INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

DONNA M. CARTWRIGHT

Interviewer: Michelle Esther O'Brien

Date of Interview: December 23, 2017

Location of Interview: NYU Department of Sociology

Interview Recording URL:
http://oralhistory.nyp.org/interviews/donnar-cartwright-2n54gk

Transcript URL:

Transcribed by Colette Arrand (professional)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #064

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Donna Cartwright: So let’s do it.

Michelle O'Brien: Okay.

Cartwright: Alright. Do you want to start again?

O'Brien: Yes. Let me read something at the beginning.

Cartwright: Sure.

O'Brien: Okay. Hello. My name is Michelle O'Brien, and I will be having a conversation with Donna Cartwright for the New York Times—sorry, New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is December 23, 2017, and this is being recorded at the NYU Department of Sociology. Hello, Donna.

Cartwright: Hello, Michelle. Okay.

O'Brien: So tell me about what you were just talking about, about how much trans people's lives have changed since the 90s.

Cartwright: Hugely. Hugely. I mean, the background of this is that I came out in 1997-98, so I’m roughly 20 years old as a trans person. And the way that—I was talking about a young friend of mine, a trans woman in her early 20s who was recently married in a very conventional church service that you know, everyone just accepted it as a young woman getting married, and it was so touching to me that her life expectations and life um experience as a trans woman who came out, or began coming out probably when she was in undergraduate in college um is so hugely different from what people experienced in the 90s, and either people who experienced in the 80s and 70s when it was even phenomenally more difficult. You know, younger people particularly who come out as trans have a much better chance of living what is sometimes referred to as a normal life, you know? As a life where they’re not a curiosity to everyone, they’re just another person. And they’re a person with maybe a different history, but they’re not somebody whisper about, etc. So that has changed a great deal, and I am fortunate and privileged to have watched that change occur in the last 20 years. So basically that’s what I was covering. Go ahead. Yeah.

O'Brien: Okay. So perhaps start off and give us a broad arc of what are the major places you’ve lived, during what phases of your life?

Cartwright: Alright, I was born in New Jersey, in the New York suburbs. In 1946. Uh, I was raised in the Jersey suburbs. Uh, I lived a fairly conventional middle class life, except that I had this thing that I became aware of when I was around four or five years old that something about gender was different for me. I, my parents, my father worked in New York when I was born, although later the company moved out to Jersey and he worked and lived in New Jersey. And but we were in the suburbs and everybody sort of was in the orbit of New York. So you know,
when the—I was seven years old when the New York Daily News published the story of Christine Jorgensen. I remember it was on television. I remember, my parents may have actually had a copy of that paper and talked about it, and I think I looked at it or sort of absorbed the idea that this person had gone from male to female. And in a way that I could not articulate, I was thrilled. I think I somehow let on to my parents that I really liked this idea, and they let on quickly that I was not to like it. Um but so and for a long time really that was all you really knew about trans pep. There was Christine Jorgensen, and uh when I went to college, I went to college at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, uh, starting in the fall of 1964, there are several things that are base points for things that happen later, and yes, exactly. So, and they don't seem immediately related but for example I think in the spring of '65, I was walking across the street in front of the liberal arts campus, where I was a student. I had a copy of the New York Times, and on the front page there was an article that said that the Johns Hopkins University was starting a gender clinic, which I think was referred to as either a sex change or a transsexual clinic. And Hopkins was the first one in the country, I believe. I looked at that and it was another of those shock/thrill moments just I like describe with the Christine Jorgensen thing, I think, oh my God this is here, and yet I already knew that I must keep at arm's length, I must keep it a secret, I cannot let anyone know, etc., because I had been impressed at several points during my upbringing that my parents were concerned about any outward display of femininity that I made and they were also concerned when I took one of the personality tests that—I forget which one it was, uh in maybe my sophomore year in high school, and it showed that my masculinity level was fairly low. And my parents were concerned about that. So I got the idea that this was dangerous country. Um so that was going on, and yet I built a wall around it and put it in a vault and didn't pay attention to it. But I was also becoming an activist. A political activist. I had been somewhat interested and supportive of the civil rights movement while I was in high school. In the summer between high school and college, so appropriate because it's, you know, it's really between times. A friend of mine, a guy who was in my class, but he was more mature than I had—he had a car, I didn't—he could go where he wanted, I was more limited by, you know, I was limited by where my family would take me, where I could go by public transportation—he said hey, let's go down to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. We don't have tickets, we can't get in, but we can see what's going on. Uh, so I drove down with him and we parked and we walked over to the Atlantic City Convention Hall, and when we got there, outside the convention hall was a picket line. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was protesting the seat—

O'Brien: Was this '64?

Cartwright: Yeah, '64, Democratic Convention. Uh, they were protesting the seating of the regular Democratic delegates to the convention. They had demanded that they be recognized as the real Democratic Party of Mississippi. Lyndon Johnson was wary of that and wanted to not blow up the party, particularly in the south, so he told Hubert Humphrey, I am told—I mean, I don't know this, but from personal knowledge, but they were the sort of accepted story is that Johnson told Hubert Humphrey that Hubert Humphrey could be his vice president if Humphrey would help him get rid of this problem. And Humphrey in turn delegated the task to Walter Mondale who was then the attorney general of Minnesota. And Mondale came up with the compromise which was not much of a compromise, which gave two of the MFDP
people uh seats as guests of the convention. Which they rejected. Uh, properly in my view. But which also caused the white Mississippi delegation to walk out. I remember this in particular because when I got there and my friend and I both went on the picket line for maybe 10 minutes or 15 minutes, uh, which was basically my stepping across the line into activism. And I was probably only 20 yards from Fanny Lou Hamer, who was being interviewed by television. So And since then I've actually learned that another of my high school classmates was there and we didn't know it, and a guy who I know in Baltimore was there and I didn't know it. This is something that seems to link people you wouldn't know. So uh that was important. Uh, when I got to college, only weeks later, I joined, I think in my second week I joined the Students for a Democratic Society and soon thereafter I joined Baltimore Core, within my first semester I was arrested at least twice, and in my first year I was—these were demonstrations for fair housing and against segregated apartment buildings—and in my first year I think I was arrested three or four times. Those arrests, although they upset my parents, were not particularly traumatic. What would—because the city had been through waves of civil rights demonstrations about public accommodations, discrimination was already illegal in Baltimore because—and in the country—because the civil rights act of 1964 had been passed that spring. But housing discrimination was not yet illegal, so Core had shifted its focus to that. But when you are arrested on one of those demonstrations, they would—the police would take you in the wagon down to the nearest police precinct and would—they would book you, they'd put you in a cell, you'd wait for a couple of hours, and then the lawyer for Core or the NAACP would show up, ask for the charges, and then ask what the bail was, because previously, in previous years when they were doing public accommodations demonstrations where lots of people were arrested, people had refused bail as a way of crowding the jails and creating a crisis. So the city's new tactic at the time when I came along a year later was that they released everyone on their own recognizance. And so you got out, and then the city basically sat on the charges. They never brought you to trial. Eventually they were dismissed. So it was kind of like getting arrested without much cost. So in that period, in '64 or '65, I was a student at Johns Hopkins, I was active in the SDS, active in civil rights, also beginning to be active in uh demonstrations against the Vietnam War. There was a certain irony about the way that my consciousness developed, in my freshman year, first semester at Hopkins, I was probably one of the very few people who was ever simultaneously a member of the SDS and the ROTC. I dropped ROTC after the first semester because my comrades in SDS persuaded me that the war in Vietnam was wrong and I should not place myself in a position where I would have to go there.

O'Brien: You were part of SDS out of racial justice commitments, but not initially anti-imperialist.

Cartwright: Right, exactly. That took more understanding that came later. And so you know, in my sophomore year I became a socialist. Uh, I was arrested in a big anti-war demonstration, for at least by Baltimore standards, in the spring of '66. Six of us SDS members were arrested at an Army recruiting station about five blocks from the main liberal arts campus. And the difference was very plain to see. We had, a group of our supporters, perhaps 15 or 20, were holding signs while we got, went into the recruiting station, refused to leave, got thrown out, at that point the city police took charge of us, they held us while we were on the sidewalk. There was our people and then there was another crowd, a pro-war, mostly high school
students who were around in the periphery who were shouting pro-war slogans while our people shouted anti-war slogans. The police used that as a pre-text to charge us with disorderly conduct on the grounds that our—the radical disjunction of our views with those of the crowd were making a breach of the peace more likely. And so in the judgment of a police officer, they ordered us to not sit on the sidewalk, although they were actually holding us down while we were there. They put us in the wagons, we were taken to the police precinct. Unlike the previous arrests, we were given a magistrate's trial in the police precinct. Uh we didn't have our lawyer present. Um he convinced us of disorderly conduct and sentenced us all to two months in jail. We had the right to—automatic right to appeal to the criminal courts downtown, which we did. We went to a jury trial, almost got off, but then there was a person who gave perjured testimony that um that supported the police view and we were all convicted and sentenced again to two months in jail. We served three days, the ACLU came along, bailed us out, appealed our case, and told us that you know, you're out, but you have to be aware that you must be available to serve your sentences if the appeal fails and we cannot tell you when that might be. Uh, as a result of that, I withdrew from college, I didn't know whether this was going to come along and you know take almost a whole semester out, uh, and I decided that I should look for work and sort of try to ride this out and see where it went. Uh, in the end we were in courts for four years. Uh, we won our case at the US Supreme Court in 1970. But in the meantime, uh, I had left college, my parents were not happy. Uh, they were even more unhappy than they were when I found out I was first time I was arrested. They were never the less decent people who told me that I was still part of the family, they still loved me, and I could come up and visit with them or stay with them when I wanted to, but they were not going to support me. I needed to make my own living. I worked as a day laborer, I worked as a library aide, and after those things, which are both minimum wage jobs that was about year or so, I got a job as an editorial assistant on a newspaper, I did well at that, I got a better job at the Baltimore Sun as a copyeditor trainee, and the great difference about the Baltimore Sun from the first newspaper was that the Sun was a union shop. Um and the trainee position, even though it didn't pay very much money, it guaranteed good training. That is, they made the company commit that the company would give hands on instruction to the people who are trainees. The chief of the copy desk put his assistant in to run the copy desk for something like four weeks while the chief of the desk sat with me and taught me how to do the work. Um and that was something I'll always credit with you know having you know not gotten the conventional college degree, having no real work experience, and no credentialed skills, I was able to learn a trade and work and support myself. That always stays with me as a very personal uh experience with value of the labor movement to working people. So okay, so I was copy editor at the Sun for eight years. I did fairly well at it. Pretty well, I guess. I got one promotion while I was there. I made good money, I had a decent living standard. And on the other side, my trans self started to sneak out of the little prison that I had put it in. I started to go out at night, you know, in various kinds of feminine dress. I didn't have any makeup, I did not have a convincing wig or anything like that. I obviously looked fairly strange, but I was, you know, for one thing I worked until 1:00 in the morning, you know, and then I would go home, I would you know have dinner whatever, and if I still felt like I really wanted to let Donna come out a little bit I would go out and it would be 3:00 in the morning, there'd be nobody out there. But it was this way of being out in the world that was different than hiding in your room. Uh, and I did that and uh one night in 1974 uh I was out and a police car came by or saw me, uh and—I mean the cop in the car saw
me. He pulled over, asked for ID, he—I did have, fortunately I had my wallet with me and I gave him my driver's license, but of course it had my male name. And it had the M marker on the license. And he then radioed in to the precinct saying I've got this whatever, and I don't know what term he used, but uh this person, and he asked if female impersonator laws were still on the books. They told him they were not. They had been, I believe there had been some court decision that nullified all of them maybe a few years earlier. So it was not illegal to be dressed as a woman if you were, they thought, a man, you know. So they couldn't get me for that. So he then had them run my license through their records, and they found out that I had about $100 worth of unpaid parking tickets. Uh, in those days they could take you in for that, and they did. Uh, they took me to the district, northern district precinct. And uh when they brought me in, they brought me first up to the desk, where the desk sergeant is, and you know, the cop who arrested me sort of smirked and tells the other cop that I have these tickets. And so they decide also that they're going to frisk me. And in the process of frisking me, basically they best me. They hit me, you know, several of them hit me. Um, not hard enough to knock me down, uh, not hard enough to leave a really significant bruise, but never the less I was beaten. Then, in that police precinct, and I think most others in Baltimore city and perhaps most in the United States, where they take people to detain them and particularly overnight, they'll be two banks of cells, one for men and one for women, and so they took me down the men's cells and they woke all the guys up and sort of paraded me down there, and they were all hooting and yelling at me. Uh, and The cells were bunk cells. There were two to a cell. And I went into an empty cell. That was a stroke of luck. But it became, you know, as I thought about it, it became clear that you know, in the remaining hours of darkness, it was quite possible that I would get a roommate, and not one that I would want. You know, not to be coy about it, I was quite concerned about being molested, and or other forms of violence—beaten or whatever. I managed to—I asked them if I had the right to a phone call and they said yes, and I did have a dime with me, and I made a call to a friend who got me some clothes and got me the money to pay the tickets and got me out. And I walked home, and I was no longer—I didn't have to go back to the police station because the tickets were paid. I didn't face any criminal charge. I was so ashamed that I thanked my friend, paid my friend back with a check but said I'd like it if we—if it's a few months before we see each other again, I'm really—and I was really, you know, I was so overpowered by this that I couldn't face my friend, you know? And so, I mean, she knew that I had been wearing these women's clothes because I had told her, that's what I told her on the phone. So anyway, I was traumatized by that, I did, you know, so I kept my nighttime activities much more cautious. I worked at the Sun for another two years, almost three. And then I got, uh, I was urged by a friend to apply to the New York Times for a job as a copyeditor, and I did and they invited me up to take a tryout, uh, this would be the very beginning of 1977, and uh, so I did. I went up and I took a tryout, and I did well and they offered me a job. When I had gone up, I really had not thought that I wasn't really sure I wanted to take a job even if they offered, but they offered me really a lot of money. And so uh I said well, maybe I should take this. And so I did, and I moved up to the New York area, again, I stayed with my parents, for a few months until I got an apartment in the part of New Jersey that's right along the Hudson. And I commuted into New York. I worked in New York for 30 years. And I retired in 2006. During the 30 years that I worked for the Times, I was primarily a labor activist. I was a shop steward, I was a member of the shop committee, I was a chief steward, I was a member of the local executive board, I was uh a national convention delegate. Most of that time, in a fairly short period of
time, when the left wing of the union briefly won control of the local. We later lost it. But for all of that time, as much as I could be I was active in the union. Uh, I kept my trans self, again, largely to myself. I did go out some. I was fairly cautious about it. I never had—I didn’t have a really bad experience with the police again. But my awareness of my transness increased as time went along. In 1985, no '86, early '86, I had just broken up with my girlfriend. I dated, to the extent that I dated, which wasn’t much, I dated women. And I appeared to be heterosexual, although the fact that I was so inactive sometimes made people ask and I would tell them, well, I’m sort of bisexual, and I would just kind of let that—people would not press further usually. So I just kind of let that be there. But after I broke up with my girlfriend, I happened to have—I had had maybe one or two books that were about trans people. One of them I found in the library at the Baltimore Sun when I was still working there, which was called Transvestites and Transsexuals, by Debra Heller Feinbloom. It’s fairly rare book now, but it was very—she did a lot of research in Boston in the early 70s about trans people, and I read that book with great interest. And then Renee Richards published her autobiography called Second Serve. I got a copy of that, I did not read it immediately. Um but uh in—I’m trying to remember the exact order that this was, and it probably doesn’t matter very much, but somewhere in there I read that book, and it resolved some questions for me. I mean, you know, if it’s okay I will go into somewhat intimate questions essentially about how I could be trans, still be attracted to women, and yet also have this female identity which was not particularly lesbian. I was um you know there was like this sort of um compartmentalization. When I presented as a man, I was interested in women. When I presented as a woman, I was interested in men. Um, if could imagine myself with a female body, in those circumstances I could uh imagine myself attracted to men, and But if I was in my actual, material male body, I had no interest in sex with men. So it was very much—it was as a I later learned, the category of sexual orientation, which was developed by the LGB part of the LGBT movement, uh, is correct as far as they are concerned. It is It’s determined by who you’re oriented to having sex with, but it accepts your own gender as a fixed given. Um, for trans people it’s a little different because your own gender is not fixed. In fact, when your gender becomes fluid, all bets are off, you know? The conventional categories don’t hold you anymore. So that had been a real concern of mine. How can I be a transsexual if I also am attracted to women? In fact, another sign of my life in you know, actually over that long haul, uh was that although I had both men and women friends, I generally had more women friends than men friends. I tended to prefer the company of women if I could find it. That was a thing I could not explain to myself or to others. So Renee Richards’ autobiography actually, although she did not put it in the terms that I’ve just used, she did state quite clearly that when she was Richard Raskin, she uh was married to a woman and had a relationship with that woman you know, and they had a son. But she also had a secret life in which she dressed as female, and in those circumstances she was able to be attracted to men. So that gave me kind of validation. There’s somebody like me. This is, I am a possible variant. You know, which is something I think that it’s a little strange to say, but it’s something that we all want to find, because we don’t like to be the only one. Um so having read that book, this was all around 1985, '96—'86, excuse me. 1985 to '86. Um, one day I was driving to work and I think I had just finished reading her book. And as I drove across the Hudson I had this sort of epiphany that you know, I really am transsexual. That’s what I really am. That is the only category that explains me. They didn’t have the transgender label yet. And I said okay, so that’s really what I am. And I believe—my best recollection of that, and it’s hard to remember feelings 35 years later, is that there was
like, it was taking a weight off of me. That now I finally knew, I could explain myself at least to myself. I also, I was 39 years old, and I concluded at that time that I was too old to come out as trans and too, you know, and that I was too big to actually come out and be, you know, the acceptable image of a woman and so on and so on and so on. You know, I had all the body image stuff that people have. So I decided okay, that's what I am, this is very relieving for me, uh and it actually I think sort of spurred my nighttime adventures, you know. Particularly in my car I would sometimes after work I would go down to the Meat Market district and um mingle with the trans sex workers and so on. And uh, you know, and actually in a couple of cases built up a personal relationship—I mean, they wanted, because I would do that dressed, I mean, as a woman, and they could see that I was somehow like, and they actually wanted to talk to me. And I wanted to talk to them. You know, it never went very far because sex workers lead extremely unstable lives. And if you meet somebody once, the chance that you will meet her again in the same place is not all that likely. But that was sort of an interesting putting my toe in the water of real trans people. I never joined a crossdresser's club. I don't know why, it's possibly simply I was too afraid of any real encounter. With people that wasn't in the dark of night. And so okay, so enough—basically okay, so I've decided that I am trans, I am, but I'm not going to do anything about it. I built a wall around it, a bigger wall than the first time. But it had to be contained. Uh, and yet other things happened. In 1993, the gay and lesbian employees of the New York Times began to organize. They wanted domestic partner benefits and they wanted a non-discrimination clause in the Guild contract. The newspaper guild was the union there. And few or none of them were union activists. So they needed somebody to say how do we get this on the agenda of the coming contract negotiations? They came to me. In the newsroom, I was generally known as the person you come to if you have a union question. So they came to me and they said how do we do this? And I said hey, I'll be glad to help. And I said, if you want to get this on the agenda of negotiations, first thing you have to do is show some support that goes beyond the gay and lesbian employees that you've got broad support, you need to circulate a petition. I showed them how to do that. I mean, I showed them about how you, the physical stuff of making out the petition form, but also sort of key tips like, if you have a petition, uh, and it's a blank one, I mean, there's no signatures on it yet, you either sign it yourself or you find somebody who you have good reason to believe is sympathetic and who is also a well-liked and respected person, and your first two or three signatures need to be persuaders. People who other people would be glad to sign. So I kind of talked to them about the way that you could do this as an organizing tactic. And I also told them I would be glad to take one of those petitions and circulate it myself, and I did, and I got them, you know, 10 or 15, however many signatures were on a form. And you know, they turned them in and they then told—they gave them to both union and the company so that it didn't become a partisan football in negotiations. And they also wanted to make, again, correctly, this is shrewd. They wanted to make the union and the company compete to be the most inclusive. So And that's basically how it worked. They got DP benefits and they got non-discrimination in the contract. And that in turn chipped away another piece of my self-imposed fortress. Because I had actually come out and helped LGBT people do something about their LGBTness. So maybe it wasn't so impossible for me to do something about my own LGBTness, except the T part. I mean, that was the part I had to do, and that was the part that still seemed remote. This is 1994-95. In the summer of 1995, spring and summer of 1995, you know, I had been sort of ruminating on this experience, helping the gay and lesbian people. And um I also, I'm not quite sure of the
sequence of events that led to this, but I uh yeah I think it was in the fall of ’94, I was called for jury duty in Hudson County, New Jersey where I lived, and when you go for jury duty, you know, there’s a big jury room and you wait until they call you for a panel. And then they’ll call you for a panel and likely as not you’re going to get stricken and sent back to the jury room, and this can go on for a week. So you bring stuff to read. I brought um Hollywood Androgyny by Rebecca Belmotero um and read it um and it was one of those things that considered androgyny, I believe, I’d have to go back and look to be sure, but androgyny was placed in a gay frame rather than a trans frame. But it was a[arent’ enough to me that this is about people who are genderfluid, you know? About Hollywood stars who do it, about people who do this either as an openly trans character or you know, as somebody who is concealed or whatever. So it was thrilling to me, sitting there in the jury room, I only was on a jury for half of one day, that case was settled. Eventually my panel was dismissed, and at the end of that experience, oh yes, it was 1994, I had run for shop chairman at the New York Times. I was the candidate of the left caucus. We had various names, bit we were basically the left caucus. Against the conservative business unionists who dominated that local for many years. I did respectably well. I got 45% of the vote, but I didn’t win. Um and it was clear to us in the left caucus that we had reached a plateau. We had a strong following but we weren’t going to win control of anything. I started to think, I’ve done this now for about 20 years. Maybe it’s time for me to put this on the shelf for awhile and attend to the rest of myself. Which I did. In 1995, I took whatever trans related books I had and I read them, and I got as many more as I could. I started to frequent the uh, there’s on the corner of 8th Avenue and 42nd Street, there was Show World, which was a peep show uh porno store uh and you know, there was, you know, sex work sort of going on in the periphery and so forth. But I would go over there and look for anything they had related to trans. And I started to find some stuff and you know, I wrote away and subscribed to some stuff, this was all happening in 1995 and I’m opening up my trans world to a much greater degree, starting to reach out for contact. Um at the end of ’95, I decided I have not actually had a serious conversation about this with anyone in my life except for the occasional trans sex workers in the meat market district. But they were ephemeral, you know? They were there and then they were gone and you’d never see them again. But I had never had a serious conversation with anybody who I knew on a sustained basis for 30-plus years. And I said I’ve got to talk to a therapist about this. And I started looking for a therapist. I wrote away for referrals, I got one— I got, I started calling around to therapists, first in New Jersey and then in New York. And I found a woman named Alana Burger, who was a therapist who did deal with trans issues. Uh and I saw her for a good three months on a once a week basis, which is fairly heavy duty for therapy. I mean, some people do it every day, but I didn’t. But I mean, once a week at least you know you’re spending some real money, and it’s pretty focused. Uh, I spent two or three months telling her my story, and as we went toward the end of that three months, she said—one of the things she said was, you need to talk to other trans people, you need to have social contact. And I was still shy of that, I didn’t really know quite what to do. I was a little afraid of uh organized institutions. It seemed maybe a little too public. She suggested that I call the LGBT Center in New York and I kept putting it off, but then she—I think she deliberately piqued my interest by telling me that there were two conferences related to trans issues coming up um that were in New York that I could go to. And she suggested that I did. And since I was sort of always somebody who was interested in often the more intellectualized part of things like this, I went to the first one which was at CUNY graduate, where they had uh Jameson Green,
uh, Kim Kokiwimoto, who was the first trans person to be elected to public office as far as we know, um and um Rosalind Blumenstein who ran the LBGT Center's Transgender Identity Project. She was there too. Um and I sat there and was—for the first time was in a discussion framework in the same room with trans people who were talking about themselves unashamed and in a positive way. Excuse me, I still choke up a little thinking about that. Um then a week or so later there was a conference sponsored by The Center, which was again specifically trans focused. They had a number of workshops, but one of them was given by a trans woman named Antonia Gilligan who had actually come out a few years earlier—maybe four or five years earlier—who talked specifically about how you prepare yourself and what to expect if you're going to have what we would now call gender confirmation surgery, then what they called SRS, or sex reassignment surgery. I was so thrilled by that, partly because I mean, part of my sense of myself if I did transition I did want to go the whole route and have surgery and so on, but also because Antonia was such a down to earth but very interesting, straightforward person who talked very intelligently and no BS kind of way about what you want, what you expect, you know, all of these things. She was exactly the kind of person I thought would be a friend. That day, which I remember now and have remembered since that day, was May 11, 1996. I went to that conference and I went home, I took the subway to the bus terminal, I took the bus home, and as I was on the bus going home in New Jersey, the feeling overwhelmed me that yes, maybe you can do this. And before I put my key in my front door lock, I had already decided that if I could find a way to do it I was going to. And that's another of those moments that changed my life. Um, yeah, and so uh I plunged headfirst. I called up. I found out, I got somebody to give me Antonia Gilligan's phone number. I met her, we talked. Um I then did start to come around to the support groups at The Center, I met other trans people. And you know, that sustained me. That sustained me and I started electrolysis. And I started—I found a, began looking for an endocrinologist to give me hormones. Um, oh, and my therapist by the way, Alana Berger, around that time, see she and her—she was a therapist in Manhattan, her husband had a teaching job in the New York area. They were both Israelis and, he got a job at the University of Tel Aviv. So they both went back to Israel, so she told me, you're going to have to find a new person. She helped me with that process. I interviewed therapists through June and July and early August of 1996. Found Barbara Warren at the LBGT Center. She became my therapist for the next 10 years. And she was great. She helped me through this. Um and another—you know, she strongly encouraged me to keep going to support group and be around other trans people. I did so, and this is a place where my, you know, my left political side and my trans side started to come together. I remember being in support groups and thinking as I listened to people tell their stories that I had never seen such concentrated social disadvantage in one place. You know, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist because I never hung out in the poorest black neighborhoods or whatever, but um these were people like me and they would keep telling stories like they, you know, hadn't worked in 10 years, they were on, what is it, SSDI. Um or you know um they did all kinds of shady, grey market stuff to work. They were um in desperate circumstances often. And you know, we all, you know, and we despite differences in background and so on, we had this camaraderie that you find when you connect with other people. Um, you know, I believe there was one support group where um me and maybe one other person were the only two out of 10 who were um currently employed. And of the others, many, perhaps most, had never had a conventional job. They had been sex workers, they had been on welfare, they had been um people who did um you know who were like under the table
hairdressers and waiters and you know, did all the kinds of work that you can do without I.D. And you know, I'm thinking oh my God. I knew that there was a by that time fairly powerful gay movement. There was no comparable trans movement that was at least recognized more broadly. Um I started to think how can we do this? What can we, you know, how can we organize ourselves as a community? And so let's see, uh, yeah, also in '96 I had decided I was going to transition. Oh yes. I didn't—although I knew that the New York Times had been, once the issue was posed, they had made a definite decision that they were going to embrace their gay and lesbian employees and I believe that, as I understand it, although I wasn't there because I wasn't out yet, but there was a meeting of the National Gay and Lesbian Journalists Association, Gay and Lesbian Journalists, the NLGJA, that group um had either its first meeting or its second, and they invited Joe Lelyveld, who was then I think the managing editor of the Times, and I heard, this is a few years later, that when he stepped to the podium he said I am here in solidarity with my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, and I just about cried. And so uh—but I also wanted to see what the reality of the Times' attitude towards trans people was, particularly how they were portrayed in the newspapers, and that was a shock. I went through the archive. I searched transgender and transsexual, and I found every article I could. Printed them all out. There was one, do you remember that there was a film called Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, with Terence Stamp? In the film, which was mostly about drag queens but Terence Stamp was portrayed as a friend of the drag queens who was a more transgender identified, um and in that group of people, I mean, kind of broad end stereotypes, the drag queens were portrayed really over the top. Terrence Stamp was the sort of sane and steady person in that group. The Times' review of it—or actually no, it was an article by a Times film reviewer about Terrence Stamp, and it talked about Terrence Stamp's role in that film and a councilor of others, and said that if he doesn't watch out, he's going to get stereotyped as Hollywood's leading weirdo. Oh, god, you know? I mean, really? Um and you know, I looked up, I forget the name of this trans woman—there's a trans woman in the Philadelphia suburbs in New Jersey who came out sometime in the early 90s and I don't know she was accused of some kind of crime and the police came to arrest her and she holed up in her apartment with a rifle and she killed one policeman I think and wounded another. And she was on death row, although I think she was never actually executed, but the coverage of her you know as a person who had been accused of murder always identified her immediately as transsexual. Said so-and-so the transsexual, who you know, as if that was pertinent to the crime that she had committed. In the New York Times there was an entry in the style book, a very closely analogous entry that said um you don't specify the race or ethnicity of a person in connection with a crime unless it is clearly pertinent to the crime. But trans people clearly had not gotten that yet. So I saw all of this, you know, there were sometimes people, even my friends on the copy desk would tell a moderately anti-trans joke, and [inaudible] think, am I going to get through this? Um and I did two things. This is in the summer of '96 or '97, I'm not quite sure, because the process was a couple of years. As I went through electrolysis, I started on hormones, uh I started very selectively coming out to people. And yeah, I knew that I was going to come out at work in the spring of 1998, that I'd already, you know, I worked with Barbara Warren and we had started a timeline and you know, made a plan and so on. So in the fall of '97, I was still uncertain about how it was going to go. I, because I had been involved with the left wing caucus in the union we had had need at various times to consult labor lawyers about our rights. And uh we—there was this guy named Dan Clifton, who was of Hall, Clifton, and Schwartz, which is a sort of union member's rights law
firm. Uh, I knew Dan because he had handled labor work for the caucus before. I called him up and I said I need to talk to you about something personal. I went in and I talked to him, he never batted an eye when I talked to him, but he said I have to research this. In all previous cases when he did work for the caucus he didn’t charge us because he already knew the answers. He charged me $500 to do the—and it was justified, because he had to dig up some stuff, you know? He had to find case law. And he, what he said—he said to me, what he found showed that if I ran into discrimination, you know, if I lost my job or I was, you know, in some other way clearly disadvantaged, I might have a court case. There were precedents, they weren’t totally clear. I also, a little later than that, I went to Washington to talk to the president of the newspaper guild, Linda Foley. Now the background of this is Linda Foley was the first woman to be president of the newspaper guild and may have been the first woman to be president of any AFL-CIO union. She was elected in 1995, although she had been a staffer and generally a supporter of the incumbent administration, when she ran um the more conservative elements in the leadership did not want to support her. Uh some of them circulated a letter in which they suggested that electing her would be “a social experiment.” I and a colleague of mine, Randy First at the Minneapolis Star Tribune, who were veterans of—there was a national left wing caucus sort of on and off in the 90s. We got wind of this. I got a copy of that letter. I wrote a little sort of one page, this big, you know, half-sized thing that said, sexism rears its ugly head in the newspaper guild. And we went through this and said, you know, there’s a lot of great stuff the labor movement has done in terms of winning civil rights, but it also has a bad side to its history. I talked about Chinese exclusion, uh, etc., and then I said, we are at—I believe, I haven’t read it in years although I do have a copy somewhere at home—It said something to the effect that we are now at a point of choice, and we have to decide what is acceptable or not. We believe it is not. Um and on the first day of convention, Randy and I were not delegates. We were not elected that year, neither of us had—were in the majority of caucus of our locals. So we went as observers. The first day of convention, all the delegates went on the outing, which was—this was in Boston and they went on a Boston Harbor cruise. So in the morning, the meeting room was empty. Randy and I went in and we put our leaflets on every seat. When they came back, people read it and there was like a huge buzz around it. I won’t go through all the details, but basically we wound up being cover for Linda who did not have to defend herself in a way that would make it the boys against the girls. Because we, who were to all intents and purposes, two guys, had already brought this issue up. But we, you know, we had first, you know, blown it out there, and in the succeeding, this was probably in June of ’95, the campaign is another three months. We uh work with others on a letter-writing campaign to the guild’s newspaper, getting people to write in and say this is disgraceful, we should not allow this. Um and uh Linda asked me to help her run her campaign in New York. Uh which I did. I distributed her material both at the Times, and it’s, I think at least two or three possibly other shops in the area and found people who would circulate them. So the election came. She won nationally by a huge margin. She won 2-to-1. It was very clear that the old guard had made a terrible mistake. Uh, I think she got nearly 70% of the vote nationally. In New York, uh, the New York local president, Barry Lipton, was actually the one who was running against Linda as the candidate of the old guard. Um he won New York but not by—but not 60/40, and the great thing was he actually lost at the New York Times, which is where I did most of the work. We actually voted for Linda. So Linda won. That’s in ’95, then you know two years later I go to Washington and I say, Linda, I need to talk to you. I told her look, this is coming up, you know,
I'm going to be coming out. If I get in trouble, what can the union do? She called in Ana Pidia, who was the human rights officer of the union, national union, and we talked and we agreed that although the contract language included sexual orientation but not gender identity, we, you know, it included sex, and we thought that, you know, she said well, we can probably make some of this, we can stretch some of this language and make it work if we have to. We will try to protect you to the best of our ability. She then told me that for courtesy purposes I should go talk to Lipton and tell him this was coming up, too. And I did. And he was actually fairly gracious. I mean, he said that they would support me, too. But I knew who my real friends were. So I uh did that and then two months later I came out, you know, I posted in March 1998, I posted a notice around the newsroom. Oh, what a day that was. I came in with a box, maybe several hundred copies of an open letter to my colleagues, which it was a one-pager, it was about four paragraphs. It just said, you know, I'm going to—you know, we've had, you know, much experience together. I am going now through something big I need to tell you about. I'm going to start beginning my life as a woman, da-da-dot-da, you know? And so on. So I came in early that day, [Laughter], the normal starting time I think for my job was 4:00, but I came in at 3:00 or maybe it was 3:00 and I came in at 2:00. Um and I put my box of letters on my desk, grabbed a handful of them, uh, and I actually, I was really uh almost in a panic, but I felt that I could not let myself get bogged down with conversation with anyone, I had to get this all done or I would never get back to my desk. So I quickly put them up in every guild bulletin board around the newsroom and then quickly got on the elevator and went up to other floors where I was known. Because I was known by lots of people because I had run for office in the union many times, I had a lot of connections. And I started posting them, you know, going up from the 3rd floor to the 11th and then back down. When I got off the elevator, [Laughter], the elevator at the 3rd floor, which is the main newsroom floor in those days, I walked out of the elevator and started just sort of walking through the newsroom, and I could see that around each bulletin board there was a clump of people. [Laughter]. And then one woman turned around and said, oh hey, Dawn. Hey! This is really interesting. You know, I mean, just friendly. And I got back to my desk, I logged on, there was a primitive internal email system we had then. And my inbox was full of supportive e-mails from my colleagues. It was all good. It was all good. And you know, I went—oh and I had also consulted gay and lesbian colleagues. Some of whom, one of whom, actually several of whom were actually very supportive and helpful. One of those I had actually helped through you know the gay and lesbian version of this in 1994 actually said, no, that wasn't them—no, he was actually supportive then, alright, so I'll take that back. And we'll come back to him later, that was another [inaudible]. Um but uh so anyway, the first day was just a triumph. And I was, oh yes, because this went up in the newsroom, there were people who surreptitiously were serving as news sources inside the Times for the Times' competition. So some of them called the Daily News and the Post. The Post had articles the next morning. The Post was dreadful, as one might expect. The Daily News was snide, but not terrible. The New York Observer had a really pretty good, short notice. And then they asked me for an interview and I gave it to them because I thought they had done the best job. Um and then, you know it went around in the media world in New York. I got invited to appear on The View, you know, the Barbara Walters show at that time, which I did in June 1998. And you know, sort of fortunate that things happened in the sequence that they did because a nutty thing that I had done, and this was, you know, a body issue, vanity thing. You know, it was another of those teacher-supported that I felt that I really—you know, I wanted to not only be a woman, but I
wanted to be an attractive woman. Of course we all want to be attractive, right? So during the preceding year um I had radically changed my diet and exercise. I had dropped about 50 pounds. When I went on The View, I was skinny as a rail, except, no I guess I hadn't had my implants then, but anyway—so I mean I actually looked very thin. I had you know my hairdresser do my hair and then the studio's hairdresser did my, you know, fooled with my hair and they put my makeup on and all that, and I was on for a half hour and I just kept talking about you know trans people, if you need help you've got to reach out, find your LGBT Center, your trans support group, you know, so on and so on. Um and that was my 15 minutes of fame in the media. So after that, uh, I further had confirmed my conviction that I had expressed earlier that after 20 years of being a guild upstart and activist, I needed to put that down and take up another part of my life. Now part of that was done by coming out. Um but another part of it was part of what I had mentioned before that I had noticed about how terribly disadvantaged our trans community was. You know, I had heard the story of Tyra Hunter, who was the trans woman in Washington who was in an auto accident and was badly injured, and when the paramedics came, she had abdominal bleeding and they opened her pants and she found she had male genitals and they backed off and told jokes and let her bleed there in the street for quite awhile. Then they put her in an ambulance and they took her to the hospital where I believe she actually died within five or 10 minutes of getting to the hospital. But they had let her bleed to death in the street because she was trans. Um and to me, you know, it seemed just like, if we can't organize ourselves around fighting that kind of prejudice, we're not going to survive. And so I went on, I think it was the second national transgender lobby day. Also of course because I'm very interested in history although I don't have any college degree but I always read a lot of history, as I came out I also started reading all of the gay and lesbian history I could and whatever trans history there was, which wasn't much. Um and I did find out, because I started to subscribe to the Tapestry, I started to subscribe to Chrysalis, I subscribed to TNT, the Transgender News Telegraph out of San Francisco. And this was already a couple years in the past, but I read about the case of Brandon Teena, and I read the trans people from all over the country had come to the trial of Brandon's killers in Falls City, Nebraska, and had you know sort of stood vigil um to ensure that there was justice for this person. And so I knew that there was some stuff like that going on. I also knew that there had been one lobby day in 1995 where they had actually gone and seen people in Congress. There's another one coming up in, yeah, '97—that one was actually before I came out. I actually went on that, you know, in Washington. And you know, hoping no one would recognize me, and no one did. But as this went along, I got involved with GenderPAC, which you may remember, uh, which was the trans community's first major effort to start a non-profit NGO that would advocate for trans people on federal legislation. Um, oh, and I also got involved with NYAGRA, the New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy, which was started—that was in '97, before I came out at work. I believe in the spring of, yeah, there was a lobby day in '97, the spring of '98 perhaps, or no, maybe it was '97, uh, that has to be in somebody's archive. Seven or eight of us got together in somebody's apartment in Greenwich Village and we formed the New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy, because we had concluded from the Washington lobby days that we weren't getting anywhere with federal legislation any time soon. But we thought maybe we could get state and city. So we founded NYAGRA, yeah, it was four years, it was from 1998-2002. And we worked on a city civil rights bill, and we also worked um in somewhat more problematic ways on the state bill, from which we were not included,
you know, we were left out, then yes, we were going to be included, but then yes that turned out to be we were only included in the senate bill which wasn't going to be the one that passed, and so on and so—you know, I went through—from '97 I would say through 2002 or '03, the experience of these bitter struggles within the LGBT community about trans inclusion. This was in New York City and New York state, in New Jersey, in Maryland, other places I knew about but didn't live, but you know, I actually did visit Maryland while I was [inaudible]. Maryland there was an LGBT bill, anti-discrimination bill in the 1999 state legislature that was tabled pending a study of discrimination, and in that—that went on for two years, they reconvened in '01, and in that period, the leaders of the LGBT statewide group agreed that in order to get their bill passed, they had to drop trans people. And we were dropped, and we faced particularly the opposition of Cathy Brennan, of whom you may have heard, one of the leading trans exclusionary radical feminists. And there was a lot of bitterness and anger. So in this period, various things are happening. One, I'm active at the state level. We have some success on the city bill, we start getting people to say they'll sponsor it, we're getting endorsements from, oh, working with Pride at Work, with Mirriam Frank and Desna Holkum and some other people in Pride at Work, we got the New York City Central Labor Council to endorse our bill. She did most of that work. that is she, Desna Holkum particularly. Um so we had successes there. I became increasingly concerned about the direction of GenderPAC. At first my concerns were a little bit tenuous, they were most, you know, I didn't like to focus objections or my concerns on um personalities, but there was an issue with Riki Wilchins. Um, you know, she was an excellent provocateur. She could you know, she could give the speech that got everybody to take notice, you know, and she had been active in the Transsexual Menace years before. Um, you know, she was a very in your face kind of person. She was not the person you wanted to have lead an NGO with a permanent presence in Washington. She didn't have the administrative skills—in my view she was too wrapped up in her own personality. And—but most decisively, I was okay with her until about 2000. I think it was '99 or 2000 when she brought this woman named Gina Reece aboard who was a lesbian activist in New Jersey who had led the state LGB anti-discrimination bill in the early 90s. Um Gina was all for protecting trans people from discrimination, but she wanted to recast everything as not being about trans people but being around a more diffuse idea of gender. That is, as it was put in some debates and I think in some articles, she wanted and Riki came to agree with her that she wanted GenderPAC to be the organization that advocated not only for transgender people but also for the anorexic cheerleader who starves herself for body image, the male football player who got slapped for crying after a tough loss, etc. And I mean, I sympathize with that, but also the way I understand social change and advocacy, that is too tenuous a basis to organize around in any coherent way. You need pro who have a really unifying common experience. Trans people have that. That broader concept, first of all, the anorexic cheerleader probably can join NOW or a feminist consciousness raising group and doesn't need to associate with trans people. The guy who gets slapped after a tough football game, maybe he can choose another sport. Um, you know, there are alternatives for people who are not gender different. And you know, I was very clear that Riki was on the wrong path. In the late fall of 2000 I resigned—actually, I take it back, there was a board meeting in the spring of 2000 where we were drawing up our new mission statement, and I wanted us to have a mission statement that stated that we were anchored in or accountable to the transgender community. Riki would have none of that. She wanted us to be accountable to no one. Um and had this much more diffuse statement, did not want the
word “transgender” in the mission statement. I argued vigorously against that, and this shows part of my training both as a union activist and as a socialist, because I've been through many social, you know, I'm in several socialist groups over the course of my life. You know, so I was basically trained in verbal and ideological combat. So when you know, she basically lined up all the votes and I was, you know, kind of alone on this. I stood up and said I am perfectly willing to be a minority of one on this issue, I will not yield on this. And I said this is the wrong direction, uh, I then tried to be the best activist I could in the organization to give myself credence in it. That didn't really work because Riki controlled the board, and there was no rank and file. Um you know it was not really a membership organization. You could be a member of it but that meant that you got a newsletter or something. Um so in the fall of 2000 I felt that I had gotten as far as I could persuading people, and that I needed to resign publically, stating my reasons, and I did. I was the only one who—or maybe one other person did around the same time, although not in a single statement. But a couple of months later actually three more people left the board. I mean, whether we're a trans organization or not did resonate with a number of people. And so a bunch of people left the board. Um and in 2000, 2001, so we have left the existing trans organization in Washington, which is technically in Washington although Riki didn't live there and so on, but I think they had a P.O. Box or maybe—they didn't have an office. They didn't have employees yet. Um and so um and what I did was I started going to gender conferences. I went to the first event up in Boston and I went to Southern Comfort and stuff like that, and I really started talking it up. We need a new trans organization that is focused on the trans community, and we have to organize that from the bottom up. You know? No one is going to do that for us. And you know, there was some false starts. I, you know, looked for various possible leaders. Um I found, you know, there were some who were kind of interested but didn't want to commit. Um there were others who were you know it looked like they might be difficult personalities of not like Riki but not necessarily—I didn't find immediately the person who I believed could do this. I did not believe that I was the person to do this for several reasons. One, because I am a socialist, I generally don't support major party candidates. I am far to the left of most of my community um and um so—and also, you know I mean, I had actually already been involved in advocacy with state legislatures, and I found that basically I didn't like politicians. I was not the right person to talk to politicians. I was the kind of person who at certain critical junctures actually did say no. I mean, I did say that, I said the no on the GenderPAC board but didn't stop the train. There was another case which actually happened a good deal later in the Episcopal Church, which I am also an activist in, but that should not detain us now, it's a small part of a large canvas. Um so anyway, I thought, I'm not the right person. I'm not tactful, you know, I was willing to tell um politicians and members of the clergy that they were wrong and that they were, I mean, at least imply that they were morally deficient. I know the Debra Glick, the assemblyperson from Lower Manhattan, who we approached about the New York state bill, a group of us went to her office and argued with her, and I, as usual, took the hardest point [inaudible] and she threw us out. She told us to leave. She was really mad. Um and I also uh, at one point my assignment was to get clergy support for the city bill, and I actually did a fine job with that, I mean, if I do say so myself. When I was handed the assignment, there were 10 clergy and one congregation had signed on. When I finished three months later, we had 80 clergy and 10 congregations signed on to the New York bill. I actually developed a fair amount of skill about talking to clergy. And uh, that became one of my assignments within NYAGRA, and I also, in 2000—NYAGRA was really founded by seven
people including me, uh, but the key founders were, I was not one of. The key founders were Pauline Park and Paisley Currah. And I have to give them full credit for that. I was a strong activist, but I wasn't the key leader. In New Jersey, I sent out the first emails to some trans people I knew in New Jersey and said, we need a New Jersey version of NYAGRA, are you interested? I got five or six people aboard. We settled on a name, the Gender Rights Advocacy Association of New Jersey, because we could pronounce it “grange,” which as a sidelight, the grange in the 19th century was an agricultural protest movement. So it sort of warmed my socialist heart, and so we became GRAANJ, and we fought for six years to get a state law to ban discrimination against trans people. At the very beginning of that process, a trans woman named Carla Enríquez, who is a doctor in south Jersey, had been fired from her practice um when she came out as trans. Um and she had gone to court, and just as we were gearing up, the state supreme court ruled in her favor and said this is illegal under sex discrimination or something. So we come to crisis—should we, you know, is our mission done before we’ve organized? Do we need to disband? And I consulted around with people including Lisa Motay at the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce at the time, and we came to the conclusion that no, that even though we had a court decision we still needed a statute of law if we could get it, and we fought for six years to get it, and we did get it. It passed in 2006. I will always be really proud of that. that, you know, was grassroots work. It was the kind of organization that I love and that often tends to be fairly ephemeral, which is all volunteers, there are no paid officers, there’s no staff, there is uh no money. There are just five or six people who get together and do things, and that was GRAANJ for most of its life. Um and so we’ve got a law in New Jersey. I mean, but coming back to 2001, 2002, 2003, I’m looking for a person to head the national group. In 2000 or 2001, I can’t remember which. I went to a lobby day, and there was this other trans woman in the group that was sort of preparing for our interviews with our legislators. Her name was [inaudible]. And I talked to her and you know, I talked to her about the need for an organization. At that point, I really hadn’t quite thought that she was the one, although it turned out that she was the one. Um but you know it was very interesting is how we explored each other. She came to understand that I’m a street activist, you know, that I’m a labor activist, I’m a rowdy. Her background is quite different. She was, I mean, she’s a person of conscience, absolutely. Um during at the time when I came to know her, she had a small non-profit practice of doing focus groups that show groups that needed help from the state, she lived in Pennsylvania. How to focus groups to show them how to pitch themselves best to get um persuade legislators and so forth. But she’s like a polling and focus group person. Her father was chief of staff to two different governors of Pennsylvania. Scranton and the elder Casey. Um she had run for state house of representatives herself, or I don’t know, maybe she had just run a campaign for somebody else. But she was deeply involved in normal electoral politics. She knew how that worked. She’s tactful, she doesn’t dislike politicians. Between 2001 and 2003, and Mara was also interested in talking to me because she found that I had something that, I don’t know, she may have had some of, but a lot of people didn’t, was I had an understanding of how social movements work, and what drives them and what keeps them going. And I talked to her at length. I mean, one time, you know, she lived in Harrisburg. She came up and had lunch with me on the west side of Manhattan. While I worked there, when I was working. And um I guess before I was working because we didn't work early in the morning. But anyway, you know, we had this conversation about how to do this, and we kind of both fertilized each other’s minds about making this happen. So Lisa and I and Mara had this three way conversation that went
on for a year or so. In 2002, at the end of the—what was then called the True Spirit Conference, a trans men's conference, that was the last one because the guys got snowed in and something got rowdy and they broke up the place. Another famous story, but anyway, the day that that adjourned, Mara and Lisa and I had lunch at a nearby restaurant and we talked again and we said—I think we all came to agreement, there needed to be a trans organization that would be the NGO in Washington, the one that we wanted as our sort of national public spokes-thing. And Mara at that point, I have to give her huge credit for this, basically she closed up her professional practice. She moved to Washington. She started recruiting a board, she found people to support it. Initially she was the only employee. The actual launch was in 2003 but actually she had been doing the work for another year previous to that. Um and you know, it was launched as this extremely delicate, fledgling NGO with Mara as the only staff person. And Mara was the right person because she's not as confrontational as I am, but her task was essentially to break into NGO world and say hey, wait a minute, trans people aren't at the table, the organizations that tell you that they do represent trans people don't. Uh, and that was as much at HRC as it was at GenderPAC. And the rest is history essentially. In the course of the next three to five years, NCTE, I was on its board—

O'Brien: What does that stand for?

Cartwright: The National Center for Transgender Equality was the, yes, it was the organization that Mara founded, but I was a founding member of the board of directors, and was somebody who kept being involved in and around it. I also had, on a parallel track, I was also the first trans member of the executive board of Pride at Work. I was brought on there in 2002 and I was successfully the first trans member of the board, first trans member of the executive committee, first trans employee, first trans president.

O'Brien: And you mentioned Pride at Work before, but can you explain the basics of what it was?

Cartwright: Yeah, so okay, Pride at Work is the LGBT constituency group of the labor movement. Constituency groups were founded by the labor movement in the middle of the 1970s when it became abundantly clear that the labor movement could not present itself to America as representative if its leadership was all-male, all white male. And so the Coalition of Labor Union Women was founded, I think it was founded independently and later was brought on. The A. Philip Randolph Institute, which I think already existed, became more and more the spokesperson for African American people and separately the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. There are two black groups among the constituency groups. Later was founded, the Labor Committee for Latin American Advancement, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, Pride at Work was the last. It was founded actually I believe in the late 80s as a coalition of local labor LGB mostly groups in various cities—Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Seattle, and some other places. It organized, it grew on an informal basis. In the late 90s, the AFL took it on as the latest and actually last added constituency group. And that meant that we got office space in the headquarters, we got a grant every year, we could hire a staff, we advocated within the labor movement for LGBT inclusion, we did education about LGBT inclusion, which was increasingly important. By the middle 2003, 2004, 2005 period, I think we were already finding
that they got, that we got fewer call-ins from gay and lesbian people who were having trouble in their unions and more call-ins from unions who were saying we've got this person coming out as trans, what do we do? Um and we had to educate them and we did. And part of my time in staff I was technically communications director, a job which I actually, although it seemed like a natural fit wasn't particularly because a copy editor is quality control person, a communications director is really a creative and sales person. I did it, but it wasn't my favorite thing. My favorite thing was education. And so I did a lot of that education work with Pride at Work. Um you know so I moved up the ladder. I held every position in the hierarchy. Um I'm now back on the board as just an ordinary member. So going back to NCTE, uh, that launched in 2003, and over the next three or four years, and this may sound a little sharp-elbowed, but basically NCTE displaced GenderPAC. It also fended off an attack, or a competition by a group called the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition, or NTAC. They were good people but they were kind of amateur um in my view. Um I mean, some of these are people that I really like, so I don't want to, you know, be offensive, but they didn't have the—didn't seem to have the capacity you know, to hire an executive director, open a new office, raise money, have a board— I mean they did have a board, but it was all volunteer. And um, you know, they were rightly so actually they were more suspicious of HRC than we were, and actually some of the things they said about the HRC turned out to be true. Um but they were just, they were not going to be the group that we needed. And eventually they faded out of the picture because if you want to be present in Washington you have to be present in Washington, 365 a year. And you have to have policy experts who can actually go and talk to bureaucrats about changing policies, about writing laws, etc. and so forth. And Mara was able to put that together. Um, NCTE is now 14 years old I think, uh, and going strong. It's actually one of the few LGBT organizations that's still growing. Many of them are shrinking. Some of them as we know have disbanded. In some cases too soon, like here in New York. So I stayed on the board with NCTE, eventually I dropped off, I had, you know, too much to do, and but I always stayed connected with that. Um and you know there was another kind of way that you know, things move in sort of these curving waves in your life, so from the late 90s until 2006 maybe um most of my activism was LGBT. I did a little labor activism but not much. Starting around 2008, 2009, after the financial crisis, I began to shift back to labor. I was not only active with Pride at Work, became active with the labor campaign for single payer, you know, um you know uh being more active around Labor Notes um and so on.

**O'Brien:** What is Labor Notes?

**Cartwright:** Okay, Labor Notes is a left labor periodical. It's like a monthly publication, labor from a left wing perspective, was founded by people who were in the group called the International Socialists in the early 1970s although Labor Notes actually started in 1979. Um as a way to bring—it had to be independent of any particular union. Could not be dependent on the money of particular unions, had to speak in its own left voice and be critical of unions for not being uh not being movement enough, not being struggle oriented enough, you know, being too um having too cozy a relationship with the employers you know, whose people they—you know all of that stuff, all of the left critique of the labor movement has been expressed by Labor Notes as a publication and by the biennial conference that organizes. From 1979 to the present, which is 38 years I think, um and in my view it is a project that I have identified with
for I mean, long, long ago, I went to the first conference, I've been to every conference but one. Um and so that's a place, and there's been a sort of sweet way that those things have converged again, like in you know as I said, I compartmentalized my experience to some degree, and I um for awhile you know I would either be doing labor work or LGBT work but not—the two didn't necessarily meld. In um sometime in I don't know, between 2005 and the present, I was asked to write articles, Steward's Corner articles, which are little advice things in Labor Notes, about LGBT workers, about domestic partner benefits, about trans workers, and so I wrote a number of those. Some of them are, you know, they were all published, and I think some of them were in the Troublemaker's Handbooks, which is a you know book form that Labor Notes publishes. Um so that was a really good way of reintegrating my activism. I'm now 20 years post-transition, I still identify strongly with the trans movement, uh, as I was saying at the beginning of this interview, the difference that there is now for young trans people to come out and survive is between now and 10 years ago and certainly 20, is dramatic. You know, there's for example you don't have to—when I came out, my therapist told me that I was one of the very few people who was among her clients who kept their jobs. I kept my job. I wasn't fired by the New York Times, and I kept it and I retired from the New York Times. And you know, along the way, various people came out, some of them had a really hard time, and you know there was a suicide, there was someone who had been a sports journalist in LA who came out and basically was rejected by their family and yeah, anyway, it was a bad story and that kind of thing happened. Now you—families are supportive more. Families are supportive of young children that are trans. Which is so wonderful. I mean, those kids get a chance to really grow up as their real selves, which is something that we can wish them abundant success with. But you know, in a way there's a sad part too, because our generation didn't have that chance. Um so but I mean I wouldn't change this for the world. I mean, I guess I would change it for the better if it were possible, but it's not, can't change the past. But um you know uh I mean I remember when Lana Wachowski came out, and then Lana Wachowski's brother came out, and um you know, uh, Orange Is the New Black, um and Janet Mock, and um, you know actually some of these things I've never seen because I haven't had streaming TV yet, but I might see them. Anyway, trans has grown in the popular consciousness. You know, there was Transamerica, not the greatest film in the world, but it was decent. Um you know, and it you know there are other films, there was Susan Stryker's wonderful documentary Screaming Queens, you know, which showed another part of history that we, most people don't know. Um I watch that every year or two. I watch the Crying Game every year or two, you know? That's a movie that's somewhat controversial among trans people, but yet it's one that I find deeply touching. And so anyway, I'm off on a tangent here, but you know, the world has changed greatly for the better. However, I mean you've got to put a however on this—it is also true that in the America of President Trump, trans people are among the number one targets. Um, you know, there are dozens of bathroom bills were introduced around the country, none of them passed, some of them came close. Um we stopped the one in Texas which was probably the most dangerous one, but the information is that it will be back in another year or two. And the speaker of the Texas house who stopped it, because he was a business oriented Republican, he didn't run for reelection, or he's not going to. So again, we don't know what's going to happen. We don't know whether we influence to stop that. We may. Things get better. Um, you know, there are um you know I mean there's this kind of threat is going to pop up everywhere. They're rescinding all kinds of gains we've made at the federal level. I am convinced, I don't know if I'm absolutely convinced, no,
not quite, I wouldn't put it that way, but I am strongly optimistic that Trump is going to prove ephemeral. Um I think um the Republicans have lost three consecutive statewide elections since Trump's election. Hey lost heavily in legislative elections in Virginia. They're going to see that this stuff is a liability. That doesn't stop them, because they're actually more loyal to their base than they are in some ways to the—you know, they're less interested in becoming mainstream again than they are in cultivating their base over and over and over again, whether it's on global warming, trans rights, um you name it. Women's rights, you know, all of these things. They're going to fight, but uh I think, you know I would hope that in—see, 2020 is three years—that by that time some of the things that have been rescinded will be reversed again. We may win some stuff in the courts, although they've managed to pack the courts with right wing people. But um I am still an optimist about struggle. I still believe that it is our only hope. Um, do you have any other questions?

O'Brien: I have dozens of questions.

Cartwright: Yes?

O'Brien: They've built up throughout our conversation. But I'm, this was absolutely magnificent. I was really—it was really lovely to listen to you.

Cartwright: Thank you.

O'Brien: And I'm aware that you need to head out before too long? Is that right?

Cartwright: Let me text Andy and see what she's expecting and where—

O'Brien: Should we take a break, and then if there's time reconvene?

Cartwright: Let me see. I—she lives in Brooklyn and I—if I'm going to see her today, I think I need to leave in the next 20 to 30 minutes. But we'll see. I have to find out again her subway stop and so on.

O'Brien: So I'm going to pause it.

Cartwright: And we might, if—okay.

O'Brien: So um let's go back to the early part of your story.

Cartwright: Yes.

O'Brien: Um so uh, what—you've described your parents a little bit in their sort of uneven support, and uh ultimate hostility, what did your parents do? What were their jobs?

Cartwright: Okay. Um, my father was the chief editor of the Hammond Map Company from 1948-1988.

Cartwright: Yes, okay. So it was, at that time it was the second largest map publisher in the United States I believe, the largest being Rand McNally. So he was—he had gotten that job very young. He was in his 20s um and he ran the editorial department for 40 years just about. They retired, my parents—my mother was trained as a teacher. Um my mother and my father both came from what I would call middle class families that were under great strain from the depression. My mother’s father was a high school teacher. He kept his job, but he had He worked in Union City, New Jersey, he was a teacher and a vice principal in one of the high schools there, and they had three consecutive 10% pay cuts. Um, my mother said that during um the Depression um her mother, my grandmother, made all the clothes that they wore. She made them out of [inaudible]. Um and they were, you know because my grandmother particularly was from a rural background and had a certain self-sufficiency and you know that they had, um so they were middle class, but they didn’t have much money. Um my father um had a very rocky childhood that involved uh divorce, his mother and father were divorced when he was an infant, and he grew up in his grandparents' house with his mother as a—as he put it, in almost like an older sibling. Raised by the grandparents, his mother became ill, she had tuberculosis, she died when my father was nine. She was 34. Um and he was then you know, then his grandfather lost all of his money in the bank failures, died of a heart attack. His grandmother eventually was the sole surviving parent. She lived four more years then she died, he wound up with cousins. It was a really rocky, difficult childhood. He went to state teacher’s college because you know nobody in his family had any money, as did my—

O’Brien: Which state?

Cartwright: In Montclair State, and also in New Jersey. They were both at Montclair State, that’s where they met. They—you know, this is important actually and interesting because of the recent debate about universal college, free college for everyone. Some people, such as Hillary Clinton, have said no, no, that’s impossible, but actually I know that in the 1940s New Jersey educated people free to be teachers because they needed teachers. And so my mother and my father were in the dorms, I believe the dorm room and board was either free or virtually free, tuition was either free or virtually free. They came out of that, you know, my mother worked as a teacher for a year and a half during the war and then um when my—she became pregnant with my brother um the convention at the time was that a woman who is visibly pregnant had to leave the workforce, and that’s what happened. She left the workforce, my brother was born I 1945, I was born the next year. My mother, uh, for 14 years uh was a homemaker who was tasked with raising children, as had been her mother who was also a trained teacher who worked in a war plant during the war but you know who stayed home most of the time. So we were middle class in that sense. We lived in my mother’s home town at first, which was what I would call lower middle class and somewhat working class, and then we lived in Maplewood where the company was, where Hammond was located, and in Maplewood you know we were more prosperous than we had, we went from a two bedroom house in Woodbridge to a four bedroom house in Maplewood. With a substantial lot. My mother went back to work in 1960 when I was 14 and my brother was 15. We were, as they put it, old enough to be trusted not to
burn the house down. So They were well off in many ways, but there were limits on that. First of all, you know, and this actually is probably quite common in New Jersey in the 50s and 60s, nobody even thought about the possibility of private school. That wasn't even on the radar. When my brother and I were 15 or 16, my parents sat us down at the table and said uh we want you to go to college um we want you to go to as good of a college as you can, but no matter how good your grades are, you can't go to Ivy League because we don't have the money. Their view of the money is more conservative perhaps than has become customary since. There wasn't such a thing as $100,000 in student debt in those days. Um there wasn't um everything cost less but everybody assumed that they—you know, or at least my parents assumed that they didn't have enough money to send us to Columbia even if we could get in. Um so we were told that we had to aim for second tier top colleges, which we did. I got into Johns Hopkins, my brother got into Lehigh. Um and that was our middle class-ness. Um in the more Marxian sense of the word, we were middle class because my father was a manager and my mother was a supervisor uh when she went back to work. Um she didn't go back to teaching, but you know she was a supervising editor. And so that you know we lived in Maplewood where there wer two country clubs. We didn't belong to either of them. Um we were not comfortable with country club people. We were very middle in that sense. Um and so I, you know, that's the nature of my family. So your next question?

**O'Brien:** Uh, so you told the story about seeing the news story about Christine Jorgenssen?

**Cartwright:** Yes.

**O'Brien:** Can you—do you remember any more details from that day?

**Cartwright:** No.

**O'Brien:** Besides—

**Cartwright:** Unfortunately, I'm sorry, I wish I did, but I was seven years old.

**O'Brien:** Yeah.

**Cartwright:** And I can't remember other than, I forget—you know, I don't even remember for sure whether my father came in carrying that um that Daily News that said GI Becomes Blonde Bombshell or whatever it said, you know? Something like that. Um I know that that was the headlines. I know that it was discussed. I know that I was discouraged, but you know, I don't remember the details of it, I'm sorry.

**O'Brien:** When did you um reconstruct that story then, if uh, how have you told it—

**Cartwright:** I knew that it was there. I mean, I remember, I had that memory that Christine Jorgenssen had been discussed in the family and it was looked on with fisheye, you know? It was like, very eccentric, to put it mildly. And so that was one thing. Another thing was you know sometimes when I was young, I raided my mother's underwear drawer, and I was betrayed by
my brother and I was told, you know—you know, they didn't beat me. They didn't use physical punishment, but they would have killed me for it. And I remember that too. Okay. So it was conveyed that feminine behavior or feminine you know, any symbols of femininity were not the right thing for a boy. And so that's basically how I learned the limits of gender expression for me.

O'Brien: And as someone who soon after leaving uh New Jersey got involved in [inaudible] was your places you lived in New Jersey, were they all white or were they segregated, or did you come into contract with black people growing up?

Cartwright: Okay, it depends on which, although the answer is towards the segregated end. In Woodridge, where I lived, that was my mother's hometown, lower middle class or working class, uh, was 100% white, at least you know, I don't know for absolute sure, I haven't seen the census numbers on it, but um everybody said there are no black people in this town. It was, and racism was apparent because kids, uh, 10, 11, 12 year old kids on the street would call each other the N-word as a way of putting each other down even though there was no black people in sight. So you know there was a kind of cultural racism that was present, so that was Woodridge. We moved to Maplewood, uh, in Maplewood there was a very small black section and there was also a very small black section in South Orange, the neighboring town that shared our high school. And so in my graduating class, senior graduating class in 1964, I would estimate that the senior class was 97 or 98% white. Uh there was a Maplewood Fair Housing Council again in that summer between high school and college I contacted them and I said I'd like to circulate your petitions and I did. Although I think I only wound up getting two or three. Uh so there was some consciousness of how segregated the place was. We also knew, you know, we were you know three to five miles from Newark, which was a majority black city by then, or at least—yeah, by '64 it was. And you know, uh, contact between kids in my school, my high school, and black kids was only at sporting events. For example, our football team played a number of similarly sized high schools, some of which were majority black. Um, our basketball team, which was very good in my senior year, was eliminated in the semi-finals of the state championship by Newark Central. Um so uh and you know I remember being at that game and uh you know there are bleachers on both sides of the basketball court and the bleachers on my team's side were all white and the bleachers on Newark Central's side were all black. It was that segregated. So I was aware of segregation. Uh now here's something you might be interested in. Since there was, actually I had little on the ground experience of I mean except for the racism that I heard and, you know, I mean, I remember I think my parents heard kids using that at some point; they told me and my brother, you are not to talk like that. And that was also part of—I think that was partly because they thought that racism was wrong, but mostly because they thought it was uncouth. As a little anecdote which is sort of off to the side, but it's very illustrative: When I was 11 or 12 my brother and I had bicycles, and we used them to ride all over town. Um we had a steep driveway in our house. This was in Woodridge, before we moved. And I used to go, take my bike and ride down that steep driveway and go out onto the street, having built up a lot of speed, and ride up the hill. I always kept an eye out for cars coming up the hill. There was nowhere near as much car traffic in those days as you get used to now. But one day I did that, I rode down the hill, I saw there was a car coming, I knew I had the distance to beat it and I could get out there. But as I came up the hill the car did, the guy did blow his horn. I stopped,
I'm standing on my—with my bike, and as he drove past I thumbed my nose at him. Uh, as I was about to get back on my bike and start to ride away, my mother called me from the front door of our house, said come here. I didn't know what she wanted, so I walked up to the front of the house. And instead of saying anything, and this was very unusual in our family, she opened the door, with one hand she grabbed the front of my shirt and with her right hand she slapped me as hard as she could and said that you are never to do that again. By the time I was 12 it was very rare for us to be struck by our parents, probably almost never. Uh, but they were that concerned about being you know good mannered. So part of that probably accounted for the fact that they were disapproved of overt expressions of racism. But in the—from 1961 to '64, when I was in high school, that was at the height of the Martin Luther King, Southern Christian Leadership Conference um phase of the civil rights movement. That was when, you know, that was Selma, that was Birmingham, that was the whole thing. And my parents who actually rarely expressed opinions about it, they were a bit uncomfortable with any kind of unrest, which also seemed to be uncouth, but they rarely said very much about it. You know, I was debating, I had a friend in high school who was an extremely conservative guy who became a John Birch Society member or something, and we pushed each other, him to the right, me to the left. So I would, you know, sometimes ask my parents and they kind of expressed unease about it, but I remember this one time, spring of 1963, this is the series of incidents that's often referred to as the Children of Birmingham, when the children poured out of the high schools to demonstrate against segregation in Birmingham, and they were met by fire hoses and dogs. And I remember we watched that on television before dinner, and when we sat down at dinner, my father who rarely, you know, he had that kind of cool that was common in the 50s and early 60s—rarely expressed a vehement opinion about anything—he said, the way they treat those people is disgraceful. It should not be—you know, they should stop that, you know? They should crack down on that. I think this was around the time that they had sent troops in to get James Meredith into the University of Mississippi, and I think he was getting, you know, his cool was becoming exhaustive. So that was the spring. The summer was the March on Washington. Some of my high school classmates went. I didn't, because I at that time could not conceive of doing anything that involved my being more than half a mile from my parents, you know? We all—we were a very close-knit family, we did everything together. So if they weren't going on the march, I wasn't going on the march. When high school started in September uh and the school paper, they had already sort of covered it. Some of the kids had I guess come in during the summer and covered people going to the march, and you know I felt kind of embarrassed that I hadn't gone. Two weeks after I started my senior year was Birmingham Sunday, when the 16th Street Baptist Church was blown up and four little girls were killed. I remember how deeply angered I was by that, and you know, and also I mean it was noted at the time that the tone changed um in the civil rights movement. You know, I mean there had been a lot of the you know I have a dream, you know, the black children white children, you know, and it's a good dream but you know, it tended to be a very feel goody kind of stuff. After Birmingham Sunday, I remember hearing uh black uh activists shouting with anger. Four little girls, you know? It was unbelievable. Um, yeah, it was pretty intense. So that happened, Kennedy was assassinated in November of '63. In the spring of 1964, in Maplewood and the neighboring town, there was a weekly newspaper that just covered the local happenings. There was a short article at the bottom of the page that said that two students who had graduated from my high school in 1963, who were in my brother's class and who had been away at college, the two guys had
volunteered to go to Mississippi for Freedom Summer. These were people I knew. Um and then
I went to the Democratic Convention as we already discussed. So my introduction, you know,
as I went from a situation where—or a viewpoint where um the civil rights movement was
something I watched on television, and it became something that more and more involved
people I knew, and that I got drawn to. Um, you know, I have to tell you that this was a awkward
and difficult transition, you know, I had been essentially raised in all-white company. When I
got to Baltimore, I wasn’t the most comfortable person in the world around black people, you
know? And of course I also had this other thing going on in me that made me guarded with
people. And sometimes people took that as aloofness. Um, you know, after I transitioned, and
this is a long flashback ahead, but it tells you something about it—there was a guy I knew who
had been a business agent for one of the newspaper unions when I was active in the 90s. He
knew me, we worked together, he’s a leftie, I was a leftie, and so on. And then you know, I
transitioned, I was out of the labor scene for awhile. Sometimes you know maybe 10 years later,
I was at a Labor Notes conference, he was there, and he said, you know, this is really been very—
you know I was already out as Donna. I was there as Donna. I was you know in my days of my
femmiest presentation you know because I was still working. Uh and he said this has been so
good for you. He said, I knew Don, Don rarely smiled. But Donna smiles all the time. And my
friends Dan and Sherry just told me basically the same thing, that I was—when I visited with
them in the late 80s, I was visibly uncomfortable about something. And as I went through
transition I became less uncomfortable. Anyway, you know, that’s a long tangent from my
experience with racism, but um you know racism became something that I really wanted to
fight. And you know, I was arrested four times, uh, yeah, three, four, you know, and I was um
at the time of the Selma march in 1965, I was still a freshman in college living in the dorms. And
again, I didn’t feel quite independent enough to go down to Alabama on my own. But the
Baltimore Friends of SNCC organized a support march uh and we marched from Baltimore to
Washington, which is 40 miles. We marched all day, carrying signs saying “We support Selma,”
you know, civil rights in Selma. And I remember as cars would pass, some of them blew their
horns to support us, yeah, you know, that was a good feeling. And you know, so there were
things we did um you know, uh, so I guess I’m not quite sure where I’m going with this, but
essentially, you know, learning to be an activist and learning to be around people who are
different than you are, those are all educations. You have to learn them as best you can.

O’Brien: How did you get recruited in the court, for the uh arrests that you did in civil
disobedience in Baltimore?

Cartwright: I think I just said you know, to the SDS people, uh you know who are actually,
CORE wasn’t organized on the Hopkins campus. The Hopkins student body must have been
100% white. Um I am not sure if they actually refused black applicants, but I don’t remember
any black people. It was also a men’s school. In my sophomore year there was one woman who
was given permission to attend lectures because they had something that she needed.
[Laughter] I remember she was one poor young woman sitting in a lecture hall of 200 men, you
know, and she’s so isolated. It was like, Hopkins began admitting women in 1971, but that’s
another story. So anyway, with CORE, yeah I mean, I found out when these things were and I
went, and I went and I got arrested and did the thing. I—actually, I had easier relationships with
the older black men who were leading it. Walter Carter and Jim Griffin, were the two, you know,
Walter Carter was the big leader of Baltimore CORE, Jim Griffin was the guy on the ground who got the things done. I liked them both and they liked me. So I guess that's as best I can answer that question.

**O'Brien:** And what was your involvement in SDS like for your first, while you were at John Hopkins.

**Cartwright:** It opened a world to me. Uh. You know. I had been—in high school the range of permissible expression, or I don't know, you know, it's not like you got told you couldn't, but the socially acceptable range of political opinion ran from fairly hard right Republican to fairly liberal, although not very liberal Democratic. There was nothing out there left of that. Uh or very little. There were some kids who sympathized with the Cuban government. Uh you know and they spoke up. We had a club, uh, one of the extracurricular clubs, which was the politics and government club. In my senior year, I was vice president of the club uh and uh one of the younger members was Miriam Frank. She and I went to high school together. Uh, the guy in her class who succeeded me as vice president of that club was Mark Rudd. Um, you know, later of SDS and the Weathermen. So there were clearly other kids around there who were you know kind of moving in that direction. But it didn't get expressed a lot in the high school, you know? It was still fairly constricted. When I got to college, I mean, it was so different. I mean, when I went to SDS meetings, the free speech movement in Berkley was at its height, we had one of our members at Hopkins was from Berkley, he had been out there, he came back and reported. It was, you know, again a big, interesting, exciting thing. And uh I you know, I was thrilled by that. We talked about the civil rights movement and about the inadequate response of the mainstream liberal political establishment. We all agreed on that. you know, we were all agreed about the MFDP challenge, and we all agreed um that the federal government was not doing enough to suppress the Klan. And you know, so that was like the common currency. Then people started talking about the war. Uh, did I mention during our uh on mic thing that I was both in the SDS and the ROTC at the same time?

**O'Brien:** Yes, you did.

**Cartwright:** So, I mean, I had mixed consciousness about this. I remember [Laughter] I went to ROTC class once um you know usually you went in civilian clothes. And I went, I had my SNCC button you know on my collar, and I went there and I noticed, you know, SOME people sort of laughing a little bit, and I wondered, you know, maybe it's a little out of place. I don't know. And I took it off. But I started to see that there was a contradiction between being in the army and being, not only against the war but being in any social justice movement it seemed to be, you know, there wasn't a hardline, but there was a pretty clear soft line. Um and spoke and my colleagues in SDS had been talking about Vietnam and you know, all this was another seminal event in my life, uh, in February 1965, there was a anti-war rally in Washington at a church. It may have been Founder United Methodist, but I was one of those liberal churches. And some of us from—we publicized, some of us from SDS were going to go down. We got our cars, some of us had cars, not me, but we had got cars together, uh, to leave from the parking lot near the student union, and the ROTC guys who were people I'd been with only a few months before, some of them came out and tried to stop us. Some of us jumped on the hoods of our cars,
basically we you know, some of the guys who were driving the cars figured out ways to knock them off the hood I mean, without injuring, you know, nobody got run over, but basically we all got there. We went to Washington. The speaker at that event was I.F. Stone, who was brilliant. He was really powerful. Um and you know I began to understand that the United States government was not a force for good in the world. And so yeah, I mean that year I went from a cold war liberal with civil rights sympathies to a self-described radical. The next year, uh and again I was still in SDS or Ken Moony was one of the leaders of my chapter, along with Peter Nividovich. They were like the older uh near adults, you know? I mean, actually they were in their early 2os, but they seemed so much older than the rest of us, [Laughter]. Anyway, they were talking to us about socialism and revolution and stuff, and it was all really, really interesting. Much, much more interesting—I did okay in my first year in college. I got an A in history in my first semester, and I had like a B+ average I think by my end of my first year, and I started to go down in the second year. I was not interested in what they had to teach. Uh, I was much more interested in what I was learning as an activist. So uh, you know, they—Peter and Kim and some of the others—you know, began talking about socialism, about you know a different way of organizing society, about the importance of the working class. All fairly new concepts to me. Although I kind of ate them up quickly because I had, you know, it didn’t seem like conventional politics provided a route toward a really different society. So there was this one moment, I think pretty much it probably is in the spring of my sophomore year, so either right before I was arrested in the you know thing where I dropped out of school, or maybe right after because I still hung around on the campus. But I was in the student union and I was talking to probably to Peter and Kim and maybe some other leaders of the chapter. And we were talking—and I had sort of come far enough to realize, okay, if we need the working class to change the society, how do we do this? We were all college students, you know? None of us or very, very few of us were from working class backgrounds, at least as that was understood then, what we would now call blue collar. Um and so I said how do we cross that divide? And one of them said, you know, we need to organize a socialist organization and that organization needs to get people to go and take jobs in industry, either broadly or narrowly defined depending on who was saying it, but you had to get people with socialist ideas into the workplace to talk about those ideas. I was already on the brink of dropping out of college. And when they said that, for a moment a glimpse of a different life appeared to me. And although the road to that different life was pretty rocky and actually led be back into a white collar job, but it certainly led me into intense union struggle um I got there eventually. It took some time. But that—I mean that was really one of the things that it was moving on a number of levels, because it was convincing. That is, it was convincing people that working people could change the world, they had the power. They could stop production. They had the numbers. Um it was at least somewhat convincing that socialists could bring those ideas into the working class as you know has been cried in 100 different ways and times in the last couple hundred years. And I still believe it’s true. Those were—it was both convincing and it was something that appealed to my sense that you couldn’t just talk about this stuff, you had to do this stuff. Uh, and that meant, you know, I did apply for a number of industrial jobs, although I was at that time—my comrades, which I was starting to use that word in connection with these SDS people because we were socialists, and that became the customary way of referring to other people, but anyway, my comrades were talking about getting into the working class, but their plan was much more long term. I was out of school, out of a job, I needed to do this soon. And I couldn’t get a job in an
industrial plant partly because when I filled out the applications, I didn't realize that I should have lied about being a college student, a former college student. I also didn't have any previous—you know, like some of my friends had like had jobs painting houses for the summer. If you went to an industrial plant with that on your resume, they might hire you. If I said I re-shelved books in the library, they're not so likely to hire you. So I didn't get that kind of job. Um but you know, when I got you know, hired you know first by the Star Ledger and then by the Sun, the Sun was a union shop and then I said well okay, you know, maybe this will be my way. And actually I did put you know 25 years of my life into that. Um and all of that came out of I think you know SDS which was—had many flaws, but which was—there was at least a current in it which thought very seriously about social change and how to make it, um and didn't like the what we now see as the mainstream version of social change which is very top down. Yeah, no, we were not interested in that. I mean, it was top downness that tended to offend us the most. So anyway, that's the way—that's kind of the path that I followed in that respect.

O'Brien: You mentioned before—I want to get back to the socialist, participation in socialist work. But you mentioned before um reading about the John Hopkins Gender Clinic.

Cartwright: Yes.

O'Brien: And sort of keeping it at arm's length.

Cartwright: Yes.

O'Brien: Do you remember anything else around—were you ever exposed to the clinic, or did you learn much about it while you were there? What was it like being at the same university as it?

Cartwright: Well actually, you're at the same university in the formal, institutional sense, but at Johns Hopkins, the liberal arts campus, which is where most undergraduates are, is in north central Baltimore. It's just south of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. It's—those are all to the north, and to the east, to the west there's a working class neighborhood where white, and then to the east there's a black working class neighborhood and so on. So that campus was isolated from the medical campus. The medical campus is in what's called east Baltimore, which had been in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, that was one of the premier white working class neighborhoods in the city, it started to have a major black section in the 50s and 60s. Johns Hopkins Hospital was down there, it had actually been founded down there in east Baltimore in probably around 1900, you know, the university was founded in 1876. Um and so the two campuses were separate. Of there was that, you know, there was that clinic, but I never went there. I know I was never around it. The only possible sign, and I am not really sure about this, it could be other reasons, but I recall in the 70s, probably before they stopped the program in 1979, my job as you know kept me up late at night. I worked, my standard shift at the sun, 4:30 in the afternoon to 1:30 in the morning. Uh the bars closed at 2:00 so you couldn’t even go out for drinks really. You might go to a diner uh or you just drove home. And I mean I really drove to work and back because the busses, you know, there are no busses, or there are some busses but not enough for that late. I noticed in my drives back and forth between my home and the
Sun building, which is not quite downtown, but much nearer downtown, there was a fairly large number of trans sex workers out on the street. It's possible that some of them had come to Baltimore looking for the clinic. And were looking to raise the money or had been rejected by the clinic but needed to be sort of around that world, I don't know. That's a conjecture on my part. Um, now as I said, the clinic was in existence from 1965 to 1979. I left Baltimore in 1977. They closed the clinic in 1979 because I think the clinic was a sub-division of a larger part of the medical college. And the person who became in charge of the larger part was named Paul McHugh, who was a devout Catholic who was very anti-trans. Um but what they did was they ran a study of trans women who had surgery and trans women who didn't have surgery but transitioned. Um and they found that the satisfaction rate among those who had surgery was not markedly higher than among those who didn't have surgery but did transition. And they decided that therefore, and the logic of this is obviously shaky, they decided that the surgery part wasn't really necessarily and that even though the satisfaction rates were all positive, many more people were satisfied than dissatisfied, um for some reason they used that as an excuse to close the program. Hopkins was the first gender clinic to close, I believe, although I'd have to ask somebody who is more knowledgeable about that. Um and um but after that, in the 80s, one by one all of the gender clinics closed. Stanford, Case Western Reserve, I think there was one at Vanderbilt. And so they all closed, and this was at the time of the anti-trans backlash around Janice Raymond and The Transsexual Empire, you know, the book that she wrote that's—it is so grotesquely anti-trans it's painful to read. Um but there was this anti-trans backlash that affected not only society generally, but also the LGBT movement particularly. That's some of the origin of lesbian anti-trans—the lesbian anti-trans current in the larger lesbian movement, I might say. So um that was a time of retreat for trans people. Trans people started to look for surgery if they wanted to get it and could somehow put together the money. Um, on a fee for service, instead of going to a clinic which basically gave people free treatment if they conformed to the gender clinic's expectation of what a trans woman should be and look like. You know, there are all kinds of horror stories about that. um but so if you just—if you go to a doctor money in hand and say will you do this, some people who had the money did get that done. Other people just had to wait. Bringing us back to my life and you know, how I sort of experienced from a distance those things that were going on, as I thought about it later, I wouldn't say—I probably didn't fully understand myself as trans in the 1970s. I knew I was sort of like that, but you know, I didn't have the epiphany I mentioned until 1986. But supposing in 1986 that instead of concluding that I was too old, which really meant that I was too afraid, I had decided that I would do it. I am not convinced that if I had come out then, that I would have survived. Um and I mean that in a literal sense. The mortality rate among you know I believe among trans women who came out in that time, I don't know if I've ever seen a comprehensive study, but I believe that there was some documentation of quite elevated mortality rates. Um and that was because people got AIDS, because they used too many drugs, because they committed suicide, or because somebody killed them. Um and if I had come out in 1986 I do not believe I would have kept my job at the New York Times, and I don't know how I would have survived. So what I've read of trans history, which is by now—you know, I mentioned earlier in this interview that in 1997-1998 when I was coming out, there was trans history but not very much. Now there's quite a bit if you know where to look for it. You know, there are archives and so on. And um so um the uh you know in the 1980s it was very perilous time. It was dangerous. And it was also like, even if you survive physically, um you were stigmatized if
people knew. Um, or you were driven into hiding. I'll tell you an interesting story about that. And a story that is touching and poignant and sad and good at the same time. You may remember that in 2011, there was a trans woman who was in a fast food restaurant who was badly beaten in the Baltimore suburbs. Her name was uh Chrissy Polis. And the thing is that somebody recorded it on their cell phone camera and the video went viral. And you know, these two women attacked her and basically beat her quite badly. Um and there was a demonstration that was called. This is 2011, so by this time there's, you know, we hadn't really crossed the tipping point yet, but there was a fair number of people who would turn out for something like this. So there's a big demonstration at the place. I went, a lot of people went um that I knew. And when we got there we found a number of people who identified themselves to others in the crowd as trans women who had been in the closet for 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 years, who were so moved by this that they came out to demonstrate. Um and who lived these lives of isolation and denial. That—and that they had found the courage to come out and do this was wonderful. Um but that is—you know, I think that was the kind of life that faced people who had to deny who they were. I mean, I'll tell you another story, this is maybe technically you know, I mean, there are no names attached to it, so I will. It's like, one of my therapists in one of our conversations, as I was making my decision to transition and come out, for a brief time I entertained the idea that I would uh you know go through as much transition as I could and still hide it, and then I would quit my job at the Times and I would go through the rest of transition and save up the money to have my surgery, and then I would later come back under a different persona and work. And this is all actually, although I didn't quite understand it at the time, this was a way of hiding from being out. And I remember that my therapist told me that um in her view this would be a terrible mistake. And she said this thing I'll always remember. She said, you have just given up one life of lying and hiding, why start another? And she also told me an anecdote, and this is what I was slightly hesitant about, but I'm not going to name my therapist or the person she was—because I don't know the name of the person she described—she said, she had a patient who was then uh she said a trans woman who passed very well, you know, who blended into society perfectly, you know, was you know either blessed with being fairly small or light-boned or you know, so all the things that help some trans women pass. And she said that that woman, although she fit in, blended in perfectly, she said this woman is mentally on the brink. She's scared out of her mind that someone will know her secret. Even though actually no one would. And uh, there's this thing about um paradoxical thing that hiding makes you afraid. Um and afraid that someone will know. Uh, that was very powerful and actually persuaded me that I shouldn't do that. um and it's, you know, I've advised people along the road that you know, do not get back into a life of denial. It's a terrible place to be. So I'm not sure how I got on to that, but I'm going to toss it back to you.

O'Brien: So you mentioned a number—your involvement as a socialist—

Cartwright: Yeah.

O'Brien: As a socialist in the labor movement—

Cartwright: Yes.
**O'Brien:** And prior in SDS.

**Cartwright:** Yeah.

**O'Brien:** And uh there are some hints about the sort of kind of socialist you were, and you described a little bit about your politics. Um, could you sketch some about the current of the socialist movement that you were a part of and some of the organizations you were involved in, and the arc of that?

**Cartwright:** So when I was persuaded by my SDS mentors to be—to you know to take up the idea of socialism and so forth—um the socialist movement had been through a really deep trough in the 50s and had started to come back in the early 60s. Some of my older comrades had been in the Young People's Socialist League which was the youth group of the Socialist Party in the United States. It had a strong left part. Most of the Socialist Party uh was either into sterile electoralism or um into reforming the Democratic party. But there was this left group that included a number of people who were my older mentors um who believed that we needed to build an independent working class movement and so on. Those people, some of those people, they coalesced in several places in the middle 1960s, beginning in 1964 and 1965. The first of them was the Berkley Independent Socialist Club, which played a critical role in the free speech movement. One of its leaders was Hal Draper who had been uh a leading activist in the Socialist Worker's Party and then later the, uh, what was called the third camp offshoot of that called the Worker's Party. Third camp meant that the Worker's Party did not accept that either capitalism or soviet style communism was an acceptable view. So the idea was the third camp of you know genuine socialism, which was democratic as well as collective. That was the basic idea. Um and Hal was like, you know, he had been a leader in the student movement in the early 1930s, anti-war student movement. He had been editor of the Worker's Party's paper and so forth. He was still alive and active, he was working as a librarian at UC Berkley during the free speech movement and he, his brother by the way is Theodore Draper. Um and so Hal—Hal is dead and I think so is Theodor, but—Hal was like the kind of intellectual father figure to a lot of people who led the FSM. Um—

**O'Brien:** The FSM?

**Cartwright:** Free Speech Movement in Berkley. Sorry. So that was that group, and they started to revive those ideas. They published a pamphlet called Two Souls of Socialism. Um and there was also a group in New York around a guy named Cy Landy, which was also—and they start, I think inspired by the Berkley ISC, they formed a New York ISC. We heard about it in Baltimore, and we formed something called the Baltimore Independent Socialist Union because we had some people who were from slightly different currents. They were not—the differences were not large, but sometimes those things, you know? So we had to tread a little lightly about that. So we called it the Baltimore ISU. We put out a pamphlet called Towards the Working Class, whichannunciated actually some of those ideas that I had just been describing, became so attractive to me. Uh, in the summer of 1966, a guy named Fred Epsteiner who is also at Hopkins, who is one of the co-authors of that pamphlet, and I and somebody else drove a car from Baltimore with boxes, a couple of boxes of copies of that, out to the SDS convention in Clear
Lake, Iowa in 1966, and we started to proselytize that idea. We made some critical connections. A guy named Steve Kindred, who later became a key organizer of Teamster rank and file, his father, who is a Methodist minister, owned the church camp where the SDS had its convention, so that was the sort of funny connection. Steve died a few years ago and it was very sad. Um so um there were these things cropping up around the country called independent socialist clubs. We had basically the same politics. We distinguished ourselves from the Communist Party, we distinguished ourselves from the Socialist Worker's Party, we distinguished ourselves from all the tons of Maoists who were around, you know, and the leadership of SDS which was by the late 60s, '68.

69, you know was moving into insane streetfighting and uh terrorism around the Weathemen. And so we had a different politics. We thought, you know, you have to build the revolution from the ground up. And so in—we confederated in 1967 probably I'd the Independent Socialist Clubs of America, which is kind of a loose federation. I'm not—yeah, we did have a publication. Didn't come out very often. The various clubs all functioned independently. We got very involved in 1968, first in the Cleaver campaign, when Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther leader, was going to run for president at the head of a you know left alternative to Humphrey and um Johnson. And you know, so there was a Cleaver campaign. He was actually ruled off the ballot in New York but Dick Gregory got on the ballot, so we supported him. Uh and uh so you know, and SDS, which was, although um a lot of our people actually in the ISC and you know, the various ISCs, were not necessarily SDS members, because some places the SDS was not particularly strong like in Berkley. But SDS was sort of the fulcrum of the new left because it's the largest organization. And as it started going crazier and crazier, you know, we could see that there was a split coming. Because there was deep factionalism between the SDS national leadership around Bill Ayers, Bernadine Dorn, various like JJ Jacobs and others that I'm not picking up. Uh, Kathy Wolkerthan. Uh they had one viewpoint and then there was PL, the Progressive Labor Party, which had launched a sort of deep penetration campaign in SDS, winning control of the number of chapters, and they were competing for leadership of SDS. It came to a head at the 1969 convention, in the late spring of '69 as I recall. I was at that time I think in my third month at the Baltimore Sun as a copy editor that I got the time off and I went. Um, you know the atmosphere was terrible, you know there were, you know, the two factions had these um you know security squads of not firearm armed, but people who were armed with clubs and stuff, and I mean you know physical violence was you know close to the surface there. They held you know the actual competition between PL and what later became the [inaudible] is movement leadership. We were sort of sidelined in that. we didn't take part. But what we did do was we managed to grab a meeting room off to the side while the two big factions were fighting it out, and called for a meeting of people who wanted to start an independent socialist organization that was you know along the lines that I described. That is not supportive of the Soviet Union, not supportive of western capitalism, uh, people had different positions on exactly, what kind of level of support you would give to Cuba or the NLF in Vietnam. We were all for immediate withdrawal from Vietnam. So those are kind of some of the differences within us, but we said we have enough in common, we want you folks to come and we need to meet in this meeting room and see if we've got something to start an organization. And you know, quite a few people did. I forget whether it was 30 or 50 or whatever, but there were a bunch of people who said yeah, let's do this. In September of 1969, that came to fruition. The ISCA formed what became the IS, became International Socialists. Which was conceived as a much
more tightly organized organization with a national headquarters, and which would have a policy that it would implement. Um I mean, I think chapters were allowed some autonomy, but you know, not—it wasn’t the loose federation that we’d had before. Um the founding convention, I forget where it was—was it Chicago or somewhere, I forget—um, might have been in Detroit—but we I went to that, and we started and by that time it was, you know, we were like three years down the road from Clearlake, where we had been circulating this stuff about working class orientation. By ’69 we—that was the predominant idea. The differences were over how you implemented that and how quickly. This organization started with around 300 members as best I know. There are other people probably who know this better. I believe Joel Geyer probably knows this somewhat better than I do, but I think I have the basic, same knowledge. So um we founded the organization. It’s initial headquarters were in New York, but there was a strong push among those who wanted to get into industry to move it to the Midwest and that is what was done. Uh, the headquarters would move to Detroit, um and people were encouraged to come to the Midwest, particular into heavy industry, and to get jobs there. I believe, although I don’t have hard numbers, I was never in the central office of the organization, but the generally accepted figure is that from 1969 to the middle 70s, the number of people who went through—who were members of IS at various times—probably exceeded 500. The number of people who went into industry was probably around 250 to 300. There were enough to build some kind of a base with some real connections in the working class, and that was an outstanding achievement in my view. Um, never the less, there were dissenting voices. For example, Hal Draper did not want to follow that path at all. He wanted us to be a propaganda center, um and when he didn’t get his way, he quit with some associates. Then there was another small group that quit over uh the question of whether you formally supported the NLF in Vietnam or not, and that group left too. I think they were expelled, but I think they also—they set it up with provocations that they, yeah, so, there was that.

**O’Brien:** Did they start another group?

**Cartwright:** I don’t think so. I mean, they started an informal group but I don’t think they ever had a name. There was yet a third group um that was um later became known as the RSL, the Revolutionary Socialist League. That took a large group out. Those were people in my humble view who were not comfortable with the real work of building a movement. They really liked to argue um points of theory. Um some of them were anarchists really, um and were um—their vision of class struggle was debating other socialists. And um, now that’s a harsh viewpoint, but I think there are many other comrades that would agree that that’s what they were. They were expelled, and we lost around 100 people with that, but we lost people who really could not work with anyone else in the organization. So actually that—it wasn’t an amicable divorce, but it was a necessarily one. So we had those splits. In the middle 70s, while we had built a base in the working class and you know had started to take part—you know, some people like Steve Kindred were active in Teamster rank and file, which became uh one of the constituent parts that became TDU. Um, others of our comrades were active in opposition groups around, in left groups in the UAW, left groups in the Steelworkers, some of our people supposted Sudlowski and Bellanof as they made challenges to the leadership there. We did that kind of thing. We did good work. We were also um severely crippled, uh, and a number of people have said this, by the onset of the 1973-74 recession, the um the oil crisis, and the beginnings of—there was a
book by somebody named Fergusson and somebody else called Right Turn, about the right turn in American politics at that time. That was very, very real, and that was uh, it really um was a big shock. Um and then we had two more splits. We lost what became the ISO and we lost another group that was called Worker's Power, all before the end of the 70s.

**O'Brien:** The ISO?

**Cartwright:** The ISO left the IS and became a separate organization. Um most of them were not comfortable with our, with the I would say near-exclusive emphasis on labor work in the organization.

**O'Brien:** So the International Socialist Organization, they were doing student organizing.

**Cartwright:** Well, yes. They did that, and they did some working class organizing too, but they basically felt that we were getting too drawn into the details of um labor politics, you know, of the specific politics of organized labor unions. So, and I also think that there were people um—it was interesting I believe, and I don't know this, because I was actually out of the IS, I left, and I was isolated as a member at large. I was a union member, but nobody in the IS was very interested in newspaper work, although that is something of a mistake I believe because newspapers have very volatile labor relations, but—you know, so I was a member at large, I got my discussion bulletins, but I had no one to work with. I wrote for the Worker's Power, which was the paper of the IS in the early 70s, occasionally, but as I drifted away from it and kind of got myself more immersed into having what you “might call a normal life,” I eventually felt more and more guilty that I wasn't doing more. I was occasionally active in the union but there weren't all that many ways to do it. I still didn't have much confidence in myself as a leader, uh, and I resigned from the IS in the summer of '76 saying you know, I just—I don't find a way for me to be active, I need to step away from this. And I was out for four years. So the ISO left in '77 and I believe Worker's Power in '79. Both of them I believe were not rooted in Detroit or in the Midwest. One was rooted in New York and the other on the West Coast I believe. I think there was a sense that they felt alienated that they weren't at the center of the organization. And there was also some craziness that went on in the IS. There was, you know, a period of hyper-discipline, you know, where people were expelled from not being active enough or you know not being willing to move to such and such a place and get a job at such and such a place, you know, that kind of thing. It was too much actually really, there was, you know, people were too convinced that if they just worked everybody hard enough you know socialist revolution would be here. And of course it wasn't. um, you know, and we had one setback in the early middle 70s around that and then another big one in 1979-80 of course with Reagan's election and the further turn to the right and so on. Um the IS declined in membership. I rejoined in 1979 because I had not only come to the Times but I had become active in the union, I was recruited to be a shop steward by a woman who was one of the leaders of the left-ish faction in the union who had also been a founder of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, Betsy Wade. She recruited me to become a shop steward, I became a shop steward, and I, you know, there's a left ticket that ran in 1980, we won, I became grievance chair, which is like the chief steward. So suddenly I felt I was okay again. I was actually doing my part, so I rejoined the IS. But it was evident that things were difficult, the organization was holding its own, you know, it started
Labor Notes in 1979 I think as a way um to reach broader layers of left-inclined unionists than you could one a one-on-one basis, particularly in an organization the never had more than 300 members at a time and probably had quite a few fewer than that at various—so, Labor Notes was a way around that. But it took Labor Notes awhile to settle in, you know? You know, the first conference, which I went to, I think it was ’82, I think there were, you know, maybe 100, 150 people, which we thought was a considerable success, but you know, conferences now have 2,000 people. So this is all just to give it perspective. So we merged, we brought—Worker’s Power, which had left us, they decided, some of them, that the split had been a mistake, and some of our people decided the split had been a mistake, so we merged our New York branches in which I was a member of the IS branch, and we merged those two and then the two national organizations, and a fragment of the SWP that had—one fragment, the one that split off from the SWP, was called Socialist Action, and then part of Socialist Action split off, calling itself Socialist Unity. There’s a very characteristic thing about splits in socialist organizations is that when an organization splits and looks for a new name, it chooses a name that denies exactly what it had just done, so an organization that was born in a split calls itself Socialist Unity. Go figure. Anyway, uh, so they joined us. We had enough people, you know, an organization with 150, 200 people again. I actually had a hard time in the New York branch. I felt that the New York branch was one of the few people where—people who had come out of IS were in a minority. And in fact, I think at the time of merger, the IS branch in New York City had less than 10 members, we may have had eight or nine. Um, many of them didn’t join the merged organization, and some of them who did didn’t stay. By 1987, two years after the branch merged, I was the last ISer in the branch. And I felt that I was being marginalized in the branch. I don’t know—I mean, I suppose it’s okay that this is in the archive, although it’s very far from the trans oral history part. I mean, my transness is interwoven in this, but anyway, this is—you know, if you want an insider’s account of how socialist organizations developed in that period, this is all true. Anyway, so uh I eventually left the branch, wasn’t a member of solidarity at all for about 10 years and rejoined. Now this is interesting and actually brings us back to the trans part. When, as I mentioned, in the late 90s, I was coming out at work, I was transitioning, I was in the support groups, I was seeing this dramatic social disadvantage, did not have—I needed, see, I could do labor work on my own even without a socialist organization to lead me or give me, you know, I could do it. I knew how to do it. LGBT work I really didn’t know how to do. Hadn’t done it before. I wanted to find somebody with a socialist perspective on this. I rejoined Solidarity in 1999. And I found that although there were some L, G, and B members, there was very little LGBT work, coordinated work that was done by the organization. I wrote articles for Against the Current, which are still available. I wrote one about that period in the 80s, you know, the deepest, you know, the worst time for a trans movement. It’s all there somewhere. Um and but the organization did not prioritize that work uh, and it wasn’t like there was a decision at the top, oh we will not prioritize this work. It was actually that the LGBT comrades themselves by and large were focused on other things. So um I didn’t find that that was all that useful to me. Uh, I was a member for four years. I actually did some useful educational work in Solidarity. There was a socialist school that every year—conventions are every two years and the non-convention years they have the socialist summer school. And I gave some talks about trans people, and that was interesting and useful. Um—

**O’Brien:** I met you at one of those conventions.
Cartwright: Yeah. Okay. Okay, yes. So I left again in 2003. Again, I plunged deeper into NGO and related world because private work is a little different, it’s not wholly a classic NGO, I mean because—

O’Brien: So we were cut off because uh the recorder part filled up.

Cartwright: Yeah. Where were we?

O’Brien: Well, you were talking about uh your brief seduction into supporting Democratic party candidates in 2008.

Cartwright: Oh yes, that’s right. So I voted for Obama and um I was somehow still, I mean, you know, I had the kind of typical left wing malaise that you think well, he’s got to be better than Bush, right? You know? He’s got to be better than McCain. And so on. You know, you were so like, tired of you know, eight years of Republican party that you sort of, you know, you do it. So I did it, and I also had the classic um revival of consciousness. And it came so quickly after the election. I remember the election um you know and Obama wins by a really large margin, and then like two or three weeks later, now when is this, late ‘08, I had not quite yet been laid off by Pride at Work, that came at the end of November, but uh you know, somewhere in the very late November, I believe Obama named his economic team, and it was headed by Robert Rubin, Larry Summers, Timothy Geithner, and the whole Wall Street crowd. And I remembered that in 1992, my friend Sam Farber told me that he knew that the game was up with Clinton when Clinton named Lloyd Benson to be his Secretary of the Treasury. So I recognized that, I had you know, gone from disappointment to hatred for the Clintons over those eight years. And um, you know, and then you know Obama names the same Wall Street crowd and I think okay, maybe he won’t be as repulsive personally as Bill, but he He’s policy wise this isn’t very different. We can’t expect further. I was also deeply repelled uh during the uh you know the beginning—after Obama takes office, in the first nine months they’re talking about um universal health care, and I remembered that you know, people came to testify for single payer and they weren’t allowed—they were not given um spots to testify, you know? And then they would stand up and try to shout their testimony anyway and they’d be arrested and so you know, it was very clear that the Democratic party was not going to allow anything—you know it would make some gesture to the left, but it would be, you know, it was like really strikingly similar to ’92 in that what they came up with in ’92 was this horrendously complicated managed care system, that managed to preserve I think all the players except, I’m not sure whether—maybe the um—in ’92 I’m not sure whether they actually placated the insurance companies. I think maybe they didn’t, and that may have been one of the things that killed it. But the ’92, the HillaryCare plan was a nightmare of complexity, that you know, it was particularly bad about allowing people to go to whatever doctor they wanted, you know, because you had to get into these managed care practices. And so along comes the ACA, 16 years later, and it’s very soon apparent that it is also a horrendously complicated system that preserves the monetary interests of all the big players and means that if anyone suffers, it’s going to be the people below. So I was um repentant, [Laughter], of my excursion into mainstream politics. And as a way of um making that repentance real, you know, and I had just been laid off by Pride at Work.
I was laid off at the end of '08, just, they didn't have any money um because all the big unions had suffered in the financial disaster and there were lots of people being laid off, dues income was drying up, so Pride at Work suddenly had no money, I was laid off, so several things happened. One, in the spring of '09, a couple of Solidarity members moved to Baltimore, I was notified of that, I said okay, I want to rejoin. I did. And also, Pride at Work, although I was laid off, I continued to keep connection, you know, there was a board meeting in Washington, I wasn't a member of the board, but I went anyway. Took part, and in '09 it became clear that um we were going to have to replace, there was going to be a replacement of leadership in Pride at Work. Nancy Walforth, who had been the female identified vice president from foundation to 2009 was stepping down. The other co-president was also stepping—was not going to run again. The executive director who had laid me off um shopped for a job in the Obama administration and got one in the labor department. And so he uh delayed his I don't know whether it was delayed or not, but anyway, he still was president, executive director of Pride at Work through the convention in September of 2009. But we knew we had to replace the whole elected officers, and we knew that Jeremy, the executive director, not Jeremy Davis, but Jeremy Bishop, uh, that he was going to leave. So we were starting from scratch. Jeremy Bishop and Nancy Walforth, both of whom knew that they were leaving, tried to cobble together this slate of officers. I said okay, I'd be willing to serve as an officer of some kind. And at a certain point they said, you're going to be co-president. And I said really? And you know, and then it became clear as I sort of looked around at who else was possible, I was probably better qualified than anybody else. So I did run for co-president. Uh, and you know, of course I was selected, and because it wasn't contested [inaudible] not an awful lot of people were looking to rescue a nearly bankrupt organization with no staff. And so uh I— I mean, I took office right, I mean, at the end of that, the last—when the convention was gaveled to a close, that's when the new officers took office.

O'Brien: So this is the AFL-CIO convention? Or the—

Cartwright: Pride at Work convention, which was actually in Pittsburgh, where and while the AFL-CIO was also having its convention.

O'Brien: Okay, got it.

Cartwright: So And when it was—when the convention closed, uh, I was the co president along with Stan Keno, who is a flight attendant based in San Francisco, uh and we were the two top officers and we had to—the first order of business was to form a search committee to hire a new executive director. And we, you know, we went through all of that and we hired Peggy Shorie who [inaudible] director for several years. Um and you know, I became in effect the most uh present of the two co-presidents because Stan was, one, based on the west coast, two, was flying a lot, and three, [sneezes], excuse me—

O'Brien: Bless you.

Cartwright: And three, uh, he flew long distance routes to Australia and China. He wasn't available a lot. I lived in Baltimore, right up, you know, 40 miles from Washington, so I could be
fairly hands-on. And so I uh wound up uh being the co-president, and it was a learning experience, which I think at this point um I want to think before I go any further into how that evolved. I mean, it evolved well, but there were political conflicts that I want to think about how I talk about them.

O'Brien: Sounds good.

Cartwright: Okay, so more questions if you have them.

O'Brien: Well, we're—

Cartwright: You need to go home.

O'Brien: I should get some food, I think, and we're well over the time that you said you had available. Do you, what's your timing?

Cartwright: [Laughter]. Well, it's 10 minutes to 7:00, which means that it will probably be between 7:30 and 8:00 when I get back to Dan and Sherry's, which is probably about time for me—so I think we probably should call it a night.

O'Brien: So We can talk, I can ask my questions about NYogra and GenderPAC and Pride at Work and NCTE when, in part two—

Cartwright: When I come back next.

O'Brien: That sounds great.

Cartwright: That will be great.

O'Brien: Anything you'd like to close with?

Cartwright: Uh, no not really. Oh yes, one thing. This is just a loose end in case um we leave a false impression. While my parents did discourage me when I was young from any manifestation of femininity, when I came out to them in 1998, this is the end of 1997, they were a bit skeptical when I told them. They thought I was about to come out as gay, but I told them no, I'm going to change sex and da-da-da-da. And you know, they were They thought it was like really a big shock. However, I have to give them a lot of credit. I told them when I was—at the end of '97, right around the holidays, I went down to Florida where they lived to spend a week with them. So I told them you know, I would come back one more time before I, you know, openly transitioned, and in the meantime my mother, who had actually um had more difficulty than my father, went to the public library in Clearwater, Florida, and withdrew a copy of a book called True Selves, uh, which is I think still regarded as one of the best introductory books for people to learn about transitioning people, particularly who are maybe family members. So she took that book out, she read it, and also after I went home but before I went down the next time, I was pretty conscientious about calling them fairly frequently to sort of give them
updates on my life. And I noticed, you know, I mean later as I read back into it, they must have noticed that I sounded a lot happier. So when I came back the second time, my mother had come all the way around, she actually gave me clothes that she thought might fit me. And oh, must have been three, four years later, after the millennium, uh, one time, I was down there visiting, I was still working, uh, in New York. So I was not, I didn’t have a ton of free time, but I was down for a visit probably holidays or maybe sometime, I don’t know, anyway, we—one of our family things when I was growing up was eating was only part of dinner. You know, during and after dinner, we would have these long, wide-ranging conversations about lots of different stuff. So I’m down there in Florida, I’m talking to them again, we’re having a long, wide-ranging conversation about lots of different stuff. And I’m sounding off on something, I don’t know whether it’s politics or whatever, and my—forget whether it was my father or my mother—just stopped me and said, uh, we can’t tell you how much good this has done you.

O’Brien: Mmm.

Cartwright: They said, and it was true. That before I transitioned and when I still was, you know, very you know ambivalent, ambiguous, and hidden, you know, when I would go to visit them, you know, I would relate to them, I would be friendly, but I would also need alone time quite a bit. And when I came back after transition and I actually sat with them without budging, just talking and talking, they said that the part of me that had been guarded and that had receded from them or tended to pull away from them had gone away. Um, you know, so that was the most wonderful validation and frankly um until both of them died, we had a you know one first and then the other, my mother in 2007, my father in 2009, I would say the relationship we had was the best of our lives, you know? So there you go.

O’Brien: That’s beautiful.

Cartwright: Thank you.

O’Brien: Thank you so much, Donna.

Cartwright: Oh, you know, thank you for persisting. And for putting up with my skittishness. That, you know, and you know, I you know, yeah. I mean it’s something that I, you know, I am a little, you know, always thinking about if I say something that’s going to offend somebody, is it going to be a problem, but then, you know, everything I say, is stuff that I’ve truly experienced. And it’s, you know, I mean some people may disagree with it, but I don’t think I’ve been really vicious toward anyone, so there you go. Alright.