and was just pissed off with the homophobia and decided to do something about it. And she was at StFX quite a few years after I was, but there's no way I would even have imagined doing what she was doing back in the 80s. But she was doing it in the late 90s, so it's just interesting how things change, but often through the power of a forceful and confident personality.

SG: Yeah, they're just like able to bring people together, and people that you otherwise wouldn't have met [DW: Yeah, yeah] So I think that's a pretty powerful note to end on, honestly.

DW: Oh good, good.

SG: Yeah, I think, no I think this is really good. I think we covered a lot of ground and I think I did a lot better as an interviewer than I thought I would.

DW: Sam, you did an awesome job [*laughing*]. Nothing wrong with your interview skills. Are you, you're in masters of library and information science, is that what I saw on your-

SG: That is true.

DW: Well, you know if that gig doesn't work, you can always go into interviewing or something.

SG: *Oh thank you.*