

**Interviewee: Susan Larder**

**Interviewer: Elisabeth Rondinelli**

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

*ER: don't you go ahead and say your name and give me your date of birth, just to start off.*

SL: Sure, Susan Larder. June 29, 1963.

*ER: Okay.*

SL: Great.

*ER: Okay, I think this is going to work Susan, so why don't we just try it like this?*

SL: Great.

*ER: So good, okay. So, you were born in 1963? This is good. Susan, can you tell me a little bit about where you lived in Nova Scotia and you know what your trajectory was in terms of whether you moved from place to place and how long you lived in each of those places in and around the province.*

SL: Sure. And I did stay in the province my entire life and I kind of had somewhere between three and a ten-year interest rated any place I worked. So, I zoomed around a fair bit, but I never left the province.

*ER: Okay. And where in the province have you lived?*

SL: I lived in Halifax and Dartmouth. I lived in Bass River. I lived in Blackpoint. I lived in Truro. I'm sure that's not all of them. I, whenever I worked in Halifax I lived in Dartmouth, and vice versa. I never seem to live in the same city I was working in.

*ER: I see. And what did you do for a living?*

SL: I was a nurse.

*ER: Okay, great. And so, would you say that then, Halifax and Dartmouth might be the places that you lived the longest?*

SL: No. I always tried to live more rurally. I, I'm not really a city person, I'm more of a rural person, so I often had, I tried to make my commute not greater than 45 minutes. So, yeah.

*ER: Great. And Susan you were a nurse your whole career?*

SL: Yes.

*ER: What kind of nurse were you?*

SL: Mostly, community and psychiatric.

*ER: Okay, wonderful. One of the things that we're trying to establish for this project is any kind of community organizations that you might have connections to. And this might be organisations, Susan, that you have connections to as a result of having come out at some point in your life or anything having to do with a community building around lesbianism, sexuality, or other organizations that you might have had a connection to over the course of your life. And so, can you speak a little bit about whether or not you have these kinds of connections?*

SL: I can.

*ER: Great.*

SL: Yeah. I can, and mine is – certainly now I've been in more lesbian community that I ever had been in early life. I came out in a really negative experience in my family. At 19, it was not received well at all. It was a phase, and you know they loathed my girlfriend. And so, I just got out of dodge. And so that negative experience and then I was outed at my provincial nursing job, which really was horrible 'cause horrendous things happened to me there. I mean males would show me their penises on night shifts and they would chase me through the hall. I mean, I remember just, it was just horrendous. So, there is no mechanism to whistleblowers say, hey, this isn't a reasonable workspace and that I didn't out myself, someone, one of the orderlies knew my partners former partner, was a relation, so, you know, it wasn't a supportive work environment, even though I was a provincial employee. Not at all. Like it was really kind of awful. So that, so I didn't build community 'cause I number one, didn't know any existed and number two, it wasn't [*inaudible*] bit of celebration thing. I mean neighbours

who lived above me in the house I rented, their little child would scream profanities at us, you know. And they were the same people we, I would help as a community nurse, you know what I mean. When they didn't have things, I would provide that, so on the one hand had this really kind good person, on the other, they trained their child to call me names. So, I don't have a lot of that. Now I certainly do in my older years, but not any of my working or formative or, I wasn't part of any consciousness rising groups, I was none of that. Not at all, no.

*ER: And so, you said that you've sought out these connections later on in life? So, what kinds of connections have you, have you made?*

SL: Well, it's. It's mainly, there's a group of women here on the South Shore, so sure, who host a summer party and a Solstice party. We're just getting ready to have the Solstice party, and that is just a tremendous group. And these are really strong feminist women who worked like in, I guess 2009, I went to the World Women's March [ER: *Mhm*] in Ottawa. I guess that was my largest political action.

*ER: Great.*

SL: But, and letter writing campaigns and things like that, but no, it just really wasn't mine. I tried to, yeah, and coming out wasn't – or, being out and being political about it was just not my wheelhouse, and we were a political family, like rebels, in that way. But it just didn't occur to me in that way. It always seemed private, and it always seemed like I paid a really, really high price personally, when these things were known about me.

*ER: Yeah, that makes sense actually, doesn't it?*

SL: And in psychiatry, you know. If someone knew your weak spot, you know, that would be the very thing in that, their hour of greatest need they would hurl at you. So, I kept my private life really, really private. More and more as my life went on. Not less and less. I didn't live out loud in the gay world at all. In my work.

*ER: Yeah, yeah. So, Susan you mentioned earlier that you have, you had a really negative experience, both of coming out and then as actually being outed in your work life. So, I wonder if you could walk me through those two stories. So, it's – from what it sounded like, at 19 you actually decided to come out, but then at some point later you were outed. So could you, yeah, walk me through those two stories.*

SL: Well, okay, that's easy. So, at 19 I had formed a wonderful relationship with a woman, and you know, I thought it was all just marvelous, but when I told my family, they didn't see it in that same light at all. So, you know I can't remember, but it, you know, they - they didn't want to accept that notion. They just thought it was a phase and this was something that would pass. And I didn't feel supported at all. It was just, just like a non-option for them. Move on. And that's kind of all like I really remember of that. It wasn't positive.

*ER: Mhm.*

SL; Then my work one, it was, as I said, an orderly who knew my partners' – he was related to my partner, first partner. That was a different partner at that point. And so outed me and you know, like what men do to women is pretty horrendous, and you know, I didn't need to see their penises. I wasn't pleased or I didn't ask for it. I didn't want it. I didn't want to be terrorized at my work in those kind of ways at all. But they amused themselves that way at my expense, thinking, I don't know what they thought that would impress upon me, but, so, you know in those, that's a hostile work environment. And there were no mechanisms – certainly gay lesbian rights back in those early days was never discussed. I'd never heard anything, you know, in terms of speaking up or out against that. I just, you know, know. I had no thoughts that I could stop it.

*ER: So, this would have been like what, what year about would this have been when you were outed?*

SL: Late, late 1980s.

*ER: I think it's interesting Susan [inaudible crosstalk] okay. I think it's interesting the way you, you met, you said that when you were outed, you felt like there was nothing you could do about it, as though, as if to say like this was, not normal in a way, but that you know, how could you possibly fight back against that? Is there some, is, does that sound, does that reflect how you actually felt like, you know, there is, there, yeah.*

SL: I didn't have to fight about being a lesbian, but I sure didn't need, they weren't doing that to other female employees.

*ER: Yeah, yeah.*

SL: That, that was exclusively done to me, though, I think it was done to me somehow, if I could see their penises, I would be much inclined to go a different way [*laughing*]. I, I

don't know what their thinking was. I don't think like men. All I know is that it's not a normal work environment. To have to endure that and there was no mechanism that I could go to anyone and say, you know, the men are showing me their penises on night shift or whenever they get that idea. Like, I didn't feel that I could step forward. And raise that argument because you know it, it didn't seem like I had a system or anything under which I could have done that.

*ER: Mhm. Did you ever feel that your job was threatened?*

SL: Well, I left, and I left because of those kind of things. I had whistleblown. And that had gone as well as, on a different issue, and that again wasn't supported. It was, you know, wasn't me breaking policy. It was the person who, and I, I followed all the right channels. I went to them. I said, you know, this is causing me grief ad nauseum. But I'm going to ask you to stop this behavior and if you don't, I'm going to take it higher up, and then they did it again, and I said this is, you know you're, you're calling the shots here and I don't like the direction its going but, I'm telling you, this is, this is going to be a reportable thing [*ER: Mhm*]. And it happened again and I kept true to my word. But I, I was the one who was, you know, here this is a person close to their retirement. How dare I just like, no! How dare they? It was, you know, I considered it an abuse against a client. And I had a different belief system on how people should be treated so. So, kind, you know what I mean? There were a lot of situations where, and you, you don't think of the '80s as being a long time ago, but it is a long time ago in terms of how we talk about, or, people understand you have personal rights and that you have collective rights [*ER: Mhm*]. And, and that just wasn't talked about. I don't recall working with another lesbian. As I said, I didn't have community outside of my partner, so you know, I just had, I endured it for as long as I did and then went, it really got hostile because of my whistleblowing [*ER: Mhm*]. You know, the only obvious thing to do was skedaddle. And I did.

*ER: And Susan, like just, so the very next job that you took, did you come out pre-emptively, or did you [SL: No] stay quiet because you were, because of your experiences, or what did you just –*

SL: No, I never came out at my work after that. I really was very closed and kept my private life very, very private. Yeah. yeah.

*ER: Did you, are you glad you did that?*

SL: Well, it's not a glad or not. Like, when, I think trauma does things to you and then you live your life through that lens rather than, you know, doing the work, work. It wasn't

until much later, like late 40s, that I did any counseling work or anything to get on the other side of it.

*ER: Mhm.*

SL: Though, you know, you, I didn't even know I needed it. You know, what a, it's so strange. You just live your life, and you don't, you don't think beyond it until, until you do.

*ER: Yeah. And do you have, like you mentioned that your parents, you know or, you know, people in your family said that it was a phase and that was, and that it would pass, and that was kind of the end of it. Do you still have relationships with remaining family members?*

SL: I do. Funny, that's why I lost track of this meeting. We're in a bit of a legal dispute as a family over, over property and interpreting wills and whatnot. So, that had me a bit, pretty occupied and I really am so sorry. So. My mom just died this spring, and she and I became close later in life, and my dad died the year after I came out. So, there wasn't a big piece of time, but I don't remember my dad. I actually often reflect back and wonder if he wasn't gay [*ER: Mhm*]. You know, I just there were mannerisms and concepts and he kept to himself. And he, you know, there were just different things that I wonder it, that, something that he maybe never had the opportunity to express.

*ER: Mhm, that's very interesting.*

SL: Yeah. But mom and I got to a good place, and she certainly very much loves the partner, that I'm with now. And, you know, and not with everyone.

*ER: Okay, so, yeah, this is good Susan. So, you've told me a couple of experiences that you've had as being, you know, out. One of the things that we're also interested in finding out is, is the kind of experiences you've had as a result of your sexual orientation. And, the coming out stories are part of that, but you also have lived a whole life outside of those two experiences. And so, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about, you know, moments that stuck, stuck out or in general, what it's been like for you. Being out, being the age that you are. You said that you sought counseling in your 40s. Like if you could just talk a little bit about what your experience has been like. I'd like to hear it.*

SL: Well I think, not that I'm shy. That, yeah, no, it's not a topic I talk about. It's, I don't have a language or a context or, you know, even if I'm introducing [my partner], like I don't always say this is my partner, [*redacted*]. I'll say, and I'll, here's, this is [my partner]. So I don't put a label or a context because in one way, I really do think

partnership is a private thing. And, I'm sure that comes from earlier negative experiences, but also, like I really think we've, what we, what people think is public and what they have the right to know seems to always be way more than I'm comfortable sharing [ER: *Mhm*]. You know what I mean, like a, I don't give out a phone number readily or easily. I don't give out information about myself easily at all. Even the most pedantic things I'll keep rather to myself unless I'm really pushed up against the wall [ER: *Mhm*]. Though, I think that probably all comes from that time.

*ER: So, what made you decide to start working with a counselor, or working in a counselling capacity, in your 40s?*

SL: Do I even remember that now? I don't remember, but it was two women who did really, did powerful, powerful work and I, I was a long time finding counsellors that I would work with. Because it just seemed like I interviewed two or three before I even would have sessions because privacy issues seemed so weak. And I remember in the public system, they start, they said that they had the right to share all the information. I just said, with who? And they wouldn't list who all. And I said let's say, like best case scenario I've had a traumatic childhood. I said worse case scenario I tell you I've killed someone. Like tell me the [ER: *Yeah*] place and cases, and they wouldn't, and I thought, well this is strange as anything, so I didn't choose them. And then another one played this ridiculous game over where we sat in the room and it was like a setup for me to choose the wrong chair when, it's just, you know people are so funny. And there's lots of councillors like there's lots of nurses, lots of everyone in professional fields that don't do their own work, and so there, you know, they're not there to serve you, they're there to somehow serve a need they have. So, when I did find two women, and they always council together, and would do a sum up letter and you were just always, you know, really three people working together. And they did that so there was never an issue of improprieties or any anything, so you got to go deep pretty quickly [ER: *Mhm*]. But I don't remember what actually got me there in the first place. I don't, you know, I don't know that.

*ER: What about with I see you, you have a partner now, Susan?*

SL: Yes, for twelve or fourteen years, I can't just, I'm not a historian on that or a mathematician or someone who's tied to much reality, you know, but,

*ER: Yeah, yeah. And what, what has that been like. Like how, so. if you, so you, this been 14 years, were you with other partners, other long-term partners like, so –*

SL: Yes, I had one other long-term partner [ER: Okay]. So, I always had, well I had the first one, which was really short lived in the end, you know, that we didn't have anything in common except, you know, it got me pulled over a threshold, and there we were. But, no my first – we were young women and we you know, lived together, always and so, yeah. So, I consider myself monogamous, but that became an issue later in the relationship and, my partner didn't want to be the monogamous. But yet still wanted to stay within that confines, but wanted me to treat, you know, to agree to all that. And I said, well I've no idea how I'm going to react. Well, that's probably what put me in counselling. I think it was. Yeah, that sense of I had the right to one thing and if I didn't think I had the right to authorize permission for someone else to do something, you know, you like, you want to have affairs. Well, you can't come to me for permission for something you want to do. Like, and you can't have me pre-imagine how I'm going to respond to that when how will I know. I can't possibly, so, you know this doesn't sound like mine. Pretty sure must be yours. So, you know, I think that's where I got into counselling. To really understand where my boundaries were.

*ER: And what about your current partnership? How has that been for you?*

SL: Well this, I think it's all together different. When you do counselling work and you really have a sense of who you are, and then I was, I don't know, four or five years on my own, and not in any way wanting to be in a relationship. Just really wanting to live and feel the joy of my life for myself and, and that was marvelous. And then I met this woman who really had a strong sense of boundaries. Didn't want me in her bus or any of those kind of things, so we kept a distant relationship, distance. Like we lived in different cities. I think for probably three or four years. And then when we lived together, we still didn't always, what, we always left a lot of room for each other to, to expand and do our own thing, and that's still the case, so, it's been really wonderful.

*ER: You need that. You need the space.*

SL: I think, I think everybody does [ER: Yeah, yeah], to do your own thing and, yeah.

*ER: So, one of the, you mentioned this a little bit earlier about, you know, interacting with organizations, but I wonder at this point in your life, Susan, even despite being a private person, have you interacted at all with the lesbian community, with friends, with groups in Nova Scotia that, in any like minor or major way?*

SL: Well yes I've been, ok, so I was in a lesbian book club and a lesbian cooking club [ER: Okay]. And then here on the South Shore this, there's a big network of women who get together, we call it Lake Ladies. There's a summer and winter one, and I've been



doing that for twelve, thirteen, fourteen years. And now that same group of women, as they age, I'm part of the you know, the team that does a check-in and connect you on this and, you know, that kind of thing, so we're, we're, yeah [ER: So]. That's pretty sweet.

*ER: Yeah. So that's really interesting. So, there are members of, so this is the Lake Ladies group where you're doing [SL: Yes], yeah, so you have people in that group who are coming to the age where they actually need support from the community to make sure that they are cared for?*

SL: Yeah. And we always say, like we had talked about, way, way, way back when, and if we had of started it, it wouldn't have still been build. Doing what we used to lovingly called the old dykes home. We should of, and now here they are, all at the age, and stage and, you know, these are women with means now, they weren't earlier in life, but inheritance some things change everything. And they're at that point in life, and it doesn't matter how much money you have, there aren't any services to be purchased. You know it's, we're in a bit of a tricky spot.

*ER: So, what kinds of things have you done for each other?*

SL: Well. I'm a gardener, so gardening is kind of what I offer up. So, I just finished putting a friend's garden in, anyway, you know, tidy up the outside of another woman's garden. You know just clipping and nipping and shearing up the trees, and things like that. The things that I can do. And love to, and do, do, so, yeah. I think we're all realizing that maintaining our own homes and properties is coming to an end. So, yeah.

*ER: And what about the book club and the cooking club. Can you talk me, talk to me a little about those?*

SL: I just left that when I left the city because I'm not someone who likes driving anymore. And the pandemic was on, so I did leave the two book clubs when I moved away. And the cooking club that had kind of already come to an end. Yeah. And when you worked at night, that's another thing and I think that's a big piece too and you forget it. When you're a nurse and you work shift work, you're not really group material, you know because you can't always see, every Wednesday night, yeah, yeah, no, tell them you're not going to be there [ER: Mhm]. You know there's a lot about shift work that makes a lot of those kind of activities just not possible, and I never had children, so it's never part of that easy group to move into and get to know people. All my get to know people is through gardening. Some are women that were down, and I house sat for over the years. I planted in their gardens, and cared for their gardens, and I have no memory

of that, like it's so natural for me to do it, but I didn't remember. So, I've left memories throughout the city of gardening that, you know, I had no, no memory of it at all. And now when my other partner died, I guess it's two years now, I'm slowly bringing that garden that we had built here, 'cause the family are realizing that it's way beyond them, so I just brought the miniature garden up, and I've brought my mom's peonies here when she died. And now my whole front garden is my old back garden from Bass River. So, yeah.

*ER: So, Susan, I think it's interesting that like, you been talking, you've said quite a lot that you, that you consider yourself a private person. But you're also describing these, these interactions with other women where you're in quite intimate settings where maybe there is lots of opportunity to speak openly. To really get to know people, like in the context of a book club or cooking or even like entering someone's home and helping them with their garden. So, does, does that that come naturally? Do you see it as, do you see it as, as labour to be less private in those situations?*

SL: No, but it doesn't feel like I'm giving anything up in those situations either. Really it doesn't, like, no, sharing food doesn't seem to evoke that and book clubs and reading books, like we all have a perspective when we read something or know something or, so no. No. That didn't feel intimate in any kind of way. And house sitting, that was just that, I call them the four or five years where I just felt so free and so nomadic. And, you know, these are all women with far more means than me, so, slipping into their house while they zip off there, that was just so easy for me to do because I had nothing tying me against it. So, it just was easy to do and, and it left a bigger impression with them, 'cause I, I don't even recall doing it. I would naturally be out in someone's garden if I could.

*ER: Yeah, yeah. So, as we know, Susan, this is, this is a project that is building an archive of LGBT seniors in the province, and I wonder if the project leaders talked to you at all about potentially donating or contributing materials to this archive. Does that sound ...*

SL: I do, but it's [*ER: Yeah*] funny because there's a provincial archive already so, it's just a, not clear why Dal is doing a separate one. Yours will be private, and this one is already public [*ER: Okay*] so. So, I guess the question's is more for you, right, I think it, I think it's important for people like me who were silenced in many ways rather than the really active ones. So, people get a sense that it wasn't safe, it wasn't, it wasn't pleasant. I didn't have a phone at the time when those people were pulling out street signs and threatening to come in and do god awful things to me. And those are, that's not pleasant.

*ER: What, what period are you referring to Susan?*

SL: Oh, that would have been early 80s, so, yeah, 1981, '82, maybe '83 and that, so [ER: *Mhm*]. And I don't know why I didn't have a phone. if I was just getting ready to move or, I don't know.

*ER: So, the, yeah, so the, the arch– the materials, did they talk to you at all about that?*

SL: They might have.

*ER: Okay.*

SL: See I have, I have sort of some short-term memory challenges [ER: *Yeah, yeah*], so I don't remember.

*ER: Okay, yeah. Well, one of the things that we are interested in, the archives, the archivists are collecting materials. So, if you think of something, either right now or in the next day or so, whatever, that you think, oh, that might be an interesting contribution to make to this archive, you can let me know and that would be something that the archivists would consider including. So yeah, is there, is there anything that comes to mind right now or do you want some time to think about that?*

SL: No. No, I think that the main thing is for me, my piece, my contribution is [static] –

*ER: Susan, are you there? [Static] Sorry Susan, you cut out there for a second. Susan, can you hear me?*

SL: [Audio resumes] – 'Cause we have a lot of intersexuality amongst our friends and yet we never met until the Lake Ladies party.

*ER: Susan, can you hear me?*

SL: Yes, I can hear you.

*ER: Yeah, you actually cut out there for a second and the last thing I caught was, and that's when I met the Lake Ladies.*

SL: Oh, sorry. I was saying [my partner] and I had many, many, many circles of friends that were, the same. Like I knew many of the women friends she knew, and vice versa, and yet we never met until Lake Ladies.

*ER: And [redacted] is your, your current partner.*

SL: Yes, my current partner.

*ER: Okay.*

SL: So isn't that, like just kind of fascinating that we never did, so we would have been at, you know, these kind of summer events or parties or, or whatever. Maybe even the dances and stuff, you know. She, she used to organize dances that I went to, but I don't ever recall meeting her nor she meeting me.

*ER: How did you end up meeting?*

SL: At Lake Ladies New Year's party. Yeah. And then the woman I was, that had taken me to the party, we'd gotten a flat tire and [my partner] came and used her CAA and then followed us home and I had invited her to a women dance that was coming up in Tatamagouche, and she declined, and I thought, wow, I thought we really kind of struck it off. And we didn't meet again until May, but what I hadn't realized was that she was just finishing up a relationship that had ended, but you know how there's strings and you kind of like to do things right [*ER: Yeah*]. And she's very principled that way. No, she kind of wasn't freed up emotionally, or all the way extracted from that relationship, so, we didn't meet until, and we booked a kayak event to go kayaking and, then another event, and another event, you know, slowly formed this really loving relationship.

*ER: That's wonderful.*

SL: We built a home together. We're, you know, we're, yeah, pretty sweet.

*ER: Susan, is there anything that you want to add that you feel like we haven't covered or anything that you want to talk about in terms of something that you want remembered and recorded in this archive?*

SL: No, just said you know, it's, I don't think it's ever been easy for women. And I think of, particularly challenging for lesbian women to have a voice in a world that kind of could strike you, could strike you twice, you know what I mean. Men, you know, only fantasize about sleeping with a lesbian, you know. I think that, that kind of really

sexualized notion that, all that, so I think it's that kind of thing and we haven't really shifted so far from that kind of narrative, I think. Women still don't hold their proper place in governments and world leaders and all those sorts of things. So that woman's perspective, which I think is the same as a lesbian perspective, still hasn't been given its voice in the world. And we live in a much lesser world as a result of it. So, it not having Indigenous people at the table, not having persons of colour at the table, not having women at the table, we are still living in such a, just such a horrid time in history when it could be so much better. So, I think that's really still my message, so. Yes, no there's nothing deeper than that.

*ER: It's great Susan. Well, I'm just going to turn the recording off here, but I wanted to thank you very much for your time, Susan.*