

# Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

**Interviewee:** Sarah Cooper

**Interviewer:** Rasheed Rahman

**Place of Interview:** Brighton

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**Files:** SC1-4

## Key

**RR:** = Interviewer, Rasheed Rahman

**SC:=** Interviewee, Sarah Cooper

[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time

[5:22 IA] = inaudible section at this time

Word 5:22 = best guess at word

**RR:** If you can tell me where and when you were born?

**SC:** I was born in Bevington on Merseyside on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1957.

**RR:** So how long have you been living in Brighton Sarah?

**SC:** About three-and-a-half years.

**RR:** OK, did you move down from London?

**SC:** Yes, yeah I did, I work here, I worked in Brighton when I was living in London, I was doing a reverse commute which was a bit bizarre.

**RR:** And you were born in Merseyside.

**SC:** Yeah

**RR:** And how old were you?

**SC:** Oh I came down south, as it's called, when I was four and I grew up in Kent.

**RR:** OK. And did you stay in Kent for a while or?

**SC:** No I left when I was 18 and went to university and I've not lived there since. I lived in London mostly until I came to Brighton.

**RR:** OK. And tell me a little bit about your background and upbringing as you were growing up.

**SC:** It's hard to say. I come from a maritime background actually that's why I was born near Liverpool and came to live in north Kent on the Medway, which is another big river, and my dad works in the docks industry. And yeah so I had a fairly ordinary upbringing. Kent's not a very interesting place to grow up so I was pleased to live.

**RR:** Where was your nearest town that you ...?

- SC:** There aren't any big towns in Kent so I used to, from when I was about 16 I just used to sneak off to London as soon as possible for the evenings yeah.
- RR:** Is that what your friends did as well was it?
- SC:** Yeah a couple of us did, the braver ones yeah. There's really not much going on down there.
- RR:** And were there particular things you went to London for or?
- SC:** Music, music definitely. My big interest, apart from history actually, is music. So I developed an interest in music really young and no bands played Kent 'cause there was no big venues basically, even now, but there was no sort of small band scene, so to speak, as there is now. And so yeah, we basically went to London to go to gigs and clubs and stuff.
- RR:** What was your first gig?
- SC:** Er, actually my first gig was <chuckles> when I was about 13 or 14 was Slade, but that was an NME Poll Winners concert which they used to have, I mean they have club NME and all things like that now – oh actually they did have a Poll Winners Tour. But yeah that was at Wembley then, it was a really big thing.
- RR:** What year was that?
- SC:** That would be about 1972 I think, yeah I think it was when I was about 14, yeah that's right I think.
- RR:** And so when were you a punk, through the punk years?
- SC:** My sister was a bit more of a punk, I was really into soul and reggae, black music was my thing so, it still is, not exclusively but that's what I went to London for so. We went to a lot of soul gigs, so American bands would come over and they'd never play anywhere apart from London, so we'd go to them and we'd go to reggae clubs and stuff, that's what we really wanted to do.
- RR:** And what kind of schooling did you have?
- SC:** They have grammar schools in Kent so I went to a grammar school, but it was very sort of average and you weren't really sort of encouraged to do anything apart from maybe teach, which I didn't do, so yeah not that interesting. But I did ... where I grew up is, it's in a Medway Towns which one of the places there is a place called Rochester which has got a really big cathedral and castle and I grew up quite close to that. And what I did develop was a real interest in history, but I think through growing up in an area like that, so that's about the best thing that I could say about it.
- RR:** And you did O Levels/A Levels?
- SC:** Yes, yeah I did and then I went to Reading when I was 18 to study history politics.
- RR:** OK. When you were kind of between that 16 to 18 age did you have an idea of what you wanted to do career-wise or?

- SC:** No nothing, I was completely clueless. It wasn't very ... no I'm sure some people did, but I don't remember any of my friendship group thinking about careers, we didn't think that far ahead. And because we didn't have to get student loans to go to college or anything there wasn't that sort of pressure to think, well if I'm gonna go to college I've gotta think about what job I'm going to get afterwards 'cause I'm going to have to pay a dirty great loan off, so never thought about it, I hardly thought about it until I left college actually.
- RR:** And so you moved to Reading when you were...
- SC:** 18 yeah.
- RR:** So you were still close enough to London for the gigs.
- SC:** Yeah that's right, yeah 'cause Reading's not very exciting either <laughs>. And then I moved from ... as soon as I left Reading I went to live in London and I lived there for 27 years.
- RR:** And am I right in saying you were an out-lesbian?
- SC:** Not until I was 25, so I was quite late actually. Is that right 25? Yeah, 1982.
- RR:** OK. And so you moved to London what year?
- SC:** '78
- RR:** And where did you live when you were in London?
- SC:** East Dulwich, Forest Hill East Dulwich, yeah South London, but then I spent most of my ... I moved from there quite quickly and I lived in East London and North London for the rest of my time, so I went to live in Tower Hamlets. I lived on the Isle of Dogs actually before Canary Wharf was built, which was incredible because I <chuckles> I go back there for work sometimes and I still can't quite believe it. And yeah East London was a more interesting place, I would say that wouldn't I about South London, but East London is now, but always I think has been, a very interesting place to live. And there was a lot going on, there was a lot going on politically, in fact the whole thing about the BNP reminds me a lot about National Front and Rock Against Racism and stuff like that that I was involved in then, 'cause Tower Hamlets has always been a bit of a battleground for those sorts of struggles. And there was also a very sort of vibrant ... I mean I think this has changed a bit, but because there were a lot of the buildings along the river which are now quite expensive flats, they were empty and a lot of them were squatted or let as studios and work spaces so there was a kind of very lively, sort of arts/party scene as well. So although it was very ... it's not as glossy as parts of East London are now, like Hoxton and Brick Lane and Whopping, it was the ... the roots of that kind of thing were there then and it wasn't sort of quite an exciting place to be I think.
- RR:** And were you kind of politicised at university?
- SC:** Yeah I was always quite political actually, so I was ... I did and still do call myself a socialist and so I was in the Labour Party, and I was very active, I was on the left of the Labour Party and I still say I was, so I've never been a separatist and when I refer to myself as a feminist I always refer to myself as a socialist feminist. So yeah I was very active and the whole, everybody I

hung around with was very politically active and that was kind of our scene and that's what we did and went to lots of demonstrations and yeah.

**RR:** Do you think that there was any kind of origins of that in your love for music from 13, I imagine you ...?

**SC:** Yeah, I mean there's a link 'cause there's a lot of music that's ... well music expresses a lot of emotions about people's lives and there's a lot of political music – I mean punk and Rock Against Racism was enormously fertile politically, there was a lot going on then. So yeah I think the two things are very sort of interlinked. And actually thinking about the thing about punk and what have you, is those sorts of subcultures, which I mean are still very alive but ... I do, I mean this is my perspective is who I am, it wouldn't be the same for ... it's not all the same for all young people to say it depends on their ethnic background, their cultural background and what have you, but Britain was in a really big recession then, it was still in the sort of post-war recession, and it was the start of the Thatcher Government and things were very, very confrontational and there was a lot of direct confrontation on the streets. So for example, every Saturday when I was in the Labour Party Young Socialists, every Saturday we would go and sell newspapers where we new The National Front were selling newspapers. And we would get ourselves, I mean quite stupidly actually, into quite direct confrontation with them and ... the police would not be very sympathetic to us at all, not that they were necessarily sympathetic to them although we perceived that they were. And yeah, it was all quite, <chuckles> as I say, confrontational. And we'd do the same thing at nights actually, we would ... which I didn't like doing 'cause I'm not that brave. If we went out drinking we would ... and this was actually in Hoxton and Shoreditch which you can't imagine doing that now 'cause it's a completely different place, but everybody knows what it used to be like. And we would go past pubs where we knew were sort of quite right-wing and we would <chuckles> let them know who we were and then we'd be chased away, which was very silly 'cause we were ... I mean they were much more violent than we ever were going to be. But yeah it was an interesting time, and I carried on being very politically active once I came out as well.

**RR:** Do you want to talk a bit about that, you don't...?

**SC:** Err yeah, not, not particularly for this interview, I don't particularly yeah.

**RR:** OK

**SC:** But just to say that I came out in 1982, and it again, may not be true for, and it's never true for all lesbians and gay men, but I came out into a very political environment and my social life was sort of around that. Not that I stopped my other social life as well which was going to gigs and seeing my straight friends and stuff, but that and my lesbian life was very politicised. I mean not in a way that I particularly agreed with necessarily, I thought a lot of it was quite factional sectarian and a bit divertary from the true struggle which was to bring socialism to the masses, but anyway. But yeah that's how things were then and the GLC supported a lot of those issues, you know very explicitly which is one of the reasons why they got abolished, and funded a lot of gay projects which had political objectives and identifications, just as they've supported black and Irish organisations as well, and invited Sinn Féin to speak when they're a banned organisation etc. etc. all the famous sorts of things. So that was all going on there then.

**RR:** And am I right in saying that you were one of the original members of the kind of Stonewall Housing collective?

**SC:** Yes I was one of the first two workers, I wasn't around for the start of the organisation, and hopefully you'll interview or have interviewed people who were.

**RR:** It would actually be [12:48 IA]?

**SC:** Yeah I mean I can give you them, I don't know where they are but you might be able to track them down. So the couple of people that I remember is Martin Jones, but I have no idea where he is now, but he was ... so there was a management committee, they'd set themselves up as a charity or certainly a sort of legal entity and I think that was ... and again, other interviewees might tell you and the records would tell you actually...

[End of Part 1]

[Part 2]

**SC:** ... I think that was around <prff> '82/83. And another person who was involved ... there were quite a lot of people involved in housing, and actually I worked in housing which was how I came to work for Stonewall. And another person who was quite a leading light was somebody called Cliff Prior, who I think or used to work for ... an organisation that used to be The National Schizophrenia Fellowship but has now got a new name, which I'll remember at some point and will let you have later. He might be quite easy to track down 'cause he's a sort of bigwig in housing still, in supported housing mental health.

**RR:** OK. I'm going to rewind a little bit just for you to tell me about your working life from when you moved here to London after Reading and how you got into housing and how you've ended up at Stonewall Housing. You don't have to [0:58 IA].

**SC:** Yeah well I did, I had no real idea about what I wanted to do when I left college, but I realised I needed to do something. So I'd done quite a lot of social and economic history and I was quite interested in the growth of welfare state so I thought I might do something in that line, so it was kind of housing or health and it was a bit of a toss up which one I'd go into, and health administration ... not being a doctor. And so I just got a job for a housing association, a temporary job for a housing association in North London, which I really liked actually 'cause it was in Hackney and it was right around the corner from where I worked and it was just, you know, my sort of home turf. And housing associations then were, 'cause they're really big organisations now and get, I mean they deliver the bulk of social housing in this country, but then they were still sort of quite rooted in the values that are driven, which was people with philanthropic values or local people who were just very concerned about slum clearance, as it was called then or the really poor standards of housing. And so housing associations sort of grew up and there were quite a few of them in places like Hackney and what have you, and I started working for one of those and I really enjoyed it, mostly I think 'cause I enjoyed the people that I worked with and one of them is still a really good friend now. And then you needed a qualification to get on in housing, a sort of job related one, and I started doing this day-release thing and I found it really

boring, and you could do an MA in Social Admin as you can now, a social policy, and I thought oh I might do that instead. And I was just very lucky, I applied and I got a fully funded <chuckles> I got a SRC Scholarship for a year to do a fully funded fulltime Social Policy MA.

So I did that and then after I'd done that I decided I didn't really want to go back into fulltime work so I went to America for a couple of months and spent all my pension money on that. And then I came back and got a job for a couple of years in a second hand record shop which was all I was really interested in, valuing second hand records at Record and Tape Exchange, which is still around in various manifestations. And I did...

**RR:** Was that Notting Hill or?

**SC:** Yeah I worked in Notting Hill and they started a shop in Camden which I was one of the first people to start working there. So that was kind of interesting, a lot of it was quite tedious but you get a lot of free records and you get to go on the guest list for lots of gigs, so there was lots of up sides, and it was very well paid and I only had to work part time. And I got into a sort of housing co-op because I needed somewhere to live and joined a housing co-op, it was a lesbian and gay one called April in Hackney. And it was a do it yourself one, basically the local authority would give us houses that they were waiting to do up and they were just waiting for government funding to do it, and they didn't want to leave them empty 'cause they'd get squatted or stripped ou, so they would give them to a constituted housing co-op and we'd have to do them up ourselves. And we would only be there for six months or 12 months or a couple of years, and I quite liked that, I didn't so much like the co-op meetings and all that sort of thing, but I'm quite practical and I quite liked doing that side of things, and I wanted to live in that part of Hackney so that was quite good.

So after I worked in the record shop for a couple of years that kind of waned inevitably as, you know, you can have too many sweets, can't you? And I thought I better get back to doing a proper job. So I went to work for another housing co-op in Islington and did that for a couple of years, and then as a result of that I got the job at Stonewall 'cause I had basically housing experience, so I had three years or so by then.

**RR:** And what was your title when you were first employed by Stonewall?

**SC:** I think, there were two of us and we were ... I'm not even sure we worked fulltime, this is quite a long time ago. So this was 1980 ... actually I should've thought about this more, it's probably 1983 or 4 and I have a feeling that they'd only got the money from GLC for one post and they decided to employ two people on a job share. In fact I'm sure 'cause I remember carrying on doing the housing co-op job as well for a bit.

[End of Part 2]

[Part 3]

**SC:** And we were called Development Workers and the idea was that they got that funding for the post from the GLC and they got the office, which was famously in the Lesbian and Gay Centre in Cowcross Street, which you might've heard something about?

**RR:** Yes

**SC:** Denise might've said something about it.

**RR:** You can tell me more about that.

**SC:** Mm. And our jobs ... I'll come onto that in a minute 'cause it did affect the workings of the organisation and distracted us into things that weren't really to do with housing. But the idea for myself and Fiona Graff, who's the other person, I have no idea where she is now, is that we would go out and negotiate with housing associations to get hostels, as they were termed then. So the housing association owns the hostel or house, Stonewall was never going to do that at the time, but they'd find one for us, they'd do it up to our specification and then they'd give us the management agreement so we would manage it, and the government grant that came with the house and the people would be split between Stonewall and Circle 33 and what have you. So that was Fiona and my job to do to go out and get these houses, and sort the agreements out and set the houses up. And we also had to do advocacy work around the housing needs of young lesbians and gay men 'cause that was what the organisation is/was about, and Stonewall obviously wasn't going to be able to house every young lesbian and gay man who needed housing. So we also had a sort of promotion job to talk to other housing providers and try and ... which I'm sure ... still goes on, get them to take this group of people's housing seriously and provide housing for them and make sure that their support needs were dealt with. So it was a twin job. And then I can't really remember how long we did that for, I think it might've been about 18 months/two years, and then we got the houses and they were brought into management. So the organisation sort of shift into a managing role and the jobs changed into hostel workers essentially, and Fiona went and I stayed and then Denise and Casey and various other people came along and there were more of us.

**RR:** Tell me a little bit about the kind of the scale of the numbers of people that needed the services then that Stonewall was offering.

**SC:** I don't know, I can't remember numbers and it was always difficult to survey that sort of group because a lot of people don't want to be identified and what have you. But there had been a piece of research done and the people who set up the organisation, a lot of them had worked in West End Street Advice Agency. So they worked with street homes and they'd worked with the big hostel providers which is where the young people that we, not all of them, but it was where some of the young people that we perceived needed housing and went on to house, ended up on the streets of the West End because they'd run away from home or they came out of care or etc. etc. They didn't know where else to go so they inevitably were attracted by the West End – it's not a really good place to be if you're 16 and gay and you're on your own. So that group of people had, they'd done some sort of research which convinced the GLC that there was a need and it needed to be dealt with by a gay organisation. But as to the scale I couldn't tell you what numbers were, I mean we ... I don't remember ever having problems filling the spaces – sometimes we had problems convincing the existing residents to accept people but that was a different matter, that was about people living communally and what have you. But yeah we could always find people, and we could always find people through the West End agencies by and large, but then increasingly as Stonewall got established we would get referrals from

local authority direct, so from Enfield, so kids from Enfield would present at the local authority and say, 'I need housing.' And what have you, so it wouldn't all come from the West End.

**RR:** And making those links with local authorities and kind of that advocacy side of your work, was that fairly easy to kind of form those links at the time?

**SC:** It depended on the local authority, so some councils were famously identified at the time as being, well Islington flew a red flag over the town hall at various periods during the 80s, as I think Sheffield and other councils did. So some councils put themselves ... Haringey was another one, Lambeth was another one, so some councils put themselves out there and were very much lined up with the GLC against the Tory Government, and we were just getting to grips with equal opportunities in all sorts of ways. So although every council officer in Islington was by no means gay friendly, and culturally sensitive, and all those other issues, there would be people there. So they'd started to employ, like the GLC did, they started to employ equalities officers, they started to do equal opportunities training. So there were people within those local authorities who you could go to and it was very easy to identify them and you'd often know who they were because they were quite often gay as well.

So there was that sort of thing going on, but then there were other councils ... I mean this has all changed now because of legislation, but there were other councils who Westminster, Kensington Chelsea for example who were very conservative authorities and were very ... I mean not necessarily hostile but very resistant to the fact ... they didn't recognise that lesbian and gay people had any special needs at all. And inevitably I think, although nobody ever said it to me, and this will be true of officers and the Labour Authorities as well 'cause they're not all enlightened by any means. There's no doubt that there was a fear amongst some heterosexual and possibly actually some gay council officers and politicians, that a gay housing organisation was a bit of a hot potato because of that unfortunate link that there always is with gay young people, paedophilia etc. etc. particularly around men. And this idea that ... 'cause some of the people we're dealing with were inevitably under 18 and remember age consent was 21 as well for gay men, still, that they were breaching their statutory and moral responsibilities to those young people by putting them in a gay environment, even though those young people had identified as gay or bisexual and said that they wanted to be in such an environment. So there was a lot of ... I'm not saying the equality legislation has made things any eas ... necessarily cleared things up, but 'cause there was no protection for lesbians and gay men then and there was a lot of inexperience and uncertainty, and there was the age of consent issue, and then later on there was Section 28 which was a huge issue, it really did hamper our work, and of course it directly affected the lives of the people that we were dealing with as well.

So the way it worked was there would be a core of people around London, who you could trust, and you could work well with, and who would get you resources and through him referrals could come. But by and large the rest of the housing and local authority world was very uncertain and not particularly convinced of the need for something like Stonewall.

**RR:** The first project to open, were you around for the opening of that?

**SC:** Mm



**RR:** Was that Tufnell Park as well?

**SC:** Mm

**RR:** Tell me a little bit about that.

**SC:** What I remember. <Pause> Yeah that house was split into flats I think, 'cause there was Tufnell Park and Tollington Park which were the two that were in management when I was there and another couple in development. So I think that was three, two, three or four flats, yes it was as I remember, and there were big issues about how we were going to manage them, about whether we were going to have women only and male only flats. And as I remember it just really depended. I think we agreed that we'd have one of, [9:33] would have one of each, one for women and one for men ... but it pretty much depended on the people who were living there about what they wanted. The organisation itself was not particularly separatist, I don't think anybody I worked with as a hostel worker was separatist in any way, so we were kind of whatever was right for the people that we were working with was right for us, we didn't ... we had issues in the staff team about various things but the way we looked at the housing needs was, it's whatever worked.... And a lot of it actually was about personalities, so you really had to try and work to get ... find the best combination of people to work together. Communal housing is never easy but a lot of the young people we were dealing with were quite, you know had a really bad time, hadn't lived away from their families or out of an institution before. So if you're working with any group of 16 to 25-year-olds, I mean you know, it can be students, they can be a nightmare 'cause they're just learning to live responsibly, but when a lot of them had a really tough time it wasn't easy.

So I just remember a lot of stuff going on around ... that you'd get in any hostel actually, just trying to manage the people who were living there and their needs and issues, and the washing up <chuckles> etc. A lot of it was quite banal actually, and people stealing each other's post or keeping each other up at night, I mean just.... We didn't actually do a lot of the counselling, we tried ... so the idea of the organisation was that we would provide the housing and by-and-large the people who worked for the organisation at that time, I mean it's probably changed since, but we saw ourselves as housing providers, but sympathetic housing providers. And then where people had other needs, which by-and-large they did, counselling, or drug, or alcohol, or whatever it was, or health, we would help to get them the right help and then manage that. So almost like a sort of case manager in a way, so we'd make sure that they went to see their counsellor or they took their medication, all that kind of thing, but that wasn't what our area of experience was.

**RR:** And you were based in the hostel?

**SC:** No, we didn't have a hostel office, that was outside, I remember it being three separate flats. And the design for that was set before I went there, but that was the sort of model that you had in supported housing at the time, and it didn't work that well all the time. And one of the issues that we noticed was that we needed to be there more often, and of course we didn't have a hostel office, well they didn't then, they might've changed it since. So the second house, Tollington Park, which was very much designed as a hostel, although it wasn't a terribly big one, we had both a hostel office and also because of some of the issues we were having with the people we were housing we ... I

don't think there was meant to be a sleepover space, but we decided that we needed a rota to do sleepovers because we were having quite a few issues with some of the people we were housing and they needed to be managed a bit more closely. And that way at Tollington Park we could take people with higher care support needs as well, 'cause they were needing to be ... and I think we'd had to turn people away from Tufnell Park 'cause we knew we wouldn't be able to deal with them if they were too needy and we'd just send them to a straight hostel which wasn't a great thing.

I mean I think actually when I ... I'm reasonably sure, I mean it sounds paranoid now, but I'm reasonably sure that when we decided we needed the sleepover space at Tollington Park I think there was some unease on the part of some of the local authorities and the housing association people we were dealing with, again about this age consent and having older male workers in a house, sleeping in a house with 16-year-old gay men etc. But I mean we just would ... we were very assertive as you have to be, so we just said, 'No this is...' But I seem to remember a legal opinion had to be got at some point about this issue, I'm sure it did, that might have been by the first group of people who employed us even, they saw that issue coming. It seems mad now but anyway.

**RR:** [14:07] look at it now.

**SC:** Well yeah, I mean and things ... the clock can always go back, can't it? But yeah.

**RR:** And the office at Cowcross Street, tell me about that.

**SC:** Oh that office, yeah well, god I was like a lamb to slaughter. I mean I thought I was pretty politically hardened by that time, you know running round the streets of London, but god that was ... I mean I just think it was a nightmare actually.

**RR:** That was the first office you worked for?

**SC:** Yeah, yeah it was. So we had that, we took that office I think the sort of week the centre opened, and it was all funded by the GLC. And it's a really nice building, actually I've occasionally gone back there now for meetings 'cause it's offices still. And it had lots of facilities at the centre and it was going to be a shiny, bright new place where every lesbian and gay man could go and...

[End of Part 3]

[Part 4]

... within weeks I think it was running into all sorts of political quagmires, so there were big issues. I mean there were whole issues that were created by one of the [0:11] ... some lesbians didn't like using the building because it was shared with gay men – I don't think some of the gay men liked sharing a space with lesbians either. So it was coming both ways but the women would politicise it, even though they might've just had the same personal feelings about the other side and the game ended. There was a whole issue at the time about S&M and S&M regalia, I mean as there always is, so there was a lot of discussion about sexuality in the lesbian and gay community. And this was ... we moved into that office it must've been '84 and there was a lot of

discussion going on about sexuality and the right of people to define their sexuality in various ways. So a lot of people ... and I actually think I naively did think this for a while and then I realise how stupid it was. That there was something sort of pure and good about being gay and that we were all going to have very non-oppressive relationships and our sexual conduct would be beyond reproach and that we were free of all the sort of squalor and what have you that heterosexuals could get themselves into. I mean gay relationships, well they are different to straight relationships, but a lot of the same things happen and ... but there was this sort of expectation that we would all be much better. But amongst some lesbians and gay men, and as there are now, I mean some people were very explicit about their sexual practice and said that it would include S&M practices. And it became a sort of stand off, so I mean I think there must've been a group ... I seem to remember there was a group who identified as people who practise S&M, who used the centre, or wanted to meet in the centre, or wanted to have some function in the centre. And this just set a load of people off and there was a ... there was just a lot of confrontation about it, and there were pickets and there was just ... going to work was just, I mean it was just a joke sometimes. Because what would happen is there were other organisations in the building, Hall-Carpenter was in the building at the same time, and I actually knew the Hall-Carpenter people really well, I still do some of them, and we sort of shared a common understanding and opinion and we got very tired of the whole thing 'cause both our projects just wanted to get on with our job. But there were other organisations in the building, there was a theatre group, and then there were various people employed to run the centre, and there was a management committee for the centre itself and there was just all sorts of arguments going on between all these groups of people about who should use the centre, what they'd be allowed to do there, what they'd be allowed to wear, should people be allowed to wear studded belts, I'm not joking, because it was felt as seen to be saying something about...

**RR:** [3:12 IA]

**SC:** Yeah. Leather jackets at one point, and god you know we all, we all have them. And it was just mad. And so you'd go to work and yet people would try and get you in a corner to discuss the latest thing that had happened, and first of all it was kind of a bit exciting but then within a few weeks it just wore down. I mean I do remember actually in a slightly ill-advisably... I would say that wouldn't I, but the woman I worked with was a separatist, I mean I'd say she was, she might not ... as I found her, she wouldn't necessarily say that was what she was. But she was quite upset by all this, I mean because of things that had happened to her in her early life I think, and she did think that we should take a stand, and it was part of the organisation's role to take a stand. And I did actually agree with that for a while because I ... I don't know, I mean I felt quite confused about it. I mean I think that was the wrong thing to do it in retrospect, but there's no doubt that some of the people who were using the centre around that time were quite heavy, I mean it became, because there was a bit of a stand off, so there were people who had become quite provocatively dressed and that would worry other people. And there was a kind of slight, again, and this was because The National Front had been quite active in London in the 70s and early 80s, there was some confusion around gay skinheads as well, and also there were men who had very short hair. In fact one of the workers in the centre did and he was a skinhead, I mean he dressed as one, he wore the sort of DMs that go right up to your knees and very short levis. I mean he would say, 'I'm a gay skinhead, I'm not

like them.' But other people, including some black users, and I thought myself, if you saw him on the street you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. And I wasn't sure that that was a place that we should be ... I mean we didn't actually bring young people to the place 'cause it was just an administrative office, we didn't have anywhere to interview them and what you, and we by-and-large used the housing agencies and the housing associations as I remember, to interview people until we got the hostel office at Tollington Park. But I think that for a while the organisation was dragged into an area that wasn't strictly about housing young lesbians and gay men, but it was very much a kind of political climate and it was partly created by being a GLC funded organisation, which did politicise you 'cause everything about the GLC felt very political.

I'll just finish off with one thing. So then there used to be separate Pride marches and you could go on the Gay Pride March but women had a separate one which was called Lesbian Strength or Lesbian Shame as some of us like to call it. And it was very small, it was really <chuckles> small, and it'd be surrounded by police and people would be yelling at you and it was really quite unpleasant but it was kind of a trial of strength, you just felt it was something you had to do. So one year it ended up at The Lesbian and Gay Centre, but what happened was, the march, and it would only be like a-couple-of-hundred women, we got there and there was already a picket on the door of women who'd got there ahead and said, 'You can't go into this place because it's full of people wearing S&M regalia and they look like Nazis because they've got Dr. Martens on!' And it was just bonkers, it was just really bonkers. But anyway, it was bonkers, that was what it was like then and that's what it felt like you had to be like if you were lesbian and gay. That said, there were thousands of lesbians and gay men living in London at that time who weren't involved in that sort of thing at all.

**RR:** So how was the outside world, like people who worked at the GLC, who funded it or housing association, or external people, how did they respond to what was going on?

**SC:** I don't think they really understood it, and I don't ... because there wasn't ... the media was much more contained then, so now if that sort of thing happened or when things happen you can get it instantly on the internet, and so people can sit at their desk and just tap in whatever. So that sort of thing would be on the web really quickly and there was far more news media as well and they would pick up on it. But it didn't really get outside, I don't think it got leaked outside the community, I think it was in the *Pink Paper* but apart from that nobody covered it, and nobody understood it, I mean they just ... they wouldn't be able to, yeah. So I think it was quite self contained. That said, I'm sure there's a whole history of lesbian and gay centres to be recorded and written, and the experience of the people who were actually involved in managing and working at the centre might be very different, and they said, 'Oh it 'caused all sorts of problems and what have you externally.' But I don't think it did.

We generally went to see ... if we wanted to see somebody about Stonewall, we generally went to them, and that was only 'cause we had a very small office actually, I mean it wasn't much bigger than this space here and it was kind of easy to have meetings in. And actually there were issues about the door being locked sometimes and what have you, so you couldn't necessarily

get visitors in, so we didn't invite many straight people for work, we'd go to see them.

**RR:** How many people were in the office?

**SC:** Only two of us.

**RR:** Oh OK

**SC:** And then Denise ... Alex ... I think were the first to hostel workers, and they ... we were there for a while together, when we were even more crowded. So I think there could've been three or four of us in that office at one time and then we sort of de-camped to Tollington Park and used that space pretty much.

**RR:** And when did you leave that place?

**SC:** I left in '88 and I went to work for Patchwork Community Housing Association which was a much bigger shared supported housing organisation, so that housed hundreds of people across London, young single people, people with special needs. It housed gay people as well, lots of the workers were gay and we housed ... there was special houses, particular houses for lesbians and gay men, there were houses for people with HIV and AIDS and houses for ex-offenders, so it was a continuation of the sort of work I've been doing at Stonewall.

**RR:** And thinking about the impact of Stonewall Housing as an organisation, I mean did you follow the organisation after you left really or not?

**SC:** Yeah 'cause I was on the management committee for a couple of years so I did and I still continued to know people who worked there. So I did and we took referrals when I was at Patchwork although I didn't work in housing management I worked on development and we took people from Stonewall. So yes I did follow it but not until ... I gave up in, yeah in about 1990/91 and then a couple of years later I went to help start Polari Housing Association, which has just wound up because we had our winding up even this week which was quite nice, and strange because <chuckles> you've come to interview me this week. So I carried on being very involved in lesbian and gay housing up until about '98 but then I left housing.

**RR:** OK. And what kind of changes have you witnessed in your time from your first job in housing, in particular relation to the LGBT community, over the years?

**SC:** Well I mean homophobia is not dead at all and people still have terrible experiences, both at the hands of their family and friends, and at the hands of people who are supposedly there to help, like housing providers and health providers. But ... I think things have changed for the better in the last 20-odd years and that's reflected in legislation, so I think the equalities legislation is really important in that respect because even though you can't change what's going on in people's minds, the fact that the law is there to protect us is really, really important. And the other changes in the law, so I think the age consent was a really big ... was really important for anybody working with young gay people and for young gay people themselves. So yeah I think that ... I think that Stonewall helped raise the profile ... convince some people, enough people there was a need. And we always knew that we would never be able

to house everybody who needed housing, but it was this thing about creating a climate that other housing providers, like Patchwork for example, would pick up other people and house them and I think that happened. I mean maybe not always that successfully 'cause I don't think necessarily being gay means that you can do your job, you'll automatically do your job well, but I do think that it is important to have gay workers in projects that are dealing with gay people because there is a sense of empathy and understanding, not about everything 'cause it depends on your background and your experience.

But it felt really, I think for a lot of the young people who came to us it was important that they were coming to a gay place with gay workers who were quite confident about being gay, 'cause you had to be very confident about who you were – I mean we're not all 100% confident about who we are all the time, but you had to be prepared to go out there and do that. And actually that's a pressure that I think people underestimate. In fact I was talking to somebody this week at the Polari event who works for a gay project called Kairos in Westminster. And she was saying that was one of the things that surprised her about the job when she went to it, that actually it's quite a pressure being a public gay person all the time, and no matter how confident and sussed you think you are it still is a pressure. Because you're always having to be out there and be positive and be assertive and you might have to do deal with people who are quite reluctant and you really wonder what they're thinking. So that's a side of it, and that still happens today, that's still true. But I think Stonewall was part of a huge shift in culture in this country that has happened over the last 20-odd years, so just part of it.... I think GLC was very important.

**RR:** So tell me about what happened, not just with Stonewall Housing, but organisations like it, where the GLC was abolished [14:54].

**SC:** Well it left us without a funding stream, and this is always a problem, I work for a charity now and it's always a problem finding funders who will fund your core costs which is your heat, and light, and office costs, and employing people who are not doing new and special projects. 'Cause funders, you can get funders to come and fund new exciting things that they can put their name to, but they don't really like the dull old business of funding everyday work. So when the GLC went it was a huge loss because a lot of organisations like ours, all sorts of organisations, we lost our core funding.

**RR:** And what year was this?

**SC:** That was '88 I think. And organisations closed over night as a result, well they knew they were going to but they just couldn't maintain and they just wouldn't be the sort of organisation who could find other funding, for various reasons. But we were luckier because we were then ... because we had houses open and in management, and had for a couple of years or so, we were able to, so our management costs were built into the funding that we were getting from, then it was the Housing Corporation, so we were able to carry on but it wasn't particularly easy. And the other thing that happened when the GLC was abolished was it allowed ... I mean the government abolished the GLC because they could and 'cause they didn't like it, and that was around the time of Section 28 as well, so there was a real backlash against the liberal and socialists left as the government perceived it, and they didn't like all these minority groups answering back, and they didn't like them getting government funding to do what they were doing and promote their cause. So one) the

money went, and two) it felt instantly you were in a much more hostile environment and there wasn't a champion which we'd had in the GLC. And not just Ken Livingstone, but also a lot of other GLC councillors and a lot of very senior officers in the GLC were quite enlightened, and progressive and would champion black, and gay, and Irish and women's' groups and the needs of those communities, and that just went over night, I mean it was replaced by other things 'cause all those people had to go somewhere and of course Ken reappeared later on. But it felt like it was quite a ... I mean other people might disagree but I think it was quite a serious thing to happen and it took a while to recover from that, and as I say some organisations and services disappeared over night.

**RR:** And in particular, 'cause obviously at that same time there was a ... well it probably linked to the big backlash towards gay communities 'cause of HIV and AIDS; how did that impact on your day-to-day work?

I Well it did impact, I mean early on I don't ... it's really interesting and we didn't know much more than <chuckles> the people we were trying to help and some of the people who were sort of the unconvinced people out there. Because it took a while to understand HIV and AIDS and there was, yeah there was a huge ... it was a really big thing and it allowed ... it was just another element of the hostility towards lesbian and gay men. I mean it was very much directed at gay men and I think, I mean not that it doesn't affect women, but I mean it wasn't ... I think that lesbians knew quite early on that it wasn't a transmission issue for lesbians unless they slept with ... unless they were bisexual or drug users. But it was a huge issue for gay men, it created a lot of fear and hostility in the straight community and just as a gay organisation we were caught up in that. And that was part of the ... I was talking about this kind of reluctance amongst some local authority officers and housing associations to ... they didn't feel that we should, you know that young lesbians and gay men should come to us because they felt that they were morally responsible and they weren't doing the right thing. I think there was a fear that there was, not so much in our houses there was a risk of HIV, but that we were supporting their choices but that would bring them into contact with HIV and AIDS. So it was a difficult thing and as I say, I don't think we really knew much about it, not as much as people know now, although a lot of people still don't seem to know very much about it but that's 'cause they just obviously can't read or don't want to read the information that's there for them. And the government had ... I think they've shown some of these again recently, they had these really heavy handed sex education campaigns, there was the one about the iceberg and they were just terrifying actually, I mean they terrified me before I sort of understood it properly.

So it was this terrible climate of fear, but that said it was a huge thing when it happened, I mean suddenly a lot of people in America started dying and nobody knew why. But it wasn't the only issue and I wouldn't ... it wasn't something that preoccupied us day and night, it was just one of many things. I mean people were homophobic before AIDS came along and they're homophobic now, even though people know that the risk of transmission is incredible low. And actually the people who really suffer from HIV and AIDS are people in Sub-Saharan Africa and it's a completely different set of issues. But yeah I think it did create a climate, contribute to a climate of fear and I think it did ... certainly actually I would say that one of the things about GLC disappearing and funding being quite difficult to raise, I think for us as well as other gay groups. So a lot of charities get their money from charitable funders

who are independent, set up by people who have got a lot of money and want to do the right thing, and certainly some of those charities were really good and have always stood out against, you know for the right thing. But it did mean that there were some funders that we knew we would never be able to go to, whereas the supported housing project down the road who might deal with alcohol users, for example, would be able to go to that funder and get loads of money. And I think it was, yeah about being gay, but also the whole thing about HIV and AIDS at the time meant people were like, 'Oh my god, I don't want to go near them!' Even if they thought it was actually OK for them to fund us they wouldn't want the publicity associated with it because there was some ... we did have some publicity, negative publicity, which I think the records, the cuttings are there still, and *The Evening Standard* hasn't changed today.

*The Evening Standard* waged a campaign against the GLV, a very concerted campaign, and they would look at every ... they would use any excuse to get at the GLC and people associated with the GLC like Livingston. And Stonewall was caught up in that and we were in the *Standard* I think a couple of times, and it was a bit like, shock horror, 'My god, look what the GLC's funding now! They're providing, they're letting older and lesbian and gay people lure in young lesbians and gay men who might not even be lesbian and gay and they're just going to convince them they are.' And all that sort of stuff.

**RR:** Do you think your work at Stonewall Housing at that time kind of took your career somewhere or shaped you individually in any way?

**SC:** Yeah I think, I mean I'd be a ... I'm glad I did it, you know not just for myself, I mean I think it was a good thing to do. And yes it did, I mean I carried on working in what's called, was then called supported housing, housing for people with care and support needs, I carried on doing that work up until about 1995/96, so yeah I worked in that field for about 13 years or so. And it's important work to do and there's ... even though I didn't work for a gay organisation again, I think my experience at Stonewall where we had to deal with a lot of issues in a very politicised environment, and we, although we didn't particularly house a lot of people, I think ... 'cause when we had Tufnell and Tollington open it can't have been more than about 20 people we were housing, we drew ... and actually the workers as well, we drew from an incredibly diverse group of people. So everybody may have been lesbian and gay, bisexual or transgendered, but people came from different communities, different racial backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds, different parts of the country. So I dealt with a lot of issues of difference and I think that was a really useful grounding for the sort of work I went on to do later on, which was again dealing with a diverse set of needs and respecting those differences.

**RR:** And what is housing like now in 2009 with regards to special needs?

**SC:** I don't really know 'cause I don't work in it anymore, but from what I do know from a couple of people that do work in it, and the reason Polari wound itself up, which I know is not Stonewall, but I think the feeling is is that although it's quite commercially driven because the housing associations have to ... they don't get as much government subsidy as they used to and so they have to make ... it's often about the bottom line and rents were quite high in social housing and what have you, they do meet a very wide range of people's needs, not always that well but I mean they do try. And the reason why Polari



wound itself up, and I know Stonewall's still going and obviously needs to keep going, is that the people who ran Polari felt ... and it was a very small organisation, it only had one-and-a-half paid workers, but they mostly did research and advocacy and they never actually wanted to own or manage property like Stonewall does. And the thing that Polari did was just about raising the needs of older lesbians and gay men with care and housing providers, and they felt after 10/12 years that they'd done their job and that there were other organisations in that field, for example, Age Concern and Help The Aged who do take that on as part of their everyday work. Again, it depends, it varies depending on where you are and the commitment to the people involved in that particular branch or area, but there is a much wider acceptance that there are lesbian and gay people amongst the people who need services and they have some special needs, particular needs. So it's much more mainstream now, and that said I think for young people it might be quite, you know I'm sure that there's still a need for a lesbian and gay organisation, for some lesbians and gay people. But it has made a difference generally I think, but as I say, it's set against other changes like equalities legislation and other campaign organisations like Stonewall the campaigning organisation, I mean they've done an awful lot and changed things.

**RR:** I think that's great, it's been an hour actually.

**SC:** OK, that's fine yeah.

**RR:** Yeah fantastic, that was great.

[End of interview]