

Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

Interviewee: Margaret Spence
Interviewer: Olly Zanetti
Place of Interview: Leyton, London
Date: 29 June 2009
Files: MS1-4

Key

OZ: = Interviewer, Olly Zanetti
SP: = Interviewee, Margaret Spence
[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time
[5:22 IA] = inaudible section at this time
[Word 5:22] = best guess at word

OZ: ... there's a couple of questions just to...

MS: Start you off.

OZ: ... set the microphone up because it's going to be recorded and so set everything up.

MS: Yeah.

OZ: So yeah, so first of all, if you could ... hang on a sec. It's Monday the 29th of June 2009 and this is Olly Zanetti interviewing ... could you tell me your name please?

MS: Margaret Spence.

OZ: And could you tell me where and when you were born please as well?

MS: When? When, 1960. Where, Alton in Surrey.

OZ: And we are in Margaret Spence's house which is in Leyton in North East London and I think I've already said my name, Olly Zanetti, and this is for the Stonewall and Galop 25th Anniversary Oral History Project. Fantastic. So to start off, can you tell me a little bit about your background, where you come from?

MS: God! I was born in Surrey but I lived most of my life in London. I grew up mainly in East London, Stratford area and I went to school in Plaistow. Left from school, started catering when I left school, that's what I did a qualification in and I had my son when I was 17, he's now 32.

OZ: OK, so could we jump back a little bit?

MS: OK.

OZ: And tell me a little bit more about your early childhood, the things you remember from then.

MS: What sort of things?

OZ: What was your family life? What do you remember of that?

MS: I've two brothers, I'm the only girl in our family, I'm the oldest. My parents, my father was Jamaican, came over in the '50s. My mother's Irish, she came over in the '50s and they obviously had quite a hard time. We grew up, as I said, in South London and came to East London. I am in the oldest of three, they are literally a year after me, so we're quite close in terms of age. And even at a young age I tended to be a bit tomboyish because I was always out with the boys. But my mother wasn't particularly keen on me being like that, she's a very staunch Irish woman, and so I just did what I wanted to do really, I'm sounding like rubbish now so, OK.

OZ: So you're a bit tomboyish, how did that manifest itself?

MS: Well I'd go out with the boys, I did most of the things that the boys did, I was never particularly interested in dolls and stuff like that. And at quite an early age I think I realised that there was stuff going on for me that wasn't quite going on for the rest of the girls, 'cause I kind of like girls. But as I said before, I had quite a strict upbringing from my mother and she made sure I was really clear that I was to be girlish. And so I kind of steered clear of it, steered clear of the gay world or anything to do with what was defined as gay, or lesbian in particular, out of fear more than anything particularly from my mum. My dad wasn't particularly bothered, I don't think he bothered that much, but my mum was really like, 'No, that's something witches do and it's evil and it's ...' And so I stayed well clear of that right up until my mid 20s, even though there were little incidents that I could actually highlight for myself that I kind of thought, oh we're back in this situation again, I better not do this! It always felt like I was doing wrong, always. Anyway, so come my mid 20s which is quite a way on, I'd already had my son, didn't anticipate having children at all, I'd actually said at quite an early age I wasn't having children and hadn't quite understood the premise of how you get pregnant and all that for some reason, I'm sure that's again, something to do with my mum. So had my son quite early, brought him up on my own, his father died shortly after he was born, so there wasn't very much in the way of support. My mother was completely, 'pfff, that's it, out, you're not here anymore!' So brought up my son, started to bring up my son and came across ... I went to a party, I happened to go to this particularly party with a finance at the time, a male finance, who was dressed in a dress and I went into this particular party. It was Christmas Eve I think, or New Year's Eve. And this whole bunch of girls came in, very tomboyish looking and I said, 'That's it, I'm not staying here, I'm not staying here, don't want to stay here with a bunch of dykes,' and walked out. After a few weeks somehow I got talking to one of them as a result of going to this particular party and she's been my closest friend ever since in fact.

I think it was around about that time, I was about 23, 24 and I really started to start questioning things that people were saying about lesbians and gay men. I'd actually had a boyfriend along the way that actually we only spent a few months together and he actually came out as a gay man to me. I thought it was something I did! It was very upsetting and didn't really know what to do. I started to become more politically aware of lesbians and gay men as a community; I'd gone to a lot of women only parties, because I felt safer. And gradually felt far more accepted within that community than I did any other. I then fell in love with my first woman.

OZ: How old were you here?

MS: I was about 25. I'm sure I actually fell in love before and in fact I actually did say to one of my best friends at the time that I was 'in love with her.' I never actually spoke to her again since and I'm sure that that's because she got really freaked out. It was incidents like that, that made me sort of feel like maybe I shouldn't go there, maybe I shouldn't pursue this any further. I wasn't living under my mother's roof, I wasn't living under my father's roof; I was living under my own roof and I could do what I wanted. So it wasn't like I felt pressure from them. I more or less lived an independent life of bringing up my son and I started going out a lot more, particularly to women only do's. Most of the friends that I had were actually, by this time, I'd built up quite a group of supportive friends and most of the friends that I was actually around were actually lesbians anyway. Fell in love with this particular woman who I was absolutely besotted with and...

OZ: How was she, how did you finally meet?

MS: Well she was part of the group, but if you had a hierarchy of a group, she was like the ... how can I put it; there was the king pin, and she was next of the king pin, so to speak. And nobody had even think about going out with her, or who she might be. And I thought she was absolutely adorable. And after a certain period of time, I dunno, it must have been about four, five months, we actually got closer. We eventually slept with each other which was like ... I was on cloud nine, and went round telling everybody because of course she was my first love. And it didn't last very long I have to actually say. She had other commitments that she was getting involved with and has since left London which was a long time ago. God, a long time ago! I don't even know what she looks like now actually. But I understand she's moved up North. What else can I tell you?

OZ: So in terms of your family though, I mean you've spoken a lot about your family, your son's cropped up quite a lot, but I'm still quite interested, for example, as this was happening...

MS: How did he come...

OZ: Well how were your siblings and your parents, what were they doing?

MS: Right, now there was a lot of talk within the family initially when I started going out and expressing my friend's views and my current views at that time, and my mother asked me at that point, 'Are you gay?' And I said, 'Don't be stupid Mum, of course I'm not!' Because she's already set the fear in place and it was like, I just thought this was a trick question for her to give me another rebuttal. So I kept it all very ... in fact it's only in the last seven years I've actually come out to my mum, and she's now passed away; she passed away in January. Everybody in my life actually knew except my family. The only person in my family, apart from my son, was my dad. I felt able to actually tell my dad, I didn't feel it was an issue, and he knew for years. Whereas both my brothers and my mother kept very low-key, didn't tell them. If ever we went to family do's I'd usually take along a friend, 'this was my friend.' My son knew, I kind of think he always knew. He knew from a very young age. He once, at the dinner table, said to my mum ... my mum had asked him at the dinner table, 'So Ashley, have you any girlfriends?' And he said, 'No, but I've got boyfriends Mum.' And my mum immediately said to me, 'You're going around with the wrong sort of people!' <Chuckles> It's like 'oh!' I gave him a wink though.

- OZ:** And how old was your son then?
- MS:** He was about seven. So it's like ... he's 32 now and he's always been really supportive. He's been to Pride with me, oh god, he's been to Pride so many times with me. I don't go to London Pride particularly, I go to Brighton Pride because I live part-time in Brighton, 'cause I'm at uni there. And yeah, he's always been supportive. I think there was only one girlfriend, one particular girlfriend that he was a bit anxious about and I'd got threatening phone calls on the phone which was a bit oh, messy. And he did get a little bit worried about that, but I think apart from that, he's really cool, really, really supportive.
- OZ:** And what happened after your mum was making that comment to him about boyfriends?
- MS:** Well I tried to play everything really down, because the fact that she's actually asked me the question meant that she had noticed a change or had noticed stuff around me. But I didn't want her to start then getting on me about it. I haven't got a particularly good history with my mum, but I knew that that would be something, that that would just be a cause for her to criticise and I didn't want to get into that.
- OZ:** And you mentioned that you spent a lot of time under your own roof, you said, 'that was really important.'
- MS:** H'mmm, independent.
- OZ:** Tell me about why that was so important.
- MS:** Because I didn't have to worry about how I did things, I didn't have to worry so much about their ... and I say their, my parents, influences or criticisms. I didn't have to be as ... I could be as open as I wanted to be and not have to justify it to anybody. That was really important for me. It's still as important, both my parents are now dead, I don't actually feel like I have to answer to anybody. I think there's a certain amount of pressure that you're put under by your parents because you either don't want to hurt them or you know that that isn't what they're about. Even when I did come out to my mum several years ago, she was really fine. In fact I'd plucked up all the courage to actually tell the whole family, phoned them all up and I was really, really choking, saying to them how I felt and this is how it had been and actually, 'I'm now actually living with this woman,' and they'd have to get used to it. And my mum's response was, 'well Mag, you know I don't agree with any of it, but if you're happy then I can't really say very much.' And she did actually come round to even buying like birthday presents and Christmas presents for her as well, which is like so, so good. I mean I never thought I'd ever see that day, do you know what I mean, which was very cool. My brothers laughed, both of them. <Laughs> Both of them like ... one said, 'well what, didn't you think we knew?' <Laughs> And I was like, 'Aw, well why didn't you say!' He's like, 'Well it's not for us to say, it is, we had to wait until you actually said!' <Cough> And I said 'OK.' The other one said, 'Oh, can I go down the pub now and tell everybody?' And I said, 'You don't have to be that excited really, but if you want to.' And he's going, 'Well now I can say it, can't I?' 'Oh OK.' So they were all pretty cool. My dad was a bit miffed at first when he found out, and that was a lot longer, a lot further back; that was about 15 ... I'd say about 15, 20 years ago. And he wasn't partic ... I think he thought that it was just something I was play acting at, do you know what I mean? I think actually

probably most of the family thought I was just play acting, do you know what I mean? Because they ... I dunno, they hoped I wasn't. My brother once found ... he was going through my diary, you know how younger brothers go through this ... well I don't know if you know but ... they go through their sister's diary and one particular diary I had, I'd written down lesbian line on the front page or on the inside page that I'd seen on a tube train. And when we were having an argument later on in the day ... I must have been about early 20s, he'd said, 'And what's that telephone number doing in your diary?' And I sort of ... 'what telephone number?' He said, 'Lesbian line, you're not one of those, are you?' And I said, 'Well what's it to do with you?' And he said, 'Why would you have that in your diary if you weren't?' So it was very like ... you were really cautious about what you actually said and what you didn't say. And I don't think that I've ever been outwardly ... I would never ... There's the stereotype that people have for what's defined as lesbian; 'Oh well they've got to have dungarees and bother boots and short hair cuts and all that.' I've never been that type of person. I like to wear trousers, I like to actually ... I like to just be me, do you know what I mean? I'm not one of those staunch feminist like got to show you that ... you've got to prove to everybody that you're a lesbian by wearing men's clothes, and it's like, 'No that isn't me, never has been.' I like being a woman. And it used to really annoy me that my friends just ... I've got one friend in particular and she actually spent so much time in Mr Buyrite's <laughs> ... Mr Buyrite's or some other male shop, I can't remember and I'd say to her, 'Why are you going in there, why can't you just wear ordinary ...' 'Oh I like them.' Oh well, fair enough, each to their own.

OZ: You mentioned that you came out of school at 18, was it?

MS: Sixteen.

OZ: And then you went to do, was it catering?

MS: Yeah, it was the only thing that I actually came out of school with. I'm not particularly bright at school and the one thing that I could do was cook. The only thing that my mum ... or should I say not the one thing, the only things that my mother ever taught me were domesticated duties, and I had to sew, knit, to iron clothes, cook, clean, typical sort of womeny duties, and hated most of them! <Chuckles>

OZ: So how did it feel going and doing this course, was this something you did for yourself or for your mum?

MS: No, this was a need for me to actually find work. I'd left school, I had no qualifications and I needed to actually do something that I had at least some sort of flair for and catering was it. I enjoyed cooking, I do enjoy cooking, I've just taken some flap jacks out of the oven! <Laughs> I like cooking, I enjoying cooking. So I did that for two years, that wasn't too bad, it was hard work though, very hard work. And I was getting up at four in the morning, having to take Ashley to a babysitter, or a childminder, I wasn't finishing until three in the afternoon, very hard on your feet and not very much money. So I got fed up with that really quickly, and became a stay at home mum and a tower block for the best part of seven years, five to seven years. And of course, that's where I kind of built up all my activism stuff; I did a lot of work around the Tenants' and Residents' Centre. I did a lot of voluntary work around the estate and my friend Kim, at the time who is still a current friend, was always really encouraging and supporting. There were quite a few of them on this

particular estate, so there was quite a gaggle of us. And there was a running joke that they were going to throw me a surprise coming out party, because I just seemed to go to loads of all these places, but never did anything about it, 'cause I was always too nervous or too scared. We did quite a lot of work on the estate, building up the Tenants' and Residents' Association and just generally getting involved in local politics in that sense, like joining area forums and Kim and I used to be known as the Batman and Robin of a particular area, because she was the white lesbian and I was the black single parent. So we'd really kick arse, do you know what I mean, at that particular point.

OZ: So what kind of things did you do with the Residents' Association?

MS: We played bingo, we did ... I mean you knowing it absolute ... The two tower blocks that I'm referring to are ones in Stratford, Abbey Road, and both of them had asbestos in the airing cupboards. So there was a whole programme of actually getting rid of all the asbestos, but because it's quite dangerous, there was a whole programme to have to give the tenants back some sort of compensation because they'd have to move out of their houses and all that sort of stuff. And we just made sure that all the tenants knew about it, that they were aware of their rights, what sort of advice they could actually get, where they could further benefits and just generally keeping an eye on what was going on in the local council really. As a result of that work, I was out of work for quite a while as a single parent, we both actually went for one job, both her and I. And I got the job which was the Tenants' and Residents' Resource Centre. It was funded by the local authority and it was to basically look at providing small grants to tenants' and resident's associations in them building their constitutions, making sure that when they talked about equal opportunities that they did in fact adhere to the equal opportunities. A lot of tenants' and residents' associations in Newham in particular were working men's clubs, on their books, they had a membership of say 1,000 people and not even 10 percent of them were actually either black, Asian or any other equality based person, if you see what I mean. So part of my role there was to go round to these associations and basically challenge and ask them what they thought that we could actually do for them, how we could get more people involved and stuff. And I was there for about 18 months I stayed there. In the meantime I started doing a lot of work around parenting skills. My Ashley must have been about 12, 10 or 12. And as children grow up, particular if you're a single parent, you start to question whether you're bringing them up right. There was nobody else I could actually ask for in terms of support. It's a job that you take on without having any idea what you're taking on.

And I was struggling, I was really struggling 'cause he was becoming a teenager and I was thinking oh my god, how am I going to cope with this? Started doing this parenting school, parenting skills, and I'd managed to do a training programme for 12 weeks called Parent Link and was so blown away by what we found out, and one of the things was that you don't actually have to believe that your parents are the gods that we think we are, because some of them have done a really bad job. I'm not necessarily saying that of my parents, but I'm saying that it gave me the opportunity to actually say, 'Well do you know what, actually I'm not doing too bad a job!' He's clothed, he's fed, he knows what's right and wrong, he does his own thing, he's got his own independent voice, that sort of stuff. Whereas my own childhood was very, very strict. It was like, 'No you can't do that, no you can't go there, no ...' So it

helped me a lot, it helped me quite a great deal. And I started leading those workshops, I took a course that actually helped me to facilitate that for other parents and did that in Newham and in Waltham Forest under the Adult Education Training.

OZ: And so how did all of this lead on to your work with Stonewall Housing?

MS: Right well...

<End of Part 1>

MS: The work that I went on to ... I left the Tenants' and Residents' Resource Centre and got a job as a housing manager in an organisation called Homeless Action, I don't know whether you know it, it's now called Eves Housing. It was for women from 16 to 65, supported housing and we were to collect rents, provide support and do weekly visits every week. The organisation in itself was a collective, which was fantastic 'cause I've never come across that before, don't think I have since actually! Which just ... I mean in terms of again, politics, it was really good to actually be part of that dynamic and understand how that works. We were all part of the decision making process, it all felt really good. And I worked initially in the North West team which was Camden and Islington, which then included Brent. I then moved to the North East team which was Hackney, Newham and it might have been the edge of Islington again, I can't quite remember. So got involved there, and again came into more contact with more women, some on the scene, some not. You build up a certain amount of kudos or status within the community generally and I was seen as a ... I don't know whether people actually saw me as being out or not at that point. But I was always seen on the scene and knew quite a lot of women through the scene.

OZ: And how old were you here?

MS: I'd say I was about 30, 30 ... gosh, yeah about 30s, early 30s, mid 30s.

OZ: Early nineties then?

MS: Yep, yeah. I was building confidence, I was seriously building confidence and I was doing all sorts, doing tenants, I was leading workshops on, parenting skills, at one point I did workshops on hetrosexes and training, which is basically showing people that they can't ... that there's no need to always make the assumption that you're not working with lesbians and gay men. I did racism awareness training and became quite, as I say, confident about my politic awareness, as well as social awareness. I can't quite remember why I left Homeless Action, I think I was ... I did one year at the University of East London, I was going to a degree, I started to do a degree and for one reason or another that fell apart, but decided that I needed to do work. And a friend of mine, Mary, was actually working for Stonewall at the time and in fact there was another couple of workers at Stonewall who I'd already knew from Homeless Action, so they encouraged me as well to go for the job at Stonewall, which I did.

OZ: And what was the job?

MS: Right, that was under a section ... it was a housing advice and referrals worker with specific remit to work with black and ethnic minority, lesbians and

gay men. And in particular, one of my roles, one of my responsibilities was to setup a housing advice and telephone line service, specifically for those needs. And it was under the section of the Race Relations Act, I can't quite remember off the top of my head that meant that it was specifically for a black worker.

OZ: Can you remember how you felt when your friends were suggesting that you apply for this job?

MS: Again, a certain amount of fear actually. First and foremost, I'm mixed race, and there are always issues around whether you're black enough or whether you're not. And that's something that I've had to work through in my life, in this society as defining myself as black first. If I was going to define it further I'd say I was then mixed race, because purely on the basis that when I walk down the street, people see black, they don't see, well she's a lighter shade and therefore whatever. So I struggled with it a little bit because I thought for myself, would I be accepted as a black woman? And people were going, 'What are you talking about, of course you would!' And it's like, 'Right OK, well let's go for it!' So that was about my own insecurity about my colour, my heritage.

OZ: And can you remember the interview bit?

MS: Oh god, can I remember the interview? Do you know, I don't think I can. Oh yes I do; I do remember who was there. Yeah, I'm really bad at interviews I have to say <laughs>. I am terrible, 'cause I'm very nervous, I can be very nervous. And people think I'm so confident and reassured, but I can be very nervous when it comes to interview situations and I remember coming out of there actually feeling, oh well I've really messed that up, oh my god, just go home and die. As it happens, when I got told when I got the job, I was ecstatic! I was really over the moon! And knew then that I'd actually be working with people that I knew, which felt absolutely brilliant! I was excited at the prospect of actually setting something up for black and ethnic minorities, mainly because I did feel like there needed to be a certain amount of separateness, not because I actually think that they should be separated, but I think there are actually different issues and I'll come on to that a little bit later. I said before my dad was really OK about me coming out to him, he thought it was a phase I'd go through and I'd get over it. My experience of black people and how they relate to me coming out is completely different and it's not been good. So I was quite pleased about getting the job, quite chuffed and I was doing a lot of work around ... I just seemed to take off as a butterfly really. I was doing work around young women, I worked for the GAP project for a little while, I dunno whether you know of them? That's young women leaving care. There's a hostel for that in Bloomsbury, not Bloomsbury, up that way. And I was on a number of management committees doing a lot of work for different organisations. Yeah, loads, absolutely loads, got really involved. And starting the work at Stonewall just meant I met more and more people, god. I did think about how we'd actually setup the black and ethnic ... or how I'd make more contact with the black and ethnic lesbian and gay community, and my biggest fear there again was that I would be in a situation where I would have to ask a black man or a black woman what their sexuality was, they'd be really offended and I'd go and get a clump. And once I actually sought out a place that would be relatively good to use ... do you know of St Giles Trust in Camberwell Road?

OZ: I've heard of them.

MS: Right. What I did was I went round to all the different organisations that I could think of, particularly in South London because that's where a high population of black and ethnic minority people ... East London was a bit too on my door step and not as ... I don't know why East London was not a good choice, but we'd decided that South was better. And I'd gone round to all the organisations, said to them that I was trying to setup a housing advice service, specifically for the needs of black and ethnic minority lesbians and gay men, would people be interested in us doing it from there, explained to them our current drop-in service was actually working from London Friend, which we did each week. And St Giles Trust which was at that point a one stop homeless place for anybody who was street homeless, or in a hostel and actually wanted to just go there to have lunch, activities during the day, a number of things that they had there that they'd got setup. And they said that they would be prepared to let us have a room for one day a week. There was quite a mixture of staff there so I actually didn't feel like, oh you know, I didn't feel intimidated. I don't think they felt particularly intimidated by me.

And we set it up that I would actually be there one day a week for a short period of time and I'd advertise it as much as possible. The first couple of weeks I was really anxious thinking oh my god, how on earth are we going to do this? These people are going to have to come into reception; they're going to have to say that they're here to see Stonewall Housing. That might make them a bit anxious and then they've got to come in and see me! Well, after a couple of weeks you got into the swing of things and every time someone came in I was as friendly as whatever, allowed them to sit down and my way of actually broaching the subject was my saying, 'Right OK, so you're here to get some housing advice, what I need to do is just got through the monitoring form <laughs> just to ask you a number of questions,' because at least that way it didn't seem like I was like, 'Well sorry no, you can't come to this service because you're not a lesbian, you're straight,' blah, blah, blah. You'd be surprised how many people had that question asked again, 'Can you tell me what you're saying?' I was like, 'right OK.' And on a number of occasions <chuckles>, I thought any minute now they're going to get up and give me such a whack!

So I start of saying, 'right you're here for housing advice, yes come in, sit down, I need to ask you a number of monitoring questions, do you mind if I ...' whatever, yeah. 'How do you define your sexuality?' 'What you mean?' 'Well how do you see ... I mean ... how do you see your sexuality?' 'No, you have to tell me again.' I'm going oh god, this guy's got arms like flipping trucks! <Laughs> What am I going to say! 'OK, do you sleep with women, or do you sleep with men?' <Laughs> 'Let's put it that way!' And I'm thinking any minute now ... 'No, no, no, I sleep with men.' 'Oh good! Right OK, let's get on with it.' <Laughs> OK, yeah there were some very scary moments I have to actually say, because as well as understanding and setting up the service, I'd also a bit more understanding of what some of the black culture actually brings to lesbians and gay men as well. I'd had a couple of incidents that had happened where one woman had actually told me, 'I should be ashamed of my colour.' At quite a young age I got a brick thrown at my head, told that, 'If I ever said their sister was a lesbian again I'd get beaten up.' And during some point of that period of time, which has got to be about 12 years now, I went to Jamaica myself, which was the first time I'd ever been to Jamaica. I'd gone with a girlfriend, not a girlfriend, a friend who was female and she spent a lot

of time trying to tell me I must keep it down, keep it on the low because otherwise I'm going to get a good hiding. And my experience from black gay men who came into the housing advice or who I've spoken to generally, just on a social level, have expressed in no uncertain terms, the likelihood of them actually dying as a result of coming out, or someone finding out that they're sleeping with men. And what with the media and press and everything else, it was really quite scary about what I was able to actually say or what I was able to find out from people. But once we got into the swing at St Giles Trust, quite a few people came through and I felt a lot more confident about being able to ask the question and that they had a service that they could feel was part of their community. And I wasn't talking down to them. I mean that's another thing that I've got a real bug bearer about, is that so many of these services make you feel intimidated because they're the ones that are supposed to be in the know. I don't know jack! I just know what my experience is and I know what I'm able to bring and able to say, or explain it in a way that they will actually be able to understand as equally as I did, if you know what I mean? So yeah, I was quite pleased about that. I was Stonewall for five years, six years and had some really success stories in terms of people moving on and not such success stories.

OZ: Once you'd ascertained that someone was lesbian or gay, what happened next?

MS: Well it really depended on the story, I say the story, what they'd actually come to see me for. Most of the time it was that they were being harassed on most occasions, or that they'd just come out or someone had told their parents. Yeah, it really depended on what the story was and after the story was that they were being harassed by neighbours or youngsters in the area that had found out they were gay, they'd had enough of being harassed, they'd given up hope of moving onto anywhere else. And some were even so depressed they were quite suicidal about the prospect of actually going back to their house or home for yet another night of bottles through the window or being called numerous names and such so. It really depended on how much information they were able to actually give me at the time. My usual pattern of giving anybody advice at that point was, 'had they actually built up a diary of incidents? Had they reported it to the police? Had they reported it to anybody else? Had they sought counselling from their GP?' This was in order for them to build up some sort of ... yeah, a report that they could actually go to their council and actually say, 'Look this is happening to me and I either want it investigated more or I want to be moved.' There was such a thing as a management transfer that the council used to use. I don't know whether they still do it actually.

OZ: What was that?

MS: Well a management transfer is usually as a result of there being harassment or some sort of violence involved. It was actually to move the person that had been attacked to another area and it was discretionary and I think that we used that quite a lot in terms of actually trying to get people moved on, because people's mental health deteriorated, their actual health deteriorated. You'd come home to that sort of distress every evening, you just don't want to cope with it. Some people didn't even bother going home, they'd go to other people's houses, the council would deem them as being intentionally homeless because they'd left their home. What would you rather, go back home and suffer that the 100th time or go to your friend's house? It was that

sort of situation. And the lucky thing with Stonewall as well, because Stonewall itself was actually targeting 16 to 25 year olds through its own supported housing, anybody that came in within that age range, if we had vacancies, we could at least refer them to one of our hostels. At that point we were getting quite good move-on to local authority housing, which made it seem like they were being taken in to a sanctuary, do you know what I mean? Where everybody knew what was going on, they were lesbian, they were gay, there was no issue about whether guys wanted to dress up or girls wanted ... do you know what I mean? And it was so much nicer and yeah, I'm proud to be part of that to be honest.

OZ: And did you ever go and visit the hostels themselves that Stonewall...

MS: Yeah, yeah I went round to some of the Stonewall houses, yeah.

OZ: And what do you remember them being like?

MS: Very good quality. Being a housing manager at the previous organisation, you do tend to go in and do a comparison. No, quality, definitely quality accommodation, anything that needed to be changed was. I think that as the years had actually gone on though, the whole prospect of move-on to local authority housing was getting smaller and smaller and I think towards the end of my particular employment there, I was getting really frustrated at just the lack of move-on because it meant that people were coming in really frustrated, having to deal with really quite horrendous harassment. They'd been in that situation five years, they weren't getting management transfers because there just wasn't the housing for them to move on to. The Stonewall housing, they only had a certain amount of bed spaces and only a certain amount of move-on for them and everything was drying up; everything was starting to change and I really noticed the difference. But the hostels themselves were good quality and run really well.

OZ: And what were you doing for the other days of the week, 'cause you said one day in St Giles...

MS: I did housing advice based at the office. So that meant there was a telephone service that they could actually phone two times during the week. There was the London Friend; we'd go along to the London Friend and each do a ... there was three of us in our team at that particular point, and I'd go along and do London Friend. Then one would do St Giles and by the time I actually left there was also an organisation called ELOP, East London Out Project. It was just based in Leyton, down by The Dove Cafe, I can't remember the name of the road. So we did sessions there as well. That was only in its infancy when I actually left, that had been running maybe about four or five months. And the team, the advice and referrals team were looking at doing more citizen benefit type advice, or more law based advice, which I just wasn't up for at all. It became quite sad in the end for me that the lack of move-on housing was just ... you weren't able to offer solutions any longer. I could tell somebody how they could actually go to their council and say, 'Well I can't live like this anymore.' And I had been involved right back at the beginning, a number of years previous in Newham with a friend of mine who was helping another counsellor who was out at the time and he was going through horrific homophobic behaviour and having to deal with that. And he got re-housed through just keeping on at the council and saying, 'Look you've got to do something about this, if this was a black person for instance ...' 'Cause there

was always this hype about moving people who were being racist. But equally there wasn't as much being done about people based on sexual harassment, which is what they defined it first as, and then changed it to harassment. Yeah, it really depend ... I mean the kind of stories that you heard were people being thrown out 'cause they'd just come out to their parents, 'You're not staying in this house!' 'Right OK, well where do you expect them to go then?' 'We don't care, they're not coming back here!' That was quite a typical story, just people just coming over from ... I had one guy who'd just come over from Jamaica, wanted to say over here with his partner, but because there wasn't civil marriages at that point, there was nothing that you could actually do. You couldn't say to them, 'Well if you marry them or ...' I don't know. Things have changed quite a bit since then.

OZ: And so mentioned as well that you gave advice on the telephone. Was that that similar advice or targeted in a similar way?

MS: We used the telephone to give like on-the-spot kind of advice, and if we thought that it was likely to produce casework or any kind of further work, we would suggest to them to come into the drop-in, either one of the drop-ins so that we could talk to them more confidently about what needed to be done from their end, and what we could possibly provide for them. Because of course, people used to come and expect us to provide the world, it wasn't always the case. Yeah, so often the telephone would be the first point of call, some people might answer straight away or get somebody to phone on their behalf and usually you got some sort of answer as to what you could do. You'd get a brief outline of their story and be able to work from that.

OZ: And was Stonewall Housing like as an organisation to work for?

MS: I think because I knew a couple of people who were working there, and there were often connections; someone who worked there might know somebody that you knew who knew so and so. Because the lesbian and gay community is such that there are always people that have some sort of connection, it did feel very family orientated as we were a big family and all went home to our own houses. But yeah, quite family orientated in some respects. Yeah, and I learnt loads, I did loads of training and yeah, felt really quite good at being there. I seem to think that the only real thing that bugged me in the end was just not having the move-on, I mean there was just none available, the local authorities had dried it all up one way or another. And that made it almost impossible to actually do anything more than give advice and say, 'There, there, go about your business, because really there's nothing we can do!' Whereas initially you were able to say, 'Well actually, you're lucky, 'cause today we've got ...' So it did feel like we were offering something. It was a good wage, I have to say it was a good wage, it was. And we also worked in the same building as Galop and LAGER. So it felt very much a community kind of work place. The building that we worked from, there was a number of different organisations in there and yeah, it felt like we were a big family, kind of. Go down and have a cigarette and there'd be a few people down there that you'd know, and that I've come across since actually. Yeah, so it was OK.

OZ: Is that down at Leroy House?

MS: Yeah, have you been there?

OZ: Yeah.

MS: OK. Is it still there?

OZ: Yeah.

MS: No way! Oh my god! Oh they were trying to move from that for ages, they were trying to move from there from an untold amount of time.

OZ: And so how long did you work for Stonewall Housing?

MS: About five or six years.

OZ: And you started, when was it?

MS: Right, I have to work back. I've been out of work seven, eight ... about eleven, twelve years ago and I worked there for about five or six years. I actually came out of there to do fostering young people, which I did for a short period of time.

OZ: And what made you leave Stonewall?

MS: I wanted something different. I wanted to be able to do something. I think that I was quite ill as well, I had a number of issues which was going on, one of them was my blood pressure at the time and I had to balance up in my own head what was the best way forward really, for me. And being at home doing a home based job was something that I thought I would actually cope with a lot better. I didn't, I have to say. But yeah, I really enjoyed being at Stonewall and didn't particularly want to leave, but it was about the right time, I'd been there long enough and wanted to do something more heartfelt, so I left and became a foster parent.

OZ: You mentioned one thing that frustrated you was that you couldn't move people, there wasn't that move-on, but within the organisation, do you think it changed over the time that you were there?

MS: I think that what changed, there were a lot of talk about funding being cut, there was a lot of talk about social landlords and how that was going to actually change housing associations, A lot of cuts in nominating people to move-on, accommodation, and that's how I think it changed the organisation. I do think that it did change. We were working towards more of corporate model and I'd been quite used to being quite asked about my opinion as a worker and being valued, that's not to say one wasn't particularly valued, but I just felt that I'd come from an organisation where we'd worked in a collective, we were the ones that had made the decisions about what we went on to do, and you had a certain amount of that when you worked at Stonewall, but then ultimately the director had the last say, the board of directors had the last say. And you were just told to get on with whatever you had to get on with. That's quite hard, it's quite hard to do when you're used to actually being part of that process that allows you to watch an organisation grow, and policy changes. So I was quite aware of that. I don't know how it's going now actually, I don't know how it's going at all, it'd be interesting to know.

OZ: Can you remember your last day there?

MS: No, <pause> can't say I do actually. I think that the last couple of months that I was there in particular, my health had actually deteriorated quite a lot and I

spent a lot of time ... 'cause I think towards the end I actually did part-time or I did reduced hours because I was so ill, and so no I don't remember my last, it wasn't that memorable. And as that was twelve years ago, no it wasn't, it was about nine years ago, it's even less memorable. There's been a lot happened since then.

OZ: You mentioned earlier that you thought they were very specific issues for black, lesbian and gay people, and then you mentioned you were going to come back to that?

MS: Yeah, I mean during that particular period of time, there was that whole anti-gay and homophobic culture with Buju Banton doing a lot of stuff around <pause> bang, bang the batty boy, I can't remember the words actually, but I knew that ... if you see them they're going shoot you down and all that sort of business and...

OZ: And that was pop music?

MS: Yeah, that was popular culture, do you know what I mean? When you think about that, it's like ... I hadn't quite appreciated what level that was until you actually heard the stories. Guys would actually come in and say, 'Look I can't say nothing at home,' blah, blah, blah and would really confide in me quite a lot about what's actually going on in their lives and how they were absolutely petrified of their family actually finding out, or how some of their boyfriends, because they'd dumped them, had gone back and told the family themselves, just to be bitchy and it's like, 'Shit, how are you gonna get out of this one?' Yeah, I did think that they were separate issues because, 'no boy of mine's going to get in ...' do you know what I mean? It was very strict and if a group of black men ... very aggressive, very hard hitting. I think I mentioned earlier, there was a woman who actually attacked me verbally, really aggressively attacked me verbally by saying that I should be 'ashamed of my colour,' not because I'd actually said I was a lesbian or what I was wearing or my attitude, she was just giving it really ... and this was at a local community centre and she was saying 'you disgust me,' almost spitting at me, and it's like 'just go away.'

OZ: And why was she doing that?

MS: Because I think that there is whole idea that black people don't, do you know what I mean, or they didn't. I bought a bag actually at Brighton Pride about ten years ago, it's a black bag flop over and on one side of it, it says yes I am. And I bought it, and yet for four years I couldn't actually wear the bag <chuckles> saying yes I am on the side, I was too frightened that someone would go, 'So what does that mean?' It's like ... do you know what I mean? 'Cause it's alright to say it, but it's like you have to deal with the repercussions of that. So yeah, I'd always been a bit fearful of that and I'm sure that that's just shit from my mum. 'You heathen witch, you ...' <chuckles> 'Oh, it's alright mum, OK.' Yeah, I just think that black people need to feel safe enough, first of all that they're not going to be dealt with by a white person that says, 'Oh, is it a phase you're going through?' Or 'are you sure?' It's like, 'no,' and accepting other black faiths that's actually going to understand and not give them a hard time, they're going to look like they've got ... how can I put that, not your stereotypical, what someone defines as a lesbian. Sometimes the guy's would get up thinking ... you could see that they were weighing up whether I was or not, is she going to come out with 'oh lord, Jesus, la la la la,

you should repent!' Because that's the other thing that happens, is you have got a god fear in people who are actually going to be saying, 'Oh no, you can't be doing that!'

I'll tell you a quick story, just right back at the beginning before I met all my friends that I'm quite close to know, I'd got a knock on the day from Latter Day Saints, Mormons, and I'd actually joined them and was with them, I was getting really involved and I'd gone along to church a couple of times and was really quite proud of myself. I was going through a bit of crisis so I thought yeah, this is the right thing to do, join the church. And two of the people that used to look over me, Brother Chevez and somebody else, were coming and supporting me every week, would tell me I'm 'doing really well,' blah, blah, blah, and I was told at one point that because I was black I had the Mark of Cain and that I wasn't to actually become any higher in the church or whatever, and then they had to speak to me again because they'd realised that some of my friends were lesbians, did I know what that actually meant and was I understanding that they weren't worthy of my persona or whatever. I eventually had to write them a letter 'cause I was that scared of them <chuckles> and actually say to them, 'Look, I just can't be partied to a church that actually believes that this is wrong because this is something that's natural to me, it's always been natural to me, how can they actually say otherwise because it's in a book?' So I do feel like you have to challenge a lot along the way and feel that people have an understanding of what every ... I don't go up to people randomly and say, 'Who do you sleep with?' It's none of your business, none of your business what so ever, and if I chose to actually sleep with a woman then that's my choice. If I chose to live with a woman, that's my choice. It shouldn't be anybody else's business.

OZ: And do you think then that, I dunno, I suppose black and cultures and it's a difficult and complex thing to say ... but do you think that religion and black culture affected gayness and the gay issues?

MS: There was a whole load of argy bargee or whatever about words that were used. There were women that when I asked them the question, 'How do you define your sexuality,' they'd go, 'Well I'm a woman who sleeps with women.' 'Oh, that's really helpful, yeah now I understand, but define yourself as lesbian, do you define yourself as gay?' Some identified as zami, some identified as gay, some identified as lesbian, some identified as bisexual. I can't think of ... there is another name that I can across and thought oh what's that, and then they said that, 'That's women who sleep with women.' And I'd say what was the difference in actually defining themselves as different and it was that they acknowledged that they slept with women, but it wasn't necessarily that they were a cultural lesbian, does that make sense? Again a stereotype that people make up; if you're seen as a lesbian then you're not seen as someone who wears lipstick. If you're seen as a lesbian, you're someone who wears bother boats and short cropped hair. The thing is I don't, that isn't how I see lesbians. I think they come in all different shapes and sizes and particularly nowadays it's like pfff, I have my gaydar on but it misses loads of times <chuckles>. It's like 'oh, maybe not.' So I do think that there's a black culture that would say they don't define as gay men or they don't define as lesbian, but they do sleep with women and they do sleep with women so. And I think that that's about fear, I think that that's about not wanting to be seen as the stereotypical lesbian or the stereotypical gay man.

OZ: And do you think that's a particularly black thing, something which happens more in people identified as black?

MS: Good question, I don't really know, I couldn't really say. I've struggled a lot with the word myself, lesbian. I think that because it has had connotations for me in my past and certainly I would ... I dunno, it's really hard to say, I can't really say. But I have heard that there are a lot changes in the way that we actually define ourselves, so like queer, like gender bender, a number of other things that I've heard, yeah.

OZ: And...

<End of Part 2>

OZ: ... going back to the Stonewall Housing, what kind of impact do you think the work at Stonewall Housing had on the people that used its services?

MS: I would say phenomenal because <cough> right, my understanding of Stonewall for the housing and the hostels that it actually provided, it was for 16 to 25 year olds. Between the ages of 16 to 25 is quite a crucial period of time for young people. I think that they get through a certain period of time up to maybe their 21's and they think oh everything's a party and it's usually from the 21 up to the 25 that things go a bit pear-shaped. They're trying to settle into this adult life and they haven't really taken ... or there's lots of other things going on or they've built up debt or they haven't got over the clubbing period and I think Stonewall kind of provides that cushion period from the 21 to 25 year old who's been struggling, not really sure what direction they're going to go, how they're going to cope with life. And possibly the permanent move-on to a better place, their own place, their own independence, with independent living skills because they've built that up over the last four years at Stonewall. A community within Stonewall where everybody kind of knows where to go, who to go out with, what's the right peop ... that sort of stuff. Because I think it can be quite scary. If you're on your own, I dunno how people actually cope, at all actually. So yeah, I do actually think that they've had a phenomenal impact in being able to provide safe accommodation for people who are dealing with horrendous harassment at points, or just having a really shit time coming out, sorry, swearing. But do you know what I mean? It's like ... I've heard some really awful stories for people who come out to their parents and they've locked them up, they've said, 'You can't leave.' I had one particular girl who'd come to me, she'd been locked up for weeks and weeks and just made her escape. She couldn't go home that night, she was staying with a friend, she wasn't even sure what she was going to do for the rest of the time that she was ... I think she was based at uni, I can't remember. And it's like, 'Well you'll be safe to know that you can stay somewhere, where you're not going to get the same household.' Yeah, I would hope that it's made an impact on some of the members of the gay community, yeah that's what I'd hope.

OZ: And have you ever heard from people who have grown up and then come back to Stonewall housing?

MS: I think that I ... I'm sure that I've come across people who know me and know me as either a housing advisor or a housing worker and no, I'm not sure what's happened to them. There is only one person that I actually know and I've come across her quite often, and every time I'll see her she'll say to me,

'she was the person who got my housing, she was the person who sorted it out.' And I would imagine that they're quite ... yeah, I would imagine there are quite a few people who's say, 'Oh I remember you, you did so and so, you did the housing at so and so.' But that's the only feedback I've got, and that's fine, and that's good to be remembered, no it has been good to be remembered, I've enjoyed that bit of it, I got my job satisfaction.

OZ: And how about on the rest of the LGBT community, what impact do you think having Stonewall Housing as something in the background, even if they haven't used it, had?

MS: There is nothing that, as far as I'm aware, there's nothing that matches it. I always felt like Stonewall Housing never got quite the kudos that it deserved in terms of the national organisation of Stonewall. Not because it wasn't the same, just that it was very low key, it provided some sort of housing advice, it wasn't necessarily a campaigning arm. But I don't think that there's anybody in the lesbian and gay, transgender or bi community that would say that it was a bad thing, because I think that they are actually pretty good. I haven't been involved with them recently, so I don't even know what they're doing. As I said, I thought they would've moved block by now, their office. So I don't really know, couldn't really say. But I would say that if you asked the number of lesbian and gay men what they felt, I'm sure that they'd actually say, 'Yeah, I think it's brilliant that there's something that's there,' because there isn't anything. You go to any local authority, you will find that there's an equalities unit that will actually deal with issues of harassment. How much of that's actually taken up, I don't know, it'd be interesting to find out.

OZ: And...

<End of Part 3>

OZ: ... in terms of the LGBT community generally, what changes do you think you've seen in the years since you started to ... or since you came out, through to the present, how do you think it's change from then?

MS: Well I've said earlier, I'm living here and in Brighton. I always wanted to move to Brighton 'cause that's the place to be, <pause> it's not ... sorry <laughs>. I say that tongue in cheek. No, I do like Brighton, I'd rather be in Brighton than I would here any day, 'cause I do think that they are more tolerable in Brighton. How do I think it's changed? I think attacks on the lesbian and gay have become worse, I would say that. I've noticed that a lot in Brighton actually. I think we've become quite separate as a community. The only time that I would actually say that we all come together, and even that seems like very cleecky separateness and that's Brighton Pride. I haven't been to a London Pride in over ten years and that's more of a politic stance on having to pay for or having to go off ... I mean I used to love going to London Pride, loved it, 'cause it was about actually saying, 'We are the people, we are here for a reason and you have to listen to us!' And I remember going back as far as Hyde Park Corner with my son, marching to wherever feeling like yes, I'd done my bit and then having a party at the end of it. The last London Pride I did was Victoria Park and that was scary. That was scary because there was

lots of talk about BNP actually arriving and they were chanting get us all back to wherever or ... So that was quite scary and that's more about being in East London; East London can be a bit scary 'cause they're all really reactionary. So I enjoy going to Brighton Pride; I've been to Brighton Pride actually every year for the past 20 years and that's become phenomenal. That's like a gathering ... have you ever been to Brighton Pride? Oh! If you ever go to Brighton you must, it's really good. Yeah, people have got less connected but I think that's more about, we've become less community orientated. If you asked me now where there was a club in London that I could go to, I'd have to work quite hard at trying to find out whether I'd feel safe there. That was never ever an issue in the past; you'd go along and take your chances. Whether that's 'cause I've got older, I don't know. But yeah, I'm less likely to feel safe. I want to be able to go into a place and not have there be an issue about whether I was in the right place or not in the right place. Whereas there was a period of time in the '90s, mid 90s where you could go anywhere and actually feel like you'd be accepted, it wouldn't matter, I'm not sure about that now. And there's like a fraction of people who go off and do all their rave music, like Wild Fruit and stuff. Brighton Pride kind of reminds me that there are all different fractions of people; you've got the older lesbians who prefer to sit round the women's tent and do their thing there and you've got the little fraction that want to do their line dancing, please <laughs>, hats and all, right OK. And yeah, just the complete mish mash of all different cultures and vibes, I do like that and I wouldn't miss a Pride if I could help it. But London's really changed, really changed as far as that's concerned. I don't think I've even been to a club in London for years, absolute years! Building myself up, me confidence. Yeah so I just think there's a lot of separateness; we're not a community anymore. And pubs, do you know, I can't believe the amount of pubs that've closed down, I think that's made a difference as well. Or they've changed hands. I used to go to a pub in ... I used to go to several pubs and I'm not a particular pub goer, but you knew that that's where you'd find more of a community. The Wellington pub down Ball's Pond Road, that used to be quite gay. The Oak Bar which still is gay. The Clarence, women only that was! They're all gone. The Artful Dodger's now a block of flats. The Woodman which was just down Stratford, that's now an Asian restaurant. The Pigeons, I don't even know if The Pigeons are still going, I'm not sure. There's clubs that are kind of going; you've got The Angel that's in Stratford, very small, very, I would say, cleeky. You've got another one in Romford, yeah I'm really going to go out there, pfff, not. So it is about safety. It's about actually feeling that you're not going to get somebody who's going to start taking the piss and you're not wearing the right clothes or, 'No you can't come in because you look too flowery.' So I do feel that it feels very separate.

OZ: So by safety you're talking about relating with other people of the same sexuality?

MS: Well, you see club culture has actually changed quite a lot, hasn't it? I think club culture has changed quite a lot. So it's more acceptable for two guys to walk into a club with shorts, no shirt, raving music, getting into raving music and then when the realisation that they're actually two gay men for instance, they'll get ridiculed or there'll be some sort of dynamic. I don't know whether that'll necessarily happen with girls, I can't say that I've experienced it, but that's what I'm saying is, the club culture as well has changed; gay bars are allowing straight people to come in far more and vice versa and I think that there is a mismatch or a mix-match of people who say that they're 'OK with it,' but then when they're actually confronted with it get offended and there's

some sort of dynamic that goes on. This could all be in my own head, but it is, from what I see, what usually causes some sort of dynamic in a club. I've stopped going to clubs really I think 'cause I just think it's nicer to actually be in the same place as likeminded people where I feel safe, kind of.

OZ: Is there anything that you think, over all of it, that I should've asked you about, that you wanted to say or remembered earlier today that's important?

MS: I suppose what it's reminded me of is that things have actually changed in London probably and I'm just not aware of it. I, for the last eight years, I've lived in kind of a bubble, been in love and married and everything else. So you drift into this happy little love life and forget about the outside world almost. So having recently come out of that relationship, things seem very new to me and I'm thinking oh my god, I've got to go out there and start it all again! That's quite daunting, that's quite terrifying actually because I don't particularly want to go out on the scene and see loads of old people that I know! But at the same time, that would be quite comforting. Each time I have tended to go to new clubs or gone to old clubs, the young people, oh my god <laughs>, I'm thinking right OK, you look a 100. No, that's not really true, but you do feel really older and think oh my goodness, where has everybody else gone, or what's happened to them? I suppose all I can really do is wait and find out and just hope ... this will be the first Pride that I've actually been on my own for the last nine years. So it will be interesting. I will be with lots of friends and I shall enjoy that. But not to be with a partner feels quite difficult. So that should be interesting, see whether I'm out there and doing my thing.

<End of Part 4>

<End of Recording>