NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SANDRA MESICS

Interviewer: AJ Lewis

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Transcribed by Abigail Rohskothen (volunteer)

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AJ Lewis: Hello, my name is AJ Lewis, and I will be having a conversation with Sandra Mesics for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is January 14th, 2019, and this is being recorded at St. Luke’s School of Nursing in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Hi Sandy.

Sandra Mesics: Hi AJ, how you doing?

Lewis: I’m good thank you. Thanks so much for your time today, can we start—can you just introduce yourself for the recorder and you can share your gender pronouns if you want to and we can start talking about where you’re from.

Mesics: Sure. As, as you said AJ, I’m Sandy Mesics and, my gender pronouns are she, her, hers, and currently I am director of St. Luke’s School of Nursing. I’m a registered nurse as well as a certified nurse midwife and I’ve been director of St. Luke’s School of Nursing since 2004, so it’s going on almost 15 years.

Lewis: We start, by what growing up was like, where you from?

Mesics: I’m originally from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and growing up in this community back in the 1950s were, was the boom of the steel industry and Bethlehem was I think the second largest steel manufacturing company in the United States. And so, we were very much a company town—everybody—was in one way or another affiliated with Bethlehem Steel. Including my family, my father worked at the steel company—and my uncles worked there, cousins worked there. It was a noisy, dirty community at that time, the skies were lit up orange at night with the blast furnaces and the sounds of steel being processed, were it, it was endless cacophony. It smelled bad that on days when the sulfur smell came out of the coke works plant nearby. But it was a vital bustling town—but it was a steel town.

Lewis: Did you have siblings also?

Mesics: I had one older brother that he was 8 years older than I am. He’s currently retired and living in Florida and, it was just the two of us and my mom and my dad. In fact my dad died when I was eleven years old. We were out shoveling snow and he suffered a heart attack and died at age forty-five and we, just yesterday was the fifty-fifth anniversary of that event. My mother never remarried and so it was my brother, mother and I and —we continued on.

Lewis: Did you like growing up there?

Mesics: No. Not particularly because you know when you were a kid that kind of sense that you were different, it wasn’t exactly a place to be different. It was Bethlehem was not a very cosmopolitan town, a lot of the, the folks were laborers you know. And a good night out was going to the bar on your way home from the steel and having a drink or two. Having dinner that
was pretty much life, so it wasn't a great place in some respects. In some respects, it was like growing up in—like in a Andy Hardy movie or a—episode of Leave It Beaver or Father Knows Best, it was that kind of atmosphere.

Lewis: What was your sense of being different? How would you describe that?

Mesics: I think, I think from about the time I was 5 years old I sort of had realization that, I, I should have been born a girl. And, which was really funny because I grew up in a Roman Catholic family and, for the for the first 8 years I went to Roman Catholic School and they were not big on sex education. And so you know, I couldn’t tell you the physical differences between boys and girls at that age—, except that I knew that I was kind of slotted in the wrong way, despite the external stuff, the way we cut our hair and the way we dressed. But I, I couldn’t tell you what the difference was in the genitalia boys and girls at that age, in fact until sometime later because that information was just nowhere to be had when I was growing up.

Lewis: In, in like what age would that have been?

Mesics: 1957-1960, when I was about 5 to 8 years old, you know, just no comprehension, you know. We had some vague idea of how babies were made, but, the nitty-gritty of it was pretty vague—and so you know I actually, I actually grew up thinking that at some point I would be able to make a decision—and I, and I would say, okay now it’s my time to choose and I’m gonna choose being a girl, and, and as time progressed it became obvious that, that wasn’t going to be an option for me and so, that’s when I started really getting kind of that in incongruous of—but yeah, yeah I missed that decision tree somewhere along the line, and I kind of went down the wrong path.

Lewis: Did you have friends when you were growing up who sort of shared experiences of feeling different or with whom you shared your own feelings?

Mesics: Certainly not in elementary school or in junior high school—during high school, I, I think I was probably clocked once for having shaved armpits and shaved legs, at gym class or something. But, I, I don’t remember ever how I handled it, and every once in a while, I would wear clear nail polish or something, you know just in a desperate attempt to express my femininity in some way. And it didn’t go unnoticed, but I kind of brushed it off, and so I never really had close friends that I confided in about that, until years later—but yeah it just, the climate and the time, you have to remember was pre Stonewall, pre-everything for that matter and kids that were overly effeminate or that you thought might have been gay or something, they had a rough time of it in high school. You know they were the kids that were chased home and beaten up under the football stands, and so I, I learned at an early age that I wanted to avoid that so I, I tried to be the best boy I could.

Lewis: Was any of that an object for your family life at home?

Mesics: Well you, you know after my father passed and my brother was away at college and then into the military so, so for the longest time it was my mother, myself and maternal grandmother,
who occasionally lived with us. And I, I would cross-dress around the house, and you know at one point it got kind of I would like do that in front of my mom and—for a while she kind of tolerate it and a lot of time she thought it was funny or cute or then it started bothering her as I got a little bit older and, she said “I think, I think we need to take you to the doctor and get this sorted out” and that scared the bejesus out of me because what we knew about going to the doctor for something like that in the 1950s and 1960s was that you end up like with electroconvulsive therapy or something to stop that kind of behavior. So I had a sensitivity that this was not the way I wanted to go at that point. If I was going to get help for this it would be on my own terms in my own time and not because my mother schlepped me off to the family doctor and we took it from there, so that kind of drive, drove my behavior kind of underground from there on and so probably about the time I was, 16 or 17 years old I didn’t do it in front of anybody anymore.

Lewis: May I ask did you like, get the idea to cross-dress from anywhere in particular or is that just something you kind of formulated on your own?

Mesics: You know that’s a really good question AJ, I often ask myself that. Because you know—I, I think I formulated on my own. I think it, it was sometime before I realized that other people did that, and then when I did it, it wasn’t always very consoling because you know, if you read about people who crossed-dressed in those days, they were usually portrayed as pretty pathetic creatures. And so you sort of got lumped into a group that wasn’t desirable you know group to be lumped in with, but at first I thought I was the only one in the world, eventually, you know. And, keep in mind that at that time Christine Jorgenson, I think was making the news about the year I was born, 1952 but—the thinking in those days was that this was a very rare occurrence in this person is a celebrity because what she went through and, and you know had no sense that it was a community of people struggling with the same issues, very isolated, very isolated and I think I, I didn’t realize that, the community was, was as big as it was until I was in my senior year of high school and my first year of college when I started reading The Transsexual Phenomenon by Harry Benjamin and, the occasional magazine article that was out there in the popular press, that I realized was a bigger thing and I was not all by myself —and that was a really consoling thing to find out.

Lewis: Did you seek out, like texts like The Transsexual Phenomenon?

Mesics: Absolutely, I scoured the newsstand, in Bethlehem. And usually I, I—very funny stories, every Sunday morning my mom and I would stop on our way home from church and we would stop at the local grocery store on the way home, and she pack, pick up milk and groceries for the week and there were newspapers. Racks and racks of newspapers, you know print media was in its heyday back in the early ’60s. So you had your, your respectable newspapers like, The New York Times and the local—like The Morning Hall or something like that, down towards the end there were these racks that were like the National Enquirer and the National Insider and they would splash these flashy stories with pictures on the front cover that said ‘I Changed my Sex’ and stuff like that and I was attracted to that because it was information of some kind and so I, I figured out this way and I think the statute of limitations is up on this, but I did figure out a way to fold those newspapers inside respectable newspapers, get it through the checkout line and
remove them from the rest of the paper before my mom found out so that how I, I learned about that and, and interesting enough there was a publication at that time called the National Insider and it had a regular column in the back of it that gave advice like, Miss. Abby or, or and it was called Both Sides of Love and it was written by Eddie Joe Stark and Eddie Joe Stark had been a circus performer and a burlesque person but was also one of the very, the in fact I think the first American to the first, the first person to have sex reassignment surgery in the United States so she, she made this little cottage industry and she published a book called I Changed My Sex by Eddie Joe Stark and that was like one first, I think things that I was able to procure and I must of read it 50 times, you know. Tried to find out—were her experiences similar than mine, were they different were we you know, was I like her and, and that's how I started putting this information together.

Lewis: And, how long did you, how long did you were in Bethlehem for? Did you, through high school?

Mesics: Through high school, I, I finished high school in 1969 at the age of 17. I started school like a year early so I was like a year younger than most of my classmates, so I finished, I finished high school right after I turned 17—um—[co] and then I went to Penn State University, the first time now thinking that I would major in, in physics because I wanted to be an astronomer at that time and ended up not doing very well as a physics major and, almost failed out of school and so I, I did change my major to psychology surprise surprise [laughter] as much to figure out things about myself to , I was actually, I actual had a very couple of good experiences with Psych professors that really inspired me in the work they were doing and, and some of them are like nationally known folks that I had the privilege of studying under and even doing some research and undergraduate with and. So, so that was kind of how I changed course there and remember at the same time staying in school was pretty vital for me because the Vietnam War was going on, and for a while you still got a deferment from, for being a college student and so, most of us tried to stay in school if we were enrolled in college.

Lewis: What was your social roll like when you were in college?

Mesics: I was , well my social roll—my first couple of years I lived in the dorms, and so kind of restricted socially, but I actually I blossomed there and that I got very active in the Anti-Vietnam War movement and so I, I became a draft counselor for the —conscientious objectors and they were. It was the Central Committee Conscientious Objectors and they were sponsored by the Quakers—and , we learned to ferret out things and guys medical histories that might make them disqualified for the draft and so they tat us how to ask questions and then to counsel the person by saying you know, we described this, this rash that you get on, ongoing bases go get that checked out because you get deferment based on that. And so I was, I was very involved in trying to keep people, I was out of the draft and also I was very, very committed that the Vietnam War was an unjust war, we shouldn't of been involved in it. We were wasting lives of our young people and, so that was part of a major thing that I did my first couple of years in college. I also got very involved in the, The Daily Collegiate which is the daily newspaper that Penn State published and I learned how to write, and I learned how to write under a deadline—they would send me out to
do feature stories, I would come back, I would compose them, they would be typed immediately and published the next day. So it kind of gave me a skill that would turn out very useful to me later on. And so I, I kind of like in hindsight I think I was more of a journalism major then I ever was a Psych major, so that, I did that for—three of my four college years.

**Lewis:** Where you aware, since you finished high school in 69 like, that things time of the lot of occurrences around gay and feminist activism, was that something that sort of on your horizon or part of your life?

**Mesics:** That’s a really good question, and you know—this is where my memory kind of fails me a little bit. I do remember hearing about the Stonewall riots and I do remember hearing about the early gays, it was called Gay Liberation at first the Gay Liberation Movement. Just the wording of the word gay, occurred around that time, um—1969 stands out because you know that was Woodstock and I didn’t go to Woodstock that year [laughter] because I was working a summer job. Um so I, I was aware that there was an undercurrent of gay liberation starting it was, but it was in the big city even though the big city was only 90 miles from here it might as well been another world for me, Bethlehem was still pretty prudential in state college, actually it was a very conservative college town as states went and so yeah, yeah it was, but socially I was still pretty naive I mean I, I was a virgin until I think I was 19 years old, while I had dated women in, in high school, it never got too serious, and my, my sexual development was kind of retarded actually, I, I didn’t bloom until years later so.

**Lewis:** And was, was trans, which was probably not the language that you were using, thinking about it at the time, did that continue to sort of be a part of your life in any capacity through college either on your own or with other people in your life?

**Mesics:** It did, it did and—as you know, after, after two years of living in a men’s dormitory the pressure was getting like, making me crazy and, I knew that, I, I was hitting some kind of wall at that point so my, my third year and fourth year of college I moved into an apartment. My third year i had a roommate who was a Vietnam vet and so, there wasn’t a whole lot of you know personal expression that I could do, but it was better than living in the dorms. My senior year of college I was, I was involved in, with a young lady, that I would eventually marry for a short period of time and that's when I started to express myself more fully, that was the first time I ever went out in campus as as woman. Um she was fully aware at the time, you know, we were deeply in love as only you can be in love with a person that first time. I mean there’s something special about that. She was fully aware that I was struggling with these issues, she helped me along, teaching me some basic techniques of makeup you know dress and things like that. We, we didn’t know where this was going to go and I was all that time trying to figure out is, in my ultimately my goal to change my body or will I be comfortable enough by just—crossdressing and expressing myself that way, and that was the big conundrum at that time in my life [co] it kind of digressed there, but my, my senior year I was the first, the first year of my senior year of college was the first time I came out to a friend. Um and —it was in the context of gender bending, which was becoming cool all of a sudden because you had Lou Reed who just came out with the album Transformer and you had David Bowie who had been doing it awhile. And the first person I came
out to was doing the same thing although his motivation was entirely different than mine but I think the first time I talked to somebody about it and was able to, kind of express what my feelings were.

**Lewis:** And what did you say to him?

**Mesics:** I said you know I, I like to do the makeup thing and go out and dress and I’m not sure why I like to do it but and I’m not sure if it's just the dressing thing itself, or whether you know, I want to have surgery. And then he just passed the joint back to me and said, “that’s cool” and, and it was okay. So I mean, the world was slowly changing, this would have been in about 1972, 1973, so—I, I was starting to spend more and more time with Sandy, and feeling very comfortable.

**Lewis:** What were your experiences like initially going out in public dressed?

**Mesics:** Terrified, terrified, absolutely terrified I mean you know, even though wore my hair long in college, I bought a wig so I could look a little bit more different, so why would, I would dress up as Sandy and I would go out and I would go to the library, on campus. And Penn State is a big campus, I think even at that time we were 50,000 students, it’s a large place so the likelihood that I would run into somebody was pretty remote but i still tried to disguise myself the best I could. And I, I tried to do it in off times, you know like odd times that there wouldn’t be a gazillion people around and, you know, it’s like baby steps and every time I presented as Sandy and didn’t get negative feedback I felt better, and worked on things that were kind of causing problems, so it was kind of like a learning process, but it was terrifying, absolutely terrifying at first. And funny thing is, many years later at a crossdressing party in Albany, New York that I attended, one of the people there came up to me and said, “Did you go to Penn State?” and I said “Yup!” and “Were you at Penn State in 1972 or 1973?” and I said “Yup!” “Would you have been in the library reading a copy of Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment?” “That was me” and so, I mean you know I was gob smacked because there walking by me was another individual that, that was in the trans community, and the pathetic thing is we passed like ships in the night and nothing was ever said until years later.

**Lewis:** So did you not have other people in college who were cross dressing?

**Mesics:** I did not. And, this person had told me, when you know we were discussing it. I said “yeah I started it, I started to present as Sandy then and I started crossdressing and going out” and I said “I, I came very close to seeking out help with the student counseling center” and this person said to me “It’s a good thing you didn’t because they would have probably found a way to expel you.”

**Lewis:** Were books periodicals and stuff a source of information for you through college also?

**Mesics:** Yeah, when, when you’re, when you’re a, a student at a pretty good sized university, that, that information pipeline kind of opened up a little bit more, and so, there, there still wasn’t
a lot, there were some books and technical journals and things that I started to read, and got a little familiar.

**Lewis:** Things like, Virginia Princes, like Transvesti ever cross your path or a kind of thing you would have run into?

**Mesics:** I, I ran into Transvesti a little bit later on—not, not in my college years. So you know we talked about, we talked about, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania growing up, so I would come home from college, and I would come home and work summer jobs and do something like that and I would scour the local newsstands—and there was a place in downtown Bethlehem called Sherry’s newsstand and, I know exactly where it is. The buildings been torn down many years ago but he had the usual gamut of newspapers and periodicals but in the back, towards the back of it, you know you went from Playboy and Swank, and all of a sudden, there was female impersonator magazine—and my eyes got like saucers and, and honestly Aj I don’t remember if I legitimately bought it or kind of tucked it under my shirt of whatever. I think I was under age and you probably might not have sold it to me at that time but, but I ended up leaving with it. And that sort of opened up the gates and then I found out about other publications like Transvesti and things like that and I’d be happy to talk about Transvesti and my feelings about it, in a little bit, if you want to pursue that.

**Lewis:** The, the female impersonators I’m trying to remember, was that Pudgy Roberts thing?

**Mesics:** Well as it turned out it, it was, it Pudgy Robert, was Pudgy Roberts was kind of like one of the faces, of female impersonators just as I was for a while and Susy Collins was for a while. It was published by a non-trans person by the name of Jack O’Brien—and I would end up working for Jack for many years and Jack believed that in order to be successful he had to have people in the community writing about it and so he found a succession of folks, and Pudgy was a delightful person. I think Pudgy’s still probably around—Pudgy lives on the lower East Side of New York, and he was still—Pudgy was still around when I was working for Neptune Productions and—I remember visiting him a couple of times and his place was just so decrepit it was roach infested and you, you probably didn’t even want to put your stuff down there. But Pudgy had the funniest drag act you ever saw and he, he was a comic drag performer you know he was not beautiful by any sense of the imagination although he could make himself up pretty well. His, his striptease act was just hysterical he’d peel off one layer after another and, and you know snarky comments about, the chicken popping out, and just the boobs, he would take off his bra and the boobs would fall to his navel, there was, there was a snarky remark for each one of these things, he loved to taunt the audience. He was definitely an enterprising creative person, and I, I think he’s still alive at, at this day, I, I haven’t heard that he has passed.

**Lewis:** Yeah, I would like, if it’s okay, if we move to sort of your time after college.

**Mesics:** Sure.

**Lewis:** I don’t want to rush through it if you have.
Mesics: Absolutely!

Lewis: Where did you end up after finishing school?

Mesics: Okay so my, my senior year of college was—the discomfort was getting to the point where I needed to get some professional help, so in those days you wrote to an educational foundation. And you asked for some information and so I thought okay. I did this, and they sent me a referral for one provider in Pittsburgh and two providers in Pennsylvania that were familiar with trans people and, and giving hormones and hooking you up with counseling so it, I wasn’t going to go to Pittsburgh because I lived closer to Philadelphia so, out of the two folks I picked this provider in South Philadelphia.

Lewis: May I ask do you remember who you corresponded with at the...

Mesics: I think it might have been Zelda Suplee.

Lewis: Was your experiences corresponding with them okay?

Mesics: They were lifesaving to me. I. I don’t think I had any negative experiences with them. They sent me a rash of publications, you know, they had all these little pamphlet guides that ran from spirituality to hormones to you name it, it was like the resource in those days.

Lewis: Do you remember how you became aware of them?

Mesics: That’s a good question, I think it may have been through Harry Benjamin’s book or the book Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment by John Money and I’m blanking on the coauthor of that book, but that was a more technical version of it. But I think it was through one those two.

Lewis: They funded both of those, money.

Mesics: Probably.

Lewis: Interesting. I think EF is really interesting, I, I...

Mesics: Reed Erickson, never knew at the time what an interesting person.

Lewis: Interesting dude.

Mesics: I would have loved to have met Reed Erickson.

Lewis: And, anyway I didn’t mean to distract us. Did you, find—you found a doctor in Pittsburgh or the other one?
Mesics: I went to Philadelphia.

Lewis: Philadelphia.

Mesics: Only because I was, I lived, Bethlehem was much closer to Philly then it is to Pittsburgh and he was just a—he had a corner office, he was a general practitioner he was a DO. You came into his office you gave your name to the receptionist, turns out the receptionist was his wife, you sat in a chair and you waited until they called your name.

Lewis: And this would have been in the early 70’s?

Mesics: This was in 19—1972 to be exact, the fall of 72. So I drove from Penn State down to see him and it was an informed consent model cause this was the days before the standards of care.

Lewis: May I ask what the doctor’s name was?

Mesics: The Doctor was Jack Karlin, he has since passed away, and he started treating trans people because local—because one of his local patients came in and said can you do this for me, and he took it on and by the time I had seen him a couple years later I think he was treating about 300 of us.

Lewis: What as of—what treatment was he offering?

Mesics: Hormones! He was offering hormones. So you went in and it, his protocol was, you got an injection every two weeks and then, prescription oral medicine in between and so I figured out ways of getting between Penn State and there every couple of weeks for my shots and eventually moved to Philly after I graduated from college to be closer to health care and general and him in particular—and he was an awesome human being, a very compassionate, caring guy, I think, I think you paid seven dollars for an office visit in those days, didn’t take any insurance. I mean there was no such thing, you know so, you went in and it was probably five dollars for an office visit and two dollars for the injection, and he was the one who kind of saved my life, and it, it was an interesting thing, I went to the hormone therapy saying this is either going to make me or break me because you know I could decide that I hate this, I hate the side effects, or the thinking at the time was that if you gave female hormones to someone who didn’t really need them it would be so counterproductive that you know, destroying the libido etc. etc, that you would come off of them and that was sort of the test if you were a true transsexual person, and so, within two weeks of taking hormones I knew that this was, it was, I can’t describe the feeling of peace and contentment that started to go over me. It was getting to the point that I was, it was interfering with my ability to do my coursework, and I started the hormones about 6 months before I graduated from college and those were the best six months of my whole college career, and so that’s how I started hormones. And so after college I moved to Philadelphia and then, well, to back up just a tiny bit, I turned twenty-one a day later I graduated from college and, a week later I married. And so I married the girlfriend I had been living with for the last couple of years, it was kind of a misguided attempt of independence. We still, we still totally loved each
other and we were kind of in this for the long haul but, you know, you, you could see down at the end of this, probably this wasn’t the best decision we had ever made in our lives—so at any rate, moving to Philadelphia and then that’s when I, I got frustrated with how hard it was to get information about everything, everything we did you know. Getting information about hormones, the Erickson foundation was really good about giving you some information but there weren’t a lot of personal anecdotes—finding out who the good surgeons were, finding out how you manage the electrolysis or how you did makeup, what was the best makeup to cover a beard all that kind of stuff, so, with all the hubris that can only come from somebody with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. I decided to start a magazine and we called it Image, so it was me and my partner and another crossdresser that I had met along the way who wanted to be a silent partner and provide some of the funding and distribution and I would do the editorial and all the rest of it.

**Lewis:** And around what year did you start that?

**Mesics:** I think we started that in 1973.

**Lewis:** Can you tell us a little about, what you, what the content in Image and what you ended up reporting on?

**Mesics:** Yeah! Yeah we, we focused mainly on the Philadelphia scene because that’s where we were. We covered drag artists, the first issue had an interview with Divine and , Elisabeth Coffey and, and one of the cool things is I re-established content, contact with Elisabeth a few years ago and she’s still around. So, we, we covered that, you know the Pink Flamingos movie, they were on a movie tour, we did that, we covered some music, we covered—we did one fiction piece per issue and, some self-help stuff like, I mentioned some makeup tips, fashion tips, and things like that. I, I wanted Image to be kind of like a cross between Playboy and Cosmopolitan, for the trans individual and so, so that was the goal. And you know it was a short lived publication but it launched a lot of other things for me.

**Lewis:** Why did you decide to call it Image?

**Mesics:** I don’t know. [laughter]

**Lewis:** Sounded like it.

**Mesics:** It did sound like it, and yeah, we, we named our publishing company, which was another unfortunate thing, the company we formed was called Third World Communications, and why third world Because it has that connotation of you know, underdeveloped countries but we thought we were not the gay world, we weren’t the straight world, we were kind of like the third world. And so that, that’s why we chose that, you know, what can I say, I was 21 years old, and you know, like I said it took a lot of stupid hubris to do something like this really, when you hadn’t a clue, and I’m writing about things that, that just basically barely had a handle on, but it sort of started to get some traction and we would send out, we would send out free copies to people
and they would send us information and that’s when I think I came to the attention of the transsexual action organization and made contact with UTTS [United Transvestites Transsexual Society] at the time, and that was really my intro to the, the whole female impersonator and Neptune Productions thing, and that’s kind of when things really started to take off.

Lewis: May I ask, I want to hear about Neptune Productions, but can you tell me a little bit about what the scene in Philadelphia was like?

Mesics: Philadelphia is a really gay friendly scene, it was there were a lot of drag clubs and you had hostesses in some straight clubs that were trans women for instance—Elizabeth Coffey after she did Pink Flamingos she relocated to Philly we became friends, acquaintances and she was a bartender at, at a local none gay bar, but certainly a gay friendly bar and of course, the big celebrity in Philadelphia in the early 70’s was Rachel Harlow. Rachel Harlow was the contestant in the movie The Queen that won first prize, and Rachel was I think Richard Finocchio, and Philadelphia legend and Rachel was drop dead gorgeous, she looked like a young Grace Kelly, I mean just simply beautiful, but she gained such notoriety in Philadelphia that she had her own club, and so she traveled in some really high circles. So Philadelphia was becoming a real embracing kind of place. The bar scene was hopping, they were, it was the very, the early years of trying to organize healthcare services so you had Radical Queens which was the local group in Philly and you had them organizing the Eromin Center, which stood for Erotic Minorities, E-R-O-M-I-N, which I think is kind of the predecessor to the Mazzoni Center in Philadelphia. So that was an early community healthcare kind of organization. And so I had some peripheral involvement with Radical Queens and some peripheral involvement with the Eromin Center and, and that’s why I’ve always said, that I didn’t think of myself so much as a trans activist, although I guess some people have called me that, I was more of a chronicler, of those activities at the time, you know because I was writing for these publications and so I was always scratching around to find out what was going on.

Lewis: What was Radical Queens like?

Mesics: Radical Queens was—they were kind of grasp, they were in your face genderqueer type of group. And I think the leader at the time if not was, not the leader definitely a prime mover was Tommi Avacolli, and I think Tommi is still around on the West coast somewhere and very creative individual and again a very beautiful person, I mean presenting both male and female, it didn’t matter, he was just beautiful but it was very much, very much in your face, very much confrontational like Act Up was in the early days and that kind of thing always did kind of make me a bit uncomfortable, you know—I liked being visible but I wasn’t a in your face kind of person and so, you know we covered their events, but I wasn’t a big organizer for them.

Lewis: I wondered about sort of like the participant in Radical Queens and sort of what the demographic profile was like if those two who were involved with them?

Mesics: A young, for the most part young, a lot of, a lot of the older queers, queer culture was very closeted and so it was younger ones like myself and other folks that really didn’t have
anything to lose, and didn’t want to lead our lives in the closet and so you had that tug, that tug
going on. So the Radical, they were largely Caucasian although there were some African
Americans in the group, but largely young caucasian—kind of a mix of hippies and street people
and some of us, you know college graduates. I, I believe there were even some like returning
Vietnam vets in those days as well, so yeah it was that youth culture that was kind of blossoming
at that time, all of us baby boomers.

**Lewis:** And were they all sort of transfeminine spectrum people or?

**Mesics:** Yeah! I, I wasn’t aware of the transmasculine folks at that time, you know. So the, most
of them were transfeminine—most, mostly I, I would think gay expression rather than
heterosexual expression for the most part. And, here we go, we were the young folks. We, we
were the ones that were like out there. And you had Virginia Prince and the transvesti crowd that
I never was really comfortable with because they were like supper closeted.

**Lewis:** At the time you weren’t comfortable with them?

**Mesics:** No! No, even when I first found out about them, it’s like I remember when they called
themselves a sorority and so when you were my generation coming out of college fraternities
and sororities were like are you kidding me this is so 18 century.

**Lewis:** Fair Square.

**Mesics:** Yeah, yeah exactly.

**Lewis:** [laughter]

**Mesics:** It’s like I would not belong to fraternity or sorority are you kidding, and so that, that was
like there, but, their structure was born of it’s time. And, and I felt that it by the 1970’s their time
had passed and I think there demographics were probably a little bit older, certainly there
members were a little bit more affluent a little bit more in the closet and she was strictly
heterosexual and don’t pull any gay things at any of their meetings and stuff and we just weren’t
buying that whole thing you know. So I, I looked at it as kind of, even in those days I kind of looked
at it as kind of a remnant of the past, that being said you can’t help but respect her for what she
did, I mean absolutely, she was, she paid a price I think for, for doing what she did—but, we
wanted to move it to the next level and open it up to everybody, and you know, in those days we
were trying, you know we didn’t care if you cross-dressed because you got off on crossdressing
or whether you cross-dressed because you know, because you were going to have a sex
reassignment surgery, you know we felt that there was common ground, and so you know, we,
we were kind of like a movement of inclusion rather than exclusion.

**Lewis:** And did you find sort of the circles you were in that there was a mix of those kind of folks,
didn’t want to transition dressed up for whatever reasons including sexual ones and also trans
women or...
Mesics: Yeah there, there were! And a prime example was UTTS which was United Transvestite Transsexual Society and I, I always laugh at the nomenclature we used in the days, you know, we, we just didn’t have the good vocabulary for it as we do today. You know drag and female impersonator you know it’s almost sounds negative anymore, but anyway, Suzie Collins head of UTTS, and she was again a Vietnam War vet—and, and was a, a heterosexual crossdresser, I think that’s how she would have classified herself. But she and her wife would open up their homes to meetings once a month and they met in Point Pleasant, New Jersey—which was not that very far from you know Philadelphia, I think it was like a two hour drive and it was going to the beach and so, why I use to go to, to the parties and there you would meet, like folks that were on route to having surgery and you would have the crossdressers that just liked to do it occasionally and everybody in between. And their spouses sometimes, and so that’s kind of where I made some of the connections professionally that got me involved in with Neptune productions because at that time Suzi was working for Neptune Productions and Neptune was helping them launch the UTTS at the time.

Lewis: And was that mainly what UTTS was, sort of involved in, they ran publications and sort of had parties was, was Suzi involved in other kinds of thing, stuff around UTTS.

Mesics: Not that I’m aware of, you know, it was mostly, it was mostly the monthly parties and the publications and it was, it was trying, I think they were, they were attempting to start chapters in various places using like the Virginia Prince Model but being a little bit more open about it. Um, and so—Suzi, Suzi was a wonderful person, she’s passed on, but she couldn’t write, I mean you know she just couldn’t put sentences together to save her life, so the minute I started working for Neptune Productions I was writing her column for her. And so I would sit down with her and say what do you want to talk about, and I would take notes and everything and do draft and give it to her and you know it was it was hunky-dory and so, you know she had a column and female impersonator called Suzi Says and the joke around the office was, it was Sandy Says Suzy Says. So I was, I was ghostwriting already for her, she, she was a wonderful idea person, very creative individual who, who would think outside the box but, but the execution of things the step by step nitty gritty was not her strong suit, so that, that kind of felt of the rest of us sometimes.

Lewis: Can I ask one more question about Philly that I forgot to ask you?

Mesics: Sure!

Lewis: Did you like go out to bars or were there particular bars where trans folks frequented or happening places?

Mesics: Yeah! ‘m blanking on a lot of the names that I think one was called The Land of OZ and one was called Diggets—and I think my favorite was Diggets, although The Land of OZ was there too, I can probably go through, scratch through my archives and make a note of that and see what I can find for you.
**Lewis:** Why did you like Diggets?

**Mesics:** I liked good music, good looking crowd, you know friendly place.

**Lewis:** And, and were they, were they gay bars?

**Mesics:** Yes! They were gay discos but they were straight people went too because you know, I think straight people were starting to enjoy the vibe, you know and it’s fun kind of being around gay people got to be cool, you know like studio 54 I think, was it gay? Was it straight? I don’t know, but they were fun places, the drinks were pretty watery but the music was really loud and good and usually these places were, multiple dance floors and there was a lot going on in the lights and the smokes and the drugs, not that I didn’t enjoy it. [laughter] Let’s just say, occasionally, anyway but.

**Lewis:** It was that time.

**Mesics:** Yeah it was that time, it was a fun time actually you know that, that little sweet spot between liberation and the beginning of the gay movement and the HIV and the AIDS crisis, it was that heavy time. And we were all swept up in it I think.

**Lewis:** Can you tell me a little bit of how you got involved in Neptune Productions including just, can you describe what Neptune Productions was?

**Mesics:** Yeah sure. [laughter] I have to laugh because it wasn’t much.

**Lewis:** You produced a lot of stuff out of there though?

**Mesics:** Tons of stuff.

**Lewis:** [laughter]

**Mesics:** Tons of stuff, it makes my head spin to this day. Um, so, so one of the UTTS meetings, Suzi said I’m going to introduce you to Jack O’Brien and he’s, he’s the publisher of Neptune Productions, and Jack—was a cartoonist, and in fact he, one of the cartoons that he produced was Sad Sack , which was kind of, if , if you’re familiar with Beetle Bailey it was kind of like a World War II post World War II area, era comic book about just GI life and Jack was not the original creator but I think the second person that carried it on after the original creator passed away. And so Jack was a talented cartoonist—he got involved, how he got involved in publishing gay and trans stuff—he, he had a partner and the partner, I don’t remember the name but the partner got busted for doing gay porn in the late 60’s and—if you make a note I will try to find that name for you sometime cause, cause that fellow was pretty famous for his photography I think in the gay community, anyways so, so Jack and this partner pretty much lost everything and then Jack eventually went back into businesses producing trans publications—Jack reminded me
of my uncle Charlie he was a little guy and quite compassionate but very seldom sober that man can drink and so he, he met me at one of these parties and he knew that I had published Image and said, you know this, this publications a great idea but it’s pretty shit publication, you have no sense of layout it looks pretty crude and it’s like oh yeah, let’s make you a deal come work for me you’ll help us produce some of our publications, I’ll help you produce yours, you can use any of my equipment and you know, we, we can sort of arrived at this understanding, and I liked Jack immediately and I was looking for a way to transition for a fulltime living and here it was—and.

Lewis: What, what had you been doing for work?

Mesics: [laughter] Everything and anything I possibly could, I came out of college at a really bad time for the economy, there wasn’t much I could do with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, I ended up working in a gourmet cheese shop making sandwiches, I had just enough clothes to go to work every day, pretty much that was it. The rest of the time I was Sandy but even in those days that one year pretransition kind of, they use to call it real life test was really important and that's what I was striving to, to do, I was actually at that time already in the program at Pennsylvania Hospital getting they had a gender identity program I was seeing a shrink, I was in the process of working my way towards surgery and so all I was looking for was an opportunity to work fulltime as Sandy and it represented itself cause Jack didn’t care what I wore.

Lewis: And at the Benjamin standards been implemented at that, it's not exactly my expertise.

Mesics: No. I, I think those came around in the later 70’s but they—some of the, some of the Benjamin standards came out of the Johns Hopkins standards, and I think Hopkins had that re-cornered. Yeah it was kind of built on that.

Lewis: And that wouldn’t satisfy the requirements if you were not, if you were not at work not out, not living in the gender you were supposed to be living in at work.

Mesics: Yeah it would have been inauthentic, I knew some, I knew some friends that kind of skirted that requirement and even at that time, that was not a good idea because they, they suffered afterwards because of it. There, there social transition was really hard and so I was committed to doing that and this was my way of actually making that big step, so of speak, so that’s what I did, and I started working for Neptune Productions.

Lewis: Um and that was in Belmar, New Jersey?

Mesics: Belmar, New Jersey. That’s where there post office box was at various times not to destroy any illusion about what Neptune was, at various times we worked out of Jack’s basement—we even worked out of his barn for a little while, we worked out of store fronts—Jack was always one check ahead of the landlord, although he did provide for a good living for his family, I will say that. And for me, he always paid his help and I always, I always got a check from Jack, but it was not, it was not lavish by any means and then later years we actually worked his, his partner in business was Betty Johnson. Betty was a woman that came out of the New York
publishing scene and somehow drifted towards working with Jack and the two of them were you know, they were business partners and they were romantic partners Betty was not in a relationship at the time and Jack was loosely married I think at the time, and the two of them were like two peas in a pod and so the three of us for the longest time were Neptune Productions—I lived in Betty’s house for a while cause the commute between Philly and there was so long I couldn’t do it every day so I either worked from home or you know, at various times I would move into Betty’s house and we would work on publications all the time. Cause like you said, there were a lot of publications, now [co] what Jack did, was he supplied publications for Star distributors, and Star was a distribution company that put actually published the stuff, printed it and distributed it mostly to the adult bookstores—and Jack would go meet with Star about once a week and Star would tell him what kind of products they wanted and Jack would come back with more orders to produce something else, and this kind of title and that kind of title and this fiction book and that, and so it was up to us to kind of produce that stuff. Jack would send me out to all the drag balls and all the events, and I would be, I learned how to be a pretty decent photographer so I would go out and take pictures and write stories I’d write fiction, he would give me a stack of illustrations or a set of pictures and say write a book about this and by the way I need it by Friday, and so you know, I was basically paid by the hour to write for him you know pretty tame by today’s standards but none the less you know, and think about this you know, I’m writing this stuff and I’m 21, 22 years old and I’ve had probably 3 sexual partners in my whole life, so not to destroy illusions but it wasn’t what you would think it was so I had, I had a good time doing it don’t get me wrong, and I learned a lot, I learned the printing process, the prepress process and I built on my skills as a writer and being able to take photographs and it was a lot of fun, so because I was so involved with Neptune Productions, Image kind of suffered a little bit and, and in fact I remember one time I had and issue with Image ready to go and Jack came to me and said I, I need a publication you got anything? And I said well I have Image and he said how about we just publish it as TV Times or something like that and so, made a couple of changes and of it went so, you know Image kind of fell by the way side because I was able to reach so many more people do so much more by working with Neptune Productions.

**Lewis:** And I may also be asking you about like the the title of the periodicals you were working on and not actually doing to report on them, were there any people in particular like drag balls you went to especially memorable? or stuck in your mind?

**Mesics:** The, the best ones in Philadelphia were Henry David’s and he did, he did his usually around Halloween and they were pretty, pretty nice affairs at very glitzy downtown Philadelphia hotels and he was covered by the main press, Henry is still around and he’s a great entrepreneur and I think he’s a jeweler by trade but he was like the cornerstone of that, that scene in the Philly in the 70s and he, he continued to do the drag balls, I think even until this day they do an annual one. Um he calls them Halloween costume balls and things, but that was always a good one Lee Brewster—out of New York did some, some I cat the tail end of hers and then there were all these other ones, I remember going to Newark for one, I remember going to Long Island, so there were these things that we found out about and if we could cover it we did, and you know usually, I would go up take the camera along and a notepad and tried to get the name of the winners and
take some pictures and try to remember who I took pictures of and come back and produce them
and stuff and that’s how we did it.

**Lewis:** Can you describe sort of what a typical act would have been like?

**Mesics:** Um, sometimes they had categories and so you would have best female impersonator,
best glamour, best comedy, best I can’t even remember some of the categories, at one time
Henry David was going to do a whole series of these and at the end the grand prize winner of, he
was going to do a ball in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Washington D.C. and somewhere else maybe New
York and at the end the grand prize winner would get an all-expense paid sexchange operation.

**Lewis:** I remember reading about.

**Mesics:** Yeah, and I, I think unfortunately Henry only had the Philadelphia ball and then a—the
turnout wasn’t all that great and he received some death threats or something so, he canned the
rest of the series, but so that, that was kind of thing, you know—those, those were fun and
actually the cool thing was I think it was in 1975 they sent me, I made acquaintances with Ari
Kane and she was out of Boston doing the outreach institute.

**Lewis:** Was that Fantasia?

**Mesics:** Yup! And so, you know when I first met Ari, she was saying I want to do this, I want to
do this thing every year and she had a concept that would be more than a day long it would be
like a real living experience where you could go to a place where it would be friendly you could
walk around outside dressed as however you wanted to and you could do some seminars and
you could do speakers and do this thing, what do you think? And I said I’m all in, and so, [co]
excuse me, and so my role is to provide publicity and get the word out—and Ari Rodney did the
rest of the work and Fantasia is still around, and, and I was there to cover the first, the first one
for Neptune Productions and in return the funny thing was the local newspaper which the
province town of Disetter or whatever it was at the time used some of my photographs and we
shared resources they developed my film for me and in exchange for giving interviews. And so
you know, even in the community we got some coverage at that, and it was sort of like a win win
all the way around, it was a fantastic experience and I’m so gratified that it still going on, I still
attended a couple of years ago and did a presentation on what it was like to be at the first
Fantasia Fair.

**Lewis:** What did you like about the first Fantasia Fair?

**Mesics:** Um, Provincetown to begin with, in October, so it was kind of heading into, it was chilly
I still remember that it was cold, but crisp and most of the tourist had gone and all of a sudden
this little contingent of various kinds of crossdressers and for a lot of folks it was the first time
they had seen that many other people, all in one setting, and so I kind of liked that, but the best
thing I liked about Fantasia Fair was getting to know the locals, and so there were a couple of
females impersonators that worked the clubs around Cape Cod and Provincetown and one was
Bobby Ray and he was hysterical and Brandy Alexander, how many female impersonators were named Brandy Alexander I don’t know, but this one was really a fun one. And, and a young fellow named Joey Porrow and, we kind of hung around behind the scenes, we were still the younger demographic even in that group and so we, we would hang out at pizza places late into night and swap techniques for doing great makeup and stuff like that and I learned a lot from them, I created some friendships they gave me dresses and we just kind of exchanged a whole bunch of stuff, it was a lot of fun, and so — even beyond the structure of the fair it was getting to know some of the other folks and making those connections that was just awesome.

Lewis: Where you—like the folks that traveled from all over the place to go to Fantasia fairs was that right? Or was it mainly local?

Mesics: I think they traveled from all over the East coast at first, I don’t know how many came from the West Coast but you had folks coming from New York State, and Philly and—but, but for the most part I think over the years it grew to, to attract a larger crowd, but at the beginning the nucleus came out of Boston and that group was active there and then you know we sort of got the word out the best we can, I think, I forget how many people attended the first one but maybe about 50, I’m saying which was kind of a sizeable amount in those days so, but I think all largely from the East Coast.

Lewis: And you had folks that continued to stay in touch afterwards.

Mesics: One of the folks I met there was actually. Did you ever hear about Casa Susanna photos, some, somebody went to thrift shop and found this scrapbook full of pictures of crossdressers that were taken at a place called Casa Susanna—and this apparently was in New York State it was a place that crossdressers could go hangout for weekends and they went there and stuff and so actually they published a book about this a couple of years ago and it turns out that the person who took the pictures was Andrea Mallac and Andrea and I became friends and I never knew she had taken these Casa Susanna pictures when I knew her but she passed away a few years ago and in fact you can see some I think Dallas Denny did video interview with her before she passed. Fantastic person, but she was a special effects camera person and when I went to see her in her house I said—I pointed to this thing she had on the wall and I said “Is that an Oscar?” and sure enough she had an Oscar on her wall and it was for doing special effects for 2001: A Space Odyssey, so in, in the credits of that movie you will see Johnny Mallac and she, she was one of the early people that I had made friendships with and I think she was active like in the Connecticut kind of scene and stuff like that and so.

Lewis: I would love to hear some more about, can you talk a little bit about some of the other titles coming out of Neptune Productions and your work on them and how maybe they were the same or different or whatever?

Mesics: Yeah they were, they were, you know—Jack tried to kind of pigeonhole some of the publications into like certain interest so like I think the first one was female impersonator magazine which originally was about drags Club 82, and you know you had the 8x10 glossy
pictures of the impersonators and then eventually it became a little bit more pornographic you know meeting the need of the times and then, you know he would put out one more for the transvestite crowd and, and that might of been TV Times or Drag scene or something like that and then we would do one that was a little bit more gay and I, I'm trying to remember what the name of those were.

**Lewis:** Do you know how he was making decisions about like, what there was a market for?

**Mesics:** He, he was going to Star and the distributing company would tell him what was moving and what wasn’t. And so it was like really early market research you know they, he would go and they would say this stuff is selling as fast as we can produce it can you give us more, and you know or this, this is just kind of sitting there and so you know, that’s, that’s how we kind of judged our decisions and then low and behold one day they said how about a newspaper and that really blew all our minds that, you know, you want us to produce a newspaper are you kidding with more frequency of publication and they said yeah this is you know, it will be cheap and we’ll make a lot of them and they'll get wide distribution and so that’s how Female Impersonator News got started. I would have, who would have thought, I mean I certainly didn’t.

**Lewis:** Can you describe a little bit of what, what was in Female Impersonator News was like?

**Mesics:** Well, yeah, you know all of us , all of us publications at the back had mailed order stuff so that you can mail order any of our publications and we swapped our publications with Lee Bruster and we sold each other’s stuff and you know, we had really good friendly relations with Lee and her, her products and then there was always a section of personal ads—and so, you know in the pre internet days this is how people hooked up eventually so you know you had, you placed an AD in our publication we screen we collected the mail, we, we knew what post office box to send it to and then any further communications was between the two individuals so, that was a real cottage industry I mean we, we were charging like a dollar or something per item and this, this was what we went out to lunch with that kind of money, so there was that, there was always a pictorial or two—and usually you know showing full nudity and, and later years a little but of contact the laws were really precise and dicey in those days as to what we could show and what we couldn’t. Um and it was the—it was the supreme court decision that, you know that pornography was defined as something that didn’t have any redeeming social value and so I, I like to joke that I was hired to provide the redeeming social value and so that was the self-help articles. That was, you know relaying the latest research information to the layman and so, there was always an article or two in there about like self help kinds of things. There were always letters to the editor and I spent, I spent a good part of everyday responding to letters, I mean, we ,we pledged ourselves if people wrote to us we, we would write back especially if they asked for something, if they asked for advice and so, you know we would publish some of the letters some of them I would just reply to personally.

**Lewis:** And what kinds of things did readers ask about?
Mesics: I don’t, I was, I was pretty out, obviously in the publications and you know, they thought I was young and cute and how wonderful it must be that you’re doing this wonderful transition and you can live as a woman and do all this great stuff and I, I wish that I could do that and you know my wife doesn’t understand or my spouse doesn’t understand and woe is me, and you know—a little of that was okay, but after several years of that I was really getting burnt out. And people didn’t know, I mean what they knew about me was what they saw on the publications it’s like I could barely put to, I could barely make my car payment and pay for electrolysis I mean I was working hard but I was not making a lot of money. I mean I was you know a salary employee and so there was the illusion of what the Sandy person was through the publications, but it bore no resemblance to what my personal life was like, it certainly was not glamorous.

Lewis: And were the magazines themselves making much money?

Mesics: I, I think they did you know, obviously STAR probably took a very healthy cut and then Jack took a cut of that and then paid us from it and you know, so Jack was able to support a family and you know I think I was making like 4 or 5 dollars an hour.

Lewis: What was the deal with STAR that they wanted to distribute this particular kind of content?

Mesics: They, they had, a STAR was considered to be run by a, a certain Italian families in New York and so they sort of had the distribution to, to their own bookstores, adult bookstores lined up.

Lewis: They distributed for Lee also? Do you know?

Mesics: They—a lot of Lee’s stuff was considered a little too tame for them, and so...

Lewis: Sorry about that.

Mesics: And interestingly, interestingly enough Jack would go in and meet with STAR once a week or so and get his marching orders and what to produce and what not to produce. But Jack never allowed me or Betty to go with him because he just said you know this wasn’t the kind of place you would take a woman. And so I never got to meet the folks at STAR it was a big secret.

Lewis: What did you think about that?

Mesics: Jack, Jack probably was protecting his own interest and probably didn’t want me making a side deal with them or not but I honestly do believe that he was, he was kind of cavalier you know, in that old fashioned kind of masculine way that, you know if he didn’t think it was a safe place he wouldn’t come right out and say it. So I, I think there was, I think there were elements of both, you know um, I’m sure it was a pretty seedy crowd he was dealing with.
**Lewis:** And do you have a sense of what the scale of distribution and also what the readership was for all of these titles?

**Mesics:** Yeah, I think my best guess is that it peaked out at about 10,000 I think, I think for Female Impersonator News the newspaper had the largest press run something like one of our other magazines probably typically sold maybe around 5,000 copies in up, in 5,000 to 8,000 total readership there's no way of knowing because you don’t know who shared it with whom. Although in those days there wasn’t a lot of sharing I would assume but people did, did share publications at, you know these parties and meetings and stuff we might of, we might of hit 15,000 on a good day, but that’s just probably about it.

**Lewis:** And they distributed across the country?

**Mesics:** Yes! Yup, and we also sold we get some of our publications back, part of the deal was we not only produced it got to check for producing it, but you got so many copies of it to sell yourself, and so that’s, that’s what fueled our mail order business.

**Lewis:** And you’ve been kind of speaking to some of this already but as the person hired to produce redeeming social content? What, what were your thoughts about, like, what for you at that time, what did you think was important for you to be like reporting on covering?

**Mesics:** Any event that involved trans people organizing, that was like priority you know there were groups going on in Seattle and on the West Coast and we tried to plug in on that, we tried to keep kind of tabs on what the TAO was Transsexual Action Organization was doing—that, that was primary importance. To Jack, Jack it was basically the pornographic content that sold the magazines and so, that was his focus you know, to me it was, you know let’s help get the world out about events let’s talk about the surgeons that are doing good work, let’s talk about the one, the ones that you might want to stay away from—kind of the scuttlebutt in the community. To me, to me that was important.

**Lewis:** And were your, your, sort of informants for scuttlebutt was that like folks that you knew, folks that wrote in?

**Mesics:** Yeah, folks that would write in on a regular basis and occasionally phone calls you know, because again pre internet days you know, and you actually paid more money for long distance calls in those days outside of your area code so communication was pretty much pen and paper even, you know. You know it’s hard to believe in this day, we didn’t even have access to copying machines in those days where you could run off things easily. Um—you know, it’s almost trying to do this in the stone age compared to what we have now a days, and so.

**Lewis:** I’ve always been very impressed when I—like activist counter culture periodicals from that period how much they were obviously went into them.
Mesics: Yeah—and so, you know the, the cool thing about working for Neptune’s actually we had a typesetting machine we had camera facilities I learned how to develop film. And we, we did a lot of it ourselves. And so I, I was definitely the one you know producing the redeeming social value, I never, I never showed up nude in one of our magazines until after my surgery. And that was only on one occasion to help them out and you know I’m not particularly proud of, actually two, two occasions I’m doing a Monty Python here, no, no three, twice I think, I, I appeared nude in their publications and you know, cause I never considered myself a beauty of any way, but it, it was, we were short of material and so I took one for the team.

Lewis: When the activist groups you were in touch with, Seattle was that your Empathy press.

Mesics: Empathy Press, yeah.

Lewis: What, was, I know very little about what was going on, what was, what was the deal with Empathy press who was behind it?

Mesics: Um, it was published by Kathy—Slavic and a drag named—drag named Charles Slavic and he had started publishing I think in the late 60s maybe. I don’t know how they ever started, but, we, we traded publications for them and actually I wrote for them a little bit under a pseudonym so, it was not to cross boundaries so, if you ever see anything that’s in Empathy Press publications written by Jan O’Sullivan it’s mine. And so you know, I wrote a couple of books for them as well—it was never anything more than a long distance kind of correspondence but one of their, their front person for a long time was Jessica Collins—Jessy Collins, and Jessy, Jessy was—I think I’ll stop there about Jessy Collins, because Jessy is still around and I don’t want to but, but that was, that was the Sandy version of Empathy Press, the person whose name was on the publications and you know, you can, you can I think, some of them were on the Digital Archives and you can, you can look at that and see what I’m talking about. But there, they did some really nice work, I mean, there big thing was once a year they would put out a catalogue and I think it was like All Things Trans, you know, and so page after page of contacts and all kinds of things and that was really cool and the rest of the time it was mostly fiction booklets and things like that—they were nice folks. And they were, they were no means on the scale of Lee Brewster, in New York, and you know, Lee, Lee and I we produced Drag magazines and other publications and I had a lot of admiration for Lee Brewster, she was definitely a role model.

Lewis: Did you know Lee Brewster in person, or?

Mesics: Yes. Yup, Lee was quite a southern gentleman, and I use the word gentleman because Lee presented as a man most of the time. Lee liked to high drag, where you know, you, you pulled out all the stops, and you know, and the gowns and the sequins and everything. Lee was not so much a day to day kind of crossdresser; it didn’t interest him. Lee was gay and so, he had this business on the west side of Manhattan, and it was like a walk up place but inside it was like a trans cornucopia of clothing and publications and, just unbelievable business person. He, he had a great business sense.
Lewis: That was the Mardi Gras Boutique?

Mesics: Mardi Gras Boutique, and then he had, he, he branched off and did drag magazine and then he did tours to—Mardi Gras every year, he would take groups there, and I went one year to cover it. Um, and I, I think he, he tried doing a Provincetown thing at one point as well, about the same time, I don’t think that ever took off. And then he did drag balls, but those stopped sort of like in the mid 70s. We, 70s, and, and so, Lee always had his finger on the pulse, he was like funding Street Transvestite Action Revolutionary, STAR. And he had his involvement in Queens Liberation Front and he worked with BB Scarpentino, BB Scarpentino, and BB and I became friends. And so, they were the activist on what Lee Brewster was doing, Lee was a very quite business kind of person, there were some rumors that he had been part of the FBI, I think, I think he may have been a Federal Worker at one point. Um, but just, just an awesome person, but Lee begged, begged me, begged me not to have surgery. Followed me out on the street in front of his Boutique on 8th Avenue and said don’t do it, don’t do it, and, and that kind of unnerved me a little bit, cause someone you have a lot of respect for you, tells you to do something, you know, no I’m committed to this, and you know, but, but Lee, Lee did not—think very much of sex reassignment surgery, interestingly enough.

Lewis: Um, did you have contact with Street Transvestite Action Revolutionary?

Mesics: No! That, that’s one of my big misses, they, they, they were kind of fading by the time I came onto the scene.

Lewis: BB was involved with them right?

Mesics: Yes, BB was, yup.

Lewis: Um, I’d love to hear about, what TAO, Transsexual Action Organization?

Mesics: We’ll I can tell you a little bit—so I think I became involved with them in 1973, and probably the time I published Image, and, and Angela Douglas reached out to me and said, wow, you’re doing this, why don’t you become part of us you could be our Philadelphia Chapter, I want you to go out and organize, so, you know this was kind of like when I started reaching out, and meeting with the Radical Queens in Philly, and you know, we never did get a Philadelphia Chapter off the ground unfortunately. And, Angela would call me up every once in a while, and usually collect and—and would rant, and, and we just go off on rants until the money ran out, or I would try to cut her off and you know. And Angela was a very complicated person, but I’m trying to put this as kindly as, as I can, I think Angela was—a vanguard for the trans movement, and she was out there before anybody else wanted to take on that kind of abuse. And she took a fair amount of abuse for it to, but I think she paid a price in her mental health, and so, you know I became kind of, like I would dread the phone calls from Angela because you know she, she would rag on about being followed by the FBI and be careful about this person and don’t trust Lee Brewster, and don’t do this, and you know and then eventually, then eventually that, that raft turned on
me, and when, when I started working for Neptune Productions that was pretty much the end of it. She, she thought I was just using, TAO to, for the, my own purposes.

**Lewis:** I think I read like a print of Female Impersonator News between you and her. [laughter]

**Mesics:** Yeah, and you know, I, I think, I think I had enough of the abuse, I mean, I was, I had expected anybody else but not within the trans community and so, we, we parted ways less than amicably and it, it was nice, thank you very much for sharing triple jeopardy with me, and I realized that I, I forgot to mention in there, a couple of times and I, I can tell you, I can tell you anyone reading it wasn’t true, I was not a plant for the FBI in fact, probably because of my Anti war activities in college, I probably have FBI files somewhere, and but, but Angela really I, I think, I think she probably suffered from paranoia schizophrenia of some sort, and she, but she did do a lot of good work for the community. And I, I think she threatened other people you know of course I corresponded with other people who have also suffered at the hands of Angela Douglas as well. But you know, she, she decided to have surgery with John Ronald Brown and she alluded to this in her book, and she had, had a magazine of her done called Sex Change, and there were pictures of her before and after, and that was the big selling point of that magazine. And I felt so sorry for her, when I saw that publication because she, she had obviously been butchered, afterwards and it was just hard to look at. I threw it away, I should have never thrown that publication away because of its historical value, but it just upset me so badly, I mean nobody deserved that.

**Lewis:** Yeah, that's unfortunately sort of what Brown was being known for.

**Mesics:** Yeah, yeah he was one of those people to avoid.

**Lewis:** Can I ask you, can I ask you a question about Angela Douglas probably because she’s such a complicated figure and I know been interested in her for a long time, that sort of, you know, despite that she was obviously kind of intractable and a rabble rouser what was, what, particularly what sort of drew you to sort of like her, political work or maybe, to want to get involved in like, a Philadelphia contingent of the Transsexual Action Organization?

**Mesics:** If you read what they were doing, they were getting they were getting a fair amount of attention in the public press and I thought [co] I thought if that was handled well it’s a good thing, you know, it’s a good thing for the community to have the attention of the general public. I didn’t always agree with their message—and basically it was just an attempt to you know be involved in trying to launch this movement that would you know create acceptance for trans individuals. You know in, in the political context at that time I could of been arrested for walking down the street in Philadelphia dressed as a woman, if I was still male bodied, that’s the kind of stuff we were putting up with, and they were willing to go out on a limb to challenge us, and so you know, it was a scary thing at the time but I thought it was worthwhile thing to do at the time to try and organize against these, these crazy ordinances and, and in Philadelphia in particular while earlier I said in our conversation that it was a pretty gay friendly town. In election years it wasn’t so much because we had a mayor named Frank Rizzo and Frank was the police chief before he was
mayor of Philadelphia and every time he ran for mayor he would clean up the streets of Philly, which usually meant busting the gay bars. And so, you know there was still an element going around at the time, you know we were, we were starting the movement. And so, TAO challenged a lot of that stuff and you know I, I’m on board with it.

**Lewis:** Did you have contact with any of the other people involved in it? Either in Miami Beach or elsewhere?

**Mesics:** I didn’t. I didn’t, I, I knew of the people that, that Angela had talked about, but I never had separate contact with any of them. And years later I, I actually moved to Miami and, and, but by that time Angela had moved on so, we, we never actually, I never met Angela face to face.

**Lewis:** Flow, just to make sure I’m touching on the things that I wanted to hit on.

**Mesics:** Sure,

**Lewis:** And, and how long was Neptune Productions around for? Until the 80s?

**Mesics:** Until the 80s, yeah I kind of I, I had my surgical transition in 1976 and by that time I was starting to burn out a little bit. And I wanted to stretch my wings a little bit and kind of see how well I could do with just sort of blending into society in general and becoming invisible. And so— I stopped working for them full time probably around 1977 or thereabouts, but I still contributed as I could, you know but not to the extent that I did before. And I contributed to Neptune probably into the 80s Jack O’Brien eventually passed away, in the late 70s and then Betty Johnson continued with Neptune for a few more years until she got a little bit too feeble to be able to carry on herself. So, as it turned out even though Star wasn’t supposedly a safe place for females to be Betty worked with Star to keep the thing going so, I think she was, she was, she was a wonderful individual and it was personal friends with Truman Capote and — Harper Lee, and so how could you not love a person like that you know, and the stories she would tell. But anyways, she, she kept the publications going and in fact she encouraged me to write a book, a biography which you know I wish I had kept a copy of it, but she started serializing it in a, one of the magazines I think they called Trans Sex—Grown.

**Lewis:** Grown?

**Mesics:** Another one of those magazines [laughter] so a couple, one or two installments of it appeared, but I don’t think we ever and she claims that Betty, Betty claims that she ran the manuscript passed Harper Lee who basically said don’t do it, it doesn’t have a market, you know so, if, if I, if the legend be true that’s what happened I don’t, I have no way of conforming or ever denying that. I think someday I would like to go through Harper Lee’s paper just to see if there were correspondence between her and Betty but at any rate so it, it continued on the 80s and even I, I moved on eventually and lived in Miami but even into the 80s I started writing for the Transsexual Voice which was a publication out of Georgia. Um and occasionally would do something for Empathy Press even then or, then I even wrote a couple of pieces for Nugget which
was a men’s magazine that had a large kind of fetish kind of focus and so a couple of my things appeared there too—so I think I finally finished writing in the genre in probably in the mid 80s about the time of the internet started to hit, and..

Lewis: Did you also have like social guides to like the fetish communities or was that just.

Mesics: Well you know, Neptune produced some of that material as well and, and so I, I did some shoots that I took photos of, of like B&D session, bondage stuff, some S&M stuff—but it wasn’t really, I was peripherally involved you know, I found it very interesting in some ways stimulating but it wasn’t nothing I ever delved into in detail, but we, we even, we even put out a, Neptune was approached to do a publication for fat people attraction I don’t know what that is called exactly but the name of the magazine was I think Fat Is Where It’s At, and that was probably the hardest thing I had to write around erotic fiction involving that, because it just, you know, personally it didn’t touch me in any way that I could you know, that was a to one for me. I could write, I could write trans porn till the sun set but this was kind of the stretch for me and I was not very good at it, but, we, we would produce anything Star wanted. I mean, you know but I think, I think they had other folks doing more of the S&M kind of stuff then we did, we just kind of dabbled in it.

Lewis: Um, may I ask you how much you feel like talking about it, about your experiences accessing surgery in the 70s, you said 74?

Mesics: 76.

Lewis: 76.

Mesics: 76, sure it, it was kind of an interesting time for gender reassignment surgery in general because the pioneer like Johns Hopkins had just stopped doing them. For bad reasons they stopped doing it because of misleading information, and the work was being picked up by private surgeons more or less so this whole shift was occurring, so it—in my early transition days I was getting psychological counseling from Pennsylvania Hospital facility that had a gender identity program. They were also doing the surgery at Philadelphia hospital, a team of urologist and a plastic surgeon would do those, so I was, I was going there, and I was seeing a very excellent shrink, I mean I owe my life to him. I really, he told me to think outside the box, he knew that I was pretty naive, but he also knew I was bright, but he would do things, like say “how do you know you’re not gay?—Have you tried being gay?—Why don’t you do that? Why don’t you explore that?” you know it’s like okay if you think I should, yes I think you should, you think you know what being a woman is about, why don’t you go to conscious raising group. Which we had in those days, you know a feminist group, okay so I did that, he was always challenging me to you know, to, to be sure that I made the right decision. So I really do owe him my, anyway long story short, it’s an interesting story it’s kind of, I was—about my surgery day, met the surgeon and had a bad feeling, just had a bad feeling, a bad gut feeling about that visit I thought they were very dismissive, I thought they were cold, impersonal and I didn’t get a warm feeling from them. A friend of mine had had surgery done by them and
aesthetically okay, they didn’t take great pains to [inaudible] to, to, to keep sensation—and so I was going into this two weeks down with a lot of trepidation which I shouldn’t had, it should of been a glorious time for me, but you know—so anyway bout 10 days before my surgery I broke out in hives, the hives covered by body, covered my eyes, they took me to the emergency room and it turned out I had hepatitis. Where I gotten hepatitis, who knows, but as a result of the hepatitis surgery was off the table for a year, and hormones were off the table for a year which was awful, which just awful, so during that year I continued working as best I could, but after I recovered for, for Neptune Productions you know, it was a year without drinking, drugs, hormones, no surgery inside I was pretty unhappy camper. It did test my resolve but, I was able to do enough asking around and I found out about David Wesser who was a plastic surgeon doing the surgery in New York City and he had an office at Park Avenue, he did surgeries at Yonkers Professional Hospital. And I consulted with him and found a person that was truly compassionate, he had just come out of the Air Force I believe he was doing surgery on kids that were wounded by friendly and enemy fire and was an excellent plastic surgeon and he didn’t guarantee sensation but he said I work to preserve the clitoris and I’ll do everything I can to do it no guarantees but, so I went with him, when my year was up I started hormones again I had surgery with David Wesser and it was a good choice and only the fates intervene to, to give me the outcome that I eventually got cause, had I not gotten sick —I don’t know, I would have probably gone through with it.

Lewis: Would he, he would have been one of the first and only folks like actually making effort to preserve sensation?

Mesics: I think he was. I think he was one of the pioneers you know, they, they preserved a part of the spongy corpus spongiosum tissue that had sensation in, not as refined as it is now but I, I was able to retain orgasmic ability and the tradeoff, the tradeoff, he was known for this, and in my case that was certainly the case with, was that you paid for it with lack of depth. And so, so if you were a really one of those folks that you know you were committed to having a deep vagina he probably wouldn’t be your first choice, he , he choose not to do skin grafts for that reason, and so and, and that was true in my case as well so, so you know being the fact that I knew I was probably going to be lesbian post-surgery. The deepness of my vagina was kind if a moot point to me, if I could be orgasmic and so I made that choice myself. A friend of mine coincidentally, the same time who was heterosexually oriented chose Benito Rish who was also a during surgery in New York at the time, and used big honking skin grafts, which got a really nice deep vagina—I don’t know about the sensation you know Rish and—now I, excuse me, it wasn’t Rish it was Granoto, Doctor Francis, Francis Granoto but they all knew each other and so I don’t know if they traded techniques and stuff like that so. That’s, that’s how we made our decisions and again that's why we did what we did, was to supplement word of mouth, like who, who do you go to if you want a clitoris, who do you go to if you, if your focus was a deep vagina, who gave the most aesthetic looks and that’s what we did.

Lewis: Sounds like you had like fairly good experiences with medical care, maybe putting aside that bullet you dodged, of hepatitis.
Mesics: I would say that I did, I would say that key people in my life my psychiatrist my hormone doctor my surgeon they were all—caring, compassionate and competent for the most part. Which is really funny because eventually Doctor Wesser lost his license to practice by doing something with silicon or something like that and had some bad outcomes. My hormone doctor eventually lost his license to practice because he didn’t believe in paying income tax on things and so the IRS got him. So you know, they had, they were little rogue providers you know you took the good with the bad, but.

Lewis: John Brown definitely lost his license over and over again.

Mesics: Yes indeed, yes indeed. As well he should have and, and interestingly enough Doctor Wesser’s attorney actually posted something posthumously about ,yeah he did lose his license but the real reason he lost his license was because he was doing trans surgery—and, and I can point you to that website, it’s pretty interesting reading. You know he paid the price for doing what he did, under the guise of malpractice.

Lewis: Can I ask you and mothers you knew who were accessing surgery what was—how did they get paid for?

Mesics: Interesting question, I was probably one of the last people that had it covered under private insurance. —because at that time there were so few of them done that it wasn’t even on their horizon, they had no idea. And so I had made an acquaintance when I started working and started my transition and I asked a lot of pointed questions without asking the question, and you know preexisting conditions, oh yeah after a year okay any surgeries excluded oh no, nothing, okay fine. And so, it, it was a throughPrudential, and I can say that because Prudential no longer writes medical insurance. So I had this Prudential plan and I you know, I had to pay the surgeon up front but I was reimbursed for it. My friend who on my recommendation chose Prudential came a few months, say six months after I did and they challenged hers, because I guess, you know myself and maybe some other people were starting to make claims about this, and oh no we’re not covering that, she successfully challenged but it took her awhile, and so, shortly after that probably by the end of the 1976, 77 it was an exclusion for many years. And so, most of us accessed it by cash and that was the case of many years.

Lewis: Did by any chance did you know anyone who got it covered by Medicaid in the 70’s.

Mesics: Never.

Lewis: Yeah that's interesting to hear because I knew that Medicare exclusion happened in 80 or 81 or something and I wasn’t aware that private insurance were moving to exclude early in the late 70’s.

Mesics: They were.
Lewis: Um—a, a few things I wanted to ask you about was is there anything else that you, you would want to share about sort of your experiences with medical transition in the 1970s that we haven’t touched on?

Mesics: You, just to, just an observation that I’m on a lot of Facebook groups, trans related Facebook groups and one of them has to do with hormone care and you see an endless posts about these are my lad values—which should I be shooting for you know, or is, is my E too high, is my T too high is, and so the, the funny thing about it, is in the day when I was getting hormones there were no labs drawn to monitor your, your results. There was, there were no testosterone suppression drugs given like there is now like spironolactone or, basically the doc hit you with as much estrogen and progestogen that your body could tolerate, and you just kept going on that basis and then you know if you were having symptoms they backed off. But I mean I was on ungodly amounts of hormones, I was taking Inofert which was an early birth control pill, 10 ml of estrogen and then I was taking diethylstilbestrol on top of it and then injections every two weeks it was like unbelievable. So many, many, many, many years later I when I, when I met the acquaintance of Christine McGibb, a trans surgeon who was also doing hormone care, this was probably about 10 years ago you know, and I went to see her because I needed a new provider for hormones and I figured oh who would know better than a trans woman who’s a surgeon and a physician so, she asked me a question about how many my libido was [laughter] and I said what libido, there is no libido, she says “you need testosterone”. [laughter] So now I’m kind of plugged into the system where I no longer see Dr. McGibb, but I thank her for that recommendation and so I, I use bioidentical cream that has a little bit of T in it just to keep that level up a little bit. But I, I can tell well I started getting T again because it, you know it’s amazing what it does to a person. Um, yeah, I mean—T really does fuel the sex drive and you know visual stimulate, that wouldn't stimulate you before all of a sudden becomes more stimulating, it’s, it’s just a magical kinds of—hormones are just magical that’s all I can say. Um so, but, but at any rate that my experiences was there was no such thing as lad values, you just went until your dropped you know, and that’s how they did it in those days. And, and we all compared notes and like, it was almost like who could take more you know—it was a different time.

Lewis: Um I, I want to march this more into the 80s before we go on far too long but I, I also wanted to ask you a question that you mentioned, that I’m curious about you said that before going into a surgery you, you had basically already planned that you were living as a lesbian and identifying as a lesbian and I remember, I’m curious to know if you were involved in lesbian community life in the 70s and what not and what that was like?

Mesics: Yeah, a little bit. So, so—after my surgery, my first female partner after surgery was about two years after my surgery, for the first couple of years after surgery in, in the mid late 70s I tried dating men for a little bit just to kind like let out the—and I did and so I met a woman and we, we, and we ended up in a four year relationship and so, it was good, it was very good. She was more into the lesbian community than I was at that time I was still very, very kind of touchy about being read and I don’t want to cause waves. But within our circle of friends there were no questions asked about mine, being part of the community, there was a we, we go out to, we go out to the bars and we’d go to the concerts, I mean the woman’s music in the 70s was amazing
you know, met Christian and Chris Williamson and all those artists. We’d go to all those concerts and everything was hunky and dory until the Transsexual Empire got published by Janus Raymond and the Michigan Women’s Music Festival barred trans woman in then it was like I kind of retreated a little bit to that whole thing, and so, you know, I maintained friendships within the community, but wasn’t active in the lesbian community let’s put it that way. When I met my current partner, spouse now, we, we met at a, met through mutual friends but our first date was at a woman’s center Halloween dance, and so, I, I kind of like re-integrated but by that time it was like the late 80s and a lot of the hysteria kind of blew over a little bit, and so, but, but I understand that, that battle is still going on with terfs, you know what have you, legitimacy in the community and it’s like I’m too old I don’t have time for that, you know, you either take me for what I am or you know, just part ways, you know I’m okay either way, I mean [laughter] it’s a shame, it’s a shame.

Lewis: Can you tell me a, little bit to the 80s you describe getting burnt out and you know working for Neptune maybe sort of, say you know, you know sort of like not having to like be professionally trans constantly and kind of just like, sort of, yeah I, sort of how did your life kind of progress into the 80s?

Mesics: Okay, AJ that’s perfect professional trans, that’s, that’s you know kind of like yup, I, I had to move away from that. So at first it was dicey, I worked, I worked as a taxi cab driver at night, and during the daytime I substitute tat in the Philadelphia school system. I did that until I found a full-time job and I used what I had learned at a Neptune Productions to become a first, kind of like a layout artist and then proofreader for WB Saunders Publishing company. Which was a medical publishing company, and, so I sort of found my way into the graphic arts industry, and I did that, I moved from WB Saunders to a small company called Wallman Graphics that produced a print material and they, they worked for the publication companies, they worked for many publishing companies and I moved my way up in that company. At first I was a coder, so I worked code, just like HTML code except for type setting. And in the early days computer type setting, that’s how we did it, and so I rode that, I rode that industry from Philadelphia and then got a job offer, got a opportunity to do the same thing in Miami, Florida so, at that point I was single again, I felt that there was a good time to make a life change, Miami who doesn’t want to try Miami at some point in their life. So, I went to Miami and worked for a small company called Burmie Graphics that, wanted to expand into the book production business so I worked for them for many years—and so that was kind of like the 80s. What was happening towards the end of the 80s was desktop publishing was coming out, and it was changing that whole industry where now the end user could produce print material basically without going through the type setters and the graphic art companies and I could see that change was coming. And I knew it was time that I needed to try something else and so coincidentally at the late 80s at that time, the AIDS epidemic was hitting, and you know, the gay and lesbian community in Miami was a pretty strong community. A large community and all of a sudden some of my gay male friends were ending up in the hospital and, and dying. So I asked my, my spouse who was registered nurse, is a registered nurse and a nurse midwife at the time and said do you think I could make it as a nurse cause I really like to be involved in some form of AIDS care, and she said “yeah why don’t you go back to school, and you know we’ll figure it out so”. I went back to school, got a nursing degree
in 1992, ironically I never really gave direct AIDS care, but I found my way into women’s healthcare, went back to school got a Masters degree in nurse midwifery in the late 90’s and went into a busy OB/GYN practice giving OB/GYN care and delivering babies.

Lewis: [inaudible] May I ask, can you like describe maybe a little bit more about what your experience were like sort of watching, sort of the, the sort of the AIDS crisis kind of unfold around you that's inform that decision to go into nursing?

Mesics: Yeah, well you know, I touched on the personal aspect of seeing people I was friends with all of a sudden to, to wither away and die. And you know there was a lot of community mobilization because we couldn’t get traction on the national level to, to investigate this. And there was so much misconception at first, you know, you know can I hug a gay person will I get sick from hugging them, can I kiss them on the cheeks, if they stay at my house do I have to boil their sheets. I mean I’m not making this stuff up, this was the stuff we were worried about in those days, and, and you know there was a lot of hysteria around it. And so, one of the things that my spouse and I did was, we were the founding members of the St. Stephen’s AIDS Ministry at the episcopal church that we attended we had a large gay contingency. A lot of gay members of the church and so, we formed this group and our objective was to help fund things that AIDS patients needed to survive in those days, and it could be simply as providing housing assistance. They were getting thrown out of apartments because they had this diagnosis, so we would provide that, we would provide food when we had to. We would provide transportation to medical care, you name it, it was all that kind of stuff that wasn’t being, that was falling through the cracks. And so that became my involvement in, in AIDS, what we called AIDS ministry, we raised a lot of money and helped a lot of people and I’m proud to say that, that group is still going many years after we left the group. It’s active to this day, and so we accomplished that, that, but, but there was just so much, so much misinformation and hysteria and, we just needed to do something. The first injection I ever gave to a patient was as a nursing student to an AIDS patient, what did you do, did you double glove, do you triple glove? Do you wear a mask, do you, you know I mean, we just had no idea, you know the information wasn’t there yet. And, and you know groups were trying to push them, the federal government for funding to, to research this and find cures. You know now we’re kind of blasé about it anymore, but, you know at the time it was terrifying, it was a terrifying epidemic. Well I think your old enough to know, what it was like probably at the beginning.

Lewis: Where you connected to the trans people who were affected by the epidemic at the time?

Mesics: Honestly no, I knew they were, but I personally didn’t know of anybody. Remember again this, this was kind of like my pulling back and you know while I was a member of the larger LGBT community, I was no longer seeking out trans communities at that time, and so I would say no.

Lewis: Can you tell us some more of what your experience were going into nursing was like?

Mesics: [laughter] Yeah nursing is an interesting profession, it’s one of my colleagues said “it’s the one profession where if you’re a man everybody assumes you’re gay, and if you’re a female
everybody assumes you’re straight.” And so, I think we’re kind of breaking that mold, so I found nursing was probably the most rewarding and best career choice I ever made. And I’m not saying that to blow smoke, it really, it helped me blossom personally, it helped me make a little bit of change and I think I hope you know make others’ lives a little bit better. It’s the best thing I’ve ever done—I never shared that I was trans with any of the students that I went to school with. I never shared it with any of my instructors, what I did share at the time was that I was lesbian and I had a, a female partner and you know in interestingly enough, in those days it was okay to fess up to being lesbian but being trans was still kind of like you didn’t do that, you know. That was still kind of like the last taboo, so I never, I never talked about that, and, and in my nursing school with my classes or anything. Plus, plus—when, when Sarah and I got together she had kids and you know I was sensitive to kids being bullied or ridiculed so it was bad enough that their mom had a female partner or spouse to throw the trans thing in there on top of that, I never shared it with the kids until they were an older.

Lewis: Why did you, what made you choose midwifery and OBGYN?

Mesics: Well for one thing my spouse is a nurse midwife and so I was kind of fascinated with the scope of which she could do for patients, and the second thing that triggered it was out of nursing school I went to work in labor and deliveries as a registered nurse in labor and delivery and I got to work with families and labor and postpartum and, and I saw the way they were receiving medical care from physicians—and I thought it could be done better, and I knew that the midwifery method was a little bit more of, viewing labor and birth as a natural process rather than something that needed a lot of intervention. You let it progress on its own, you kept an eye on it so that it was progressing normally and safety, but you didn’t intervene necessarily, unnecessarily and so I liked that model of care. I got to spend a little bit more time with my patients then docs could, got to know them on a different level, just delivered about a better quality of care. I practiced with docs so if there was an emergency, they were there within half an hour, but you know a lot of the times they weren’t necessary, so I found it very, very rewarding. Midwifery to me was like, like a, hours of boredom interspersed with moments of terror and that’s just the way it is you know. Labor progresses slowly but then when things go wrong they go wrong quickly and so those moments of terror were real.

Lewis: Can you tell us a little bit more about your professional life more recently? How long have you been St. Luke’s?

Mesics: I’ve been here for a, since 2001 so at this time that’s 18 years now. I came here originally, we relocated back from my Miami to take care of my mother who has as it turned out was in her terminal illness at the time so while I said I would never return to Bethlehem here I am, and we did that. And so, they had an opportunity of teaching in this nursing program teaching maternal newborn nursing which was really up my, alley and while I was a pretty good midwife, I think I was a better teacher than I was a practitioner. So I came aboard here as a teacher and I tat for three years when the position of director came up and so I interviewed for that and for the past fourteen years I’ve been director of the school. And, I, I truly, truly enjoyed being involved in education as well as nursing so it’s a perfect fit for me.
Lewis: You know you do research also is that right?

Mesics: I don’t so much research anymore, most research, most recent research I was looking at critical thinking tools to predict success in nursing, students so we were using a non-nursing kind of standard of critical thinking tool and we found out that it does correlate with success on taking nursing boards and also succeeding in nursing programs, so that was one of my areas of research. I’ve published, some continuing education, one of the courses is care of the transgender patient and that’s been very rewarding for me and I’m going to present on that topic next month, in a couple of months at a convention.

Lewis: Are you affiliated with WPATH?

Mesics: Yes I am a member of WPATH, yup. And also a member of GLMA, Gay Lesbian Medical Association as well.

Lewis: Do you have a whole holistic thought about sort of [inaudible] sort of unwieldy a question to ask, but sort of the state of trans care when you were accessing it in the 70s vs now?

Mesics: I think we’ve come full circle in a way, I think we started off as an informed consent model cause you know there was no consensus established on how to treat trans patients and so we started off with you know, and you know informed consent when you boil it down to it is the person crazy or not, or are they able to make rational decisions, informed decisions. And that, that was, that’s a medical, a model that a lot of medicine practices you know. What are the strengths of this, what are the weaknesses of this course of action, what are the, the complications involved in, and you make a choice on all those things. A, WPATH got involved in, and it got very hierarchical there’s was a lot of gate keeping going on, I’m kind of a proponent of the informed consent model and, I think trans people are very competent to make their own decisions, that being said. You know I do believe that counseling helps all of us and especially at critical times in our lives when we’re making hard decisions so I would never say a person shouldn’t have counseling. I think, I think it’s a good idea, you know particularly if the counselors a good one. I don’t think they need to be gatekeepers you know, just make sure that the individuals that thought things through. So you know that part of it I would keep, the real life tests, you know I think, I think some years down the line that’s going to be an anachronism because one of the cool things that’s happening is that kids are discovering that gender is not binary and that is amazing to an older person like myself. And I say good for them and so they are the ones that are changing the whole paradigm and so really down the line what is, what is living one year as a member if the opposite gender a, going to be you know, when, when we can all be gender fluid. So kudos to, kudos to young people out there you know caring the torch very nicely—and so that, that’s how I see it. You know, obviously medicine really does you know the first thing you do is no harm ends but I think you can get carried away with that concept.

Lewis: I want to be mindful of time, but I asked you a bunch of questions especially you know in the 1970s, 80s, but I also want to make sure [inaudible] since we not treated the 90s or 2000s as
much depth, is there anything you would like to talk about that I haven’t asked you about especially in the more recent years of your life?

Mesics: I, I think the—I think the thing I really find interesting is the trans wave that’s happened in the last few years— it’s staggering to someone who came up in the years that I did. When you know growing up you thought you were the only person in the world and now you have Jazz Jennings on tv talking you know real life adventures of her own transition. I, I think, pre pubertal, pre pubertal suppression and being able to stop puberty can let kids make a decision, I mean my god I would have died for that opportunity as a kid. I’m, I’m just astounded by the wonderful changes that have happened in, in the 90s and 2000s, and I know there's a backlash and I know the political climate right now is real sucky and, and I get that too. But we have come in, and we’re not going back, you know? Mara Keisling, she and I had a discussion at one of the talks she gave afterwards, and you know we, we kind of both agreed. You know once you open that Pandora’s box, you can give us some nasty shit back but you know we’re not going back into that closet anymore, so I, I think that’s it. You know if you had told me that I would be able to marry my same gender spouse in my lifetime at one time I would have said you’re crazy. We didn’t see that coming until we gathered a tremendous amount of momentum and so all those changes.

Lewis: I think I noticed when I was diligently googling you.

Mesics: [laughter]

Lewis: That you popped up in the news around, around the marriage license is that correct?

Mesics: Yeah.

Lewis: Was that legal in Pennsylvania?

Mesics: Well it wasn’t, it wasn’t strictly legal yet but there was a justice, he was a recorder of wills or something, Montgomery County and I had gotten wind at the fact that he felt it was crazy that you couldn’t get a marriage license. So he just independently started issuing marriage licenses, and so I, I told Sarah we really should do this just to make a political statement, you know let’s, let’s go down there and so on a Friday, we went down, I was shaking going into that office. I didn’t know what to expect but the people there were couldn’t have been nicer, and so there happened to be a reporter there and they said do you mind talking to the reporter and we said sure. So you know and it’s still out there and I guess on the internet there’s a picture of us and you know, they, they talked about how we had been together for twenty five years and you know how wonderful this is. Again we didn’t touch on the trans thing [laughter] why muddy that, that’s not her objective was. And so anyway, I think we were the 146th license that was issued or something like that and then the attorney general of Pennsylvania decided not to go after this and let it be. And so, you know for, for months afterwards we were going, are we really legal are we, should we see a lawyer to see if we’re really legal, are we legal? And finally, after that it just became a moot point that we have a marriage license it’s got a number on it and so, I guess we’re legal. Not that it matters at all, but I mean—it, it was nice so yeah we, we became, you know one
of the first same gender couples in Pennsylvania to get a marriage license [laughter] we, we had been married in the church ceremony several years prior, but this, this was kind of the icing on the cake.

**Lewis:** I mean well like you said, I want to be mindful of time, don’t let me wrap this up if there’s material we haven’t touched on or anything I haven’t asked you about, but may I ask is there—any particular aspect of your, your work and life that you’d especially liked to be remembered for?

**Mesics:** Well—I, I think it’s astounding that it came to the attention of somebody at the university of the sciences in Pennsylvania that whatever body of work I left behind justified an honorary Doctorate. I, I’m still blown away by that, but that’s going to be happening next month, and you know they, they were aware of the work that I had done with you know Neptune Productions and you know I said do you really want to destroy the reputation of your college by doing this and they said we’re all about diversity and inclusivity and we want you to help us push the envelope. And I said I’m certainly experienced in pushing the envelope so I can, I can do that, so you know I don’t know what legacy to be, noted for. Honestly like I said earlier I never considered myself one of the early trans activist more like a chronicler who happened to be trans, so you know I, I played a peripheral role and I knew some of those people but really I, I thought my role if anything was to chronical it and, and doing, write about it and take pictures of it and do whatever I could to get it out there in the days. So maybe that’s it.

**Lewis:** That’s pretty cool. Sandy thank you so much for your time, this is really wonderful.

**Mesics:** My pleasure AJ, thank you.

**Lewis:** Thank you.