

Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

Interviewee: Carla Clarke

Interviewer: Mark Hutin

Place of Interview: Galop Offices, Islington, London

Date: 27th July 2009

Files: Galop Carla Clarke interviewed by Mark Hutin, part 1-7

Key

MH: = Interviewer, Mark Hutin

CC: = Interviewee, Carla Clarke

[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

MH: This is the interview for the Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project. Today's date is Monday the 27th of July 2009. The time is 1PM. The location is the Galop Office in Islington, London. My name is Mark Hutin, MARK, surname HUTIN, and I today am interviewing Carla Clarke. Carla spelt CARLA, and Clarke spelt CLARKE.

Could I start Carla by asking you your date of birth?

CC: 17/12/57.

MH: And where were you born?

CC: London.

MH: Great.

<End of Part 1>

MH: I'm just going to start off by asking you a bit about your background, your childhood, where you grew up and so on. So could you tell me a bit about your childhood and beginnings?

CC: On reflection, very disturbing because I met my family, i.e. my siblings, after the age of two. So I wasn't aware of them.

MH: OK, and where did you grow up?

CC: Camden Town and Kilburn.

MH: OK, so you've lived in London all your life?

CC: Yes.

MH: OK, so tell me a bit about growing up in Camden Town, what it was like?

CC: Growing up was very easy because all I basically did was watch television, because we were one of the few people that had television, to occupy them,

and it also helped my mother greatly because she spent most of the time in the kitchen.

MH: OK, and what about schooling and stuff?

CC: School, not much good because in junior school we moved every time to a new address.

MH: Right, OK. So thinking about your life as a teenager and growing up, could you tell me a bit about what London was like for you then?

CC: I suppose realistically it was just about alright, although racism did exist very much so. But as a teenager with friends you avoid the obvious areas that may lead to potential trouble. So didn't really do anything out of the ordinary, by saying that, we played football and general sport, albeit that I didn't actually want to because I wasn't quite aware of my inner self.

MH: So when did you begin to become aware of your inner self?

CC: I would say when I started going through puberty, my early teens.

MH: Right and what happened then?

CC: I don't know for sure, but I certainly felt completely different from the others, and I didn't really want to join in and do the things most boys do. I preferred to stay in more so than not.

MH: OK, so who did you seek advice from, who did you talk to?

CC: At the time, there was no one to talk to. That also included my eldest who I could say yes, we were good friends. But I did not feel I could really approach him, or anyone else in the family about the way I felt, so I suffered unnecessarily, unfortunately. If I knew all the outlets now back then, then things might well have been a hell of a lot different.

MH: Yes. So at what point did you talk to somebody about trans issues?

CC: Trans issues, around about 2000.

MH: Oh so very recently?

CC: Yes.

MH: OK, and what brought you to that point, how did you ...

CC: Because my inner feelings needed serious investigation, because I felt more and more feminine, the more I thought about it, the more things wanted to come out. And was really something now that I was really, in effect, stupid to suppress, but again, with hindsight, it's easy to say. But then it was not quite the same.

MH: So nine years on from that, do you feel you've made progress and ...

CC: In all reality, the answer's no. Some people will, needless to say, say differently. But what I feel, what I am, where I'm going still remains very much the same, as I was basically, when I first came out. By saying that, I really do

not view change and this it is some form of an achievement and that can only be physical change. It doesn't matter that I used to be homeless, I used to sleep in the car and now I have my own flat and that in itself has created problems. So progress is not really something that I see.

MH: Right OK. Well thinking about ...

<End of Part 2>

MH: ... thinking about your involvement a bit with Galop, at what time did you, or when did you start volunteering for Galop and why?

CC: I think it must be a year at least and I do it because I need to be involved in society, or if I take that back, find my rightful place in society.

MH: And why Galop, or I mean how did you feel about Galop?

CC: Because my support counsellor mentioned that I should go to them because they are always on the lookout for volunteers. So with that, I looked up the site and filled out the application form and that was that!

MH: So you've been volunteering for about a year then?

CC: Yes, I also volunteer for the Islington Arts Factory as well.

MH: OK.

CC: <Pause> And I also do bits and pieces for Ealing DAIS

MH: For?

CC: Ealing DAIS

MH: Oh OK. So tell me about your volunteering for Islington Arts Factory, what do you do then?

CC: It's quite simple; I work on reception for the early part of the evening, taking the membership or various courses and dance life drawings, or some of the band practice. And in the second half I help out in the canteen or I do so form of administrative work in the office.

MH: OK, so what sort of volunteering do you do for Galop then?

CC: For Galop, at this moment in time I am building a database for our services for the community.

MH: Fantastic. So thinking about Galop and what it does, in terms of issues at this time for trans people, and the sort of work that Galop does, what's your thoughts in that?

CC: My thoughts are somewhat negative I'm afraid to say, because whilst living in Southall, I used to be abused on a daily basis, by the public. When I was finally persuaded to make a report, the response back from the police was very slow and when they finally contacted me I had already moved out of the area!

MH: When you say very slow, how slow?

CC: It took from a month, or perhaps more.

MH: Right OK. So how do you feel Galop's work is helping, would help to improve that?

CC: I felt that the letters that they wrote were quite informative and true to the point. So therefore I would recommend it to the trans community who I meet up with on a monthly basis, and the phone call and the odd email.

MH: Right.

<End of Part 3>

MH: So just coming back to the issue of being trans, what do you think are the dominant issues about being trans in London?

CC: Being able to find the individual's own self identity, belief and confidence in the role that they tending to portray.

MH: OK, thank you. Well thinking about the impact of Galop, could you tell me about the impact of Galop's work on you, I think you've already mentioned a little bit, both as a volunteer and as an agency that has helped?

CC: Myself in particular, it has helped me no end to recover some of my self confidence in working in an office environment which I used to do for 30 odd years. I went through a spell of, how should I say, self seclusion from society, which also included working as well and through working here and also the factory. My confidence is beginning to come back to compared to what it was a year ago.

MH: Fantastic. And what do you think Galop's impact is on the LGBT community?

CC: It is, I would say, an organisation which does not apply pressure to individuals or other groups, I would say that, yes.

MH: Excellent. And ...

<End of Part 4>

MH: So Carla, could you tell me a bit about the changes that you've witnessed for the LGBT community over the decades if you like, do you feel things have improved or stayed the same, or what?

CC: Things have improved in some areas. But others still remain very much unchanged. Most probably because society does not really understand the meaning of transgender, because it's been said to me many times in conversation with the public after our monthly meetings when I say that I'm trans, 'oh you're a transvestite?' Which to me means they have no real understanding of the word and what it means to an individual like me.

MH: So I'd take it that that is an area that you feel hasn't changed very much?

CC: Yes.

MH: And what do you think needs to happen to make that change?

CC: I think really the trans community has to broaden its horizons.

MH: What do you mean by that?

CC: By saying that, though we meet in a public place, perhaps it would be better if we increased the frequency of such meetings, and perhaps have a greater voice within the community in general.

MH: OK, so having a greater presence if you like?

CC: Yes.

MH: And then people would understand more by seeing ...

CC: Yes, and obviously having more trans-friendly venues for socialising.

MH: Right, so do you feel the venues, the sort of all venues aren't very trans-friendly, is that what you're saying?

CC: Not really, albeit as much as there are quite a few, they are more based on sex, rather than just simply, let's say a public house, than George and the Dragon.

MH: Right, and can I ask, looking back on other people I've talked to and interviewed, looking back on the history 25 years ago, it was quite separatist it seems to me, there was a lesbian strength march, there was a gay Pride March, LGBT was very separate, and these days people refer to LGBT. I mean how do you see that? Do you see trans issues and trans people as part of LGBT, or do you think it's quite a different issue?

CC: I think really it is a different issue because collectively transgender people have much more individual goals to strive for. Whereas if grouped with the rest of the community, there is basically no [sound 4:54] within the community, in just LGB, and well maybe T follows afterwards if there's anything left on whatever agenda which is not being covered.

MH: Right, so there's an argument there to having representation of trans people, to have more resources, if you like?

CC: We do have a voice as such, but it is not a particularly strong one in comparison to any others within the umbrella.

MH: Right and you mentioned earlier that some areas have improved. What sort of areas have improved do you think?

CC: The fact now that the rest of the community do take meaningful recognition of us as opposed to even ten years, how we were viewed then.

MH: And how do you think that change has taken place, who has taken the lead to do that?

CC: For me, that is simply a case of dialogue between various transgender support groups and the mainstay of the community, by saying no, press for change, gender trust [drivers 07:01].

MH: Right.

<End of Part 5>

MH: So thinking about the changes in policing, which you might have seen, you may have witnessed towards the LGBT community. You've mentioned it a little bit about policing previously, but do you think there has been any changes, or what do you think, in policing?

CC: In policing I presume there must be, or if there was there would not be so much cooperation that exists now between the community and the police.

MH: OK. And just moving on a bit and thinking about housing issues, could you tell me a little bit about what you think of housing issues in London and with regard to the LGBT community?

CC: I think really that the establishments that they are seem to have one mentality, and they're not diverse in their thinking and they really do need to be because their general criteria for housing needs to be examined properly, and I say that from my own experiences with Ealing Council.

MH: Yes, so could you tell me a bit about that.

CC: Although I had informed them that I was transitioning at the time, I was homeless and living in my last possession, which was my car, they were quite happy for me to be living in my car, told me in simple terms, 'get lost, you are a single man and you are definitely not a priority case!'

MH: So why do they say you're not a priority, did they give you a reason?

CC: Single man, under the age of 50, which for them seemed to be what they wanted to hide behind at every possible excuse every time I came to see the homeless unit, and that also applies to when I used to see them with Stonewall in support. It was a very traumatic time and I did attempt to take my life because one, I could not see a way forward, and two, the lack of insensitivity from the public in general, was not so much public change there, society in general was too much for me.

MH: Obviously a very, very difficult time for you then.

CC: Yes, most certainly.

MH: So how did that get resolved in the end?

CC: When my vehicle tax expired I went to see them again with Stonewall and they decided to put me in a temporary B&B which would have been two years ago now. And I've only just recently come out of the B&B after appealing on the negative decisions against me.

MH: So you're now in a settled place?

CC: Yes, what's annoying about it is the fact that the various individual departments within the council obviously do not communicate with each other. As usual, somebody has to suffer and that somebody was me.

- MH:** So thinking about Stonewall Housing's role in this, how did Stonewall help you?
- CC:** By way of writing letters and also the making of strategic calls to the people that be. If it wasn't for them I may well have taken my life properly, without a shadow of a doubt.
- MH:** So Stonewall Housing has had a very important part to play in your life.
- CC:** Yes, most definitely. I am in debt to them, without saying so.
- MH:** Just thinking about Stonewall's other function which is also to provide housing for LGBT people, in your mind, what's your opinion of the need for a specific housing resource for LGBT people.
- CC:** Really, in today's society it is paramount.
- MH:** So what do you think the rationale is, why is it there do you think?
- CC:** I think really because of the insensitivity of most councils towards the communities, there are definitely more bad ones than good ones for sure. And maybe if you divide it up, maybe North of the river is OK, and South of the river, but the further West you go the worst it gets, at least that's my own experiences, because about from Ealing I also registered with Hillingdon as well, to no avail.
- MH:** Right OK.
- <End of Part 6>
- MH:** Thanks Carla for that. Could you finish off by just saying whatever you feel that you'd like to say to finish off the interview?
- CC:** Well it's quite simply really, I would like to see the trans community have a larger say in community policy strategy or whatever, and the prime example would be Pride.
- MH:** Pride?
- CC:** Yes.
- MH:** So how'd you mean, in terms of ...
- CC:** In terms as much as trans Pride meetings, they do take place, they are not evenly balanced. And really if they were I'm sure this year's Pride would've been different and more exciting for the trans community, rather than the bulk marching and breaking away from the rally. Because last year's pride was good, but this year's Pride, no one to speak for the trans community on stage and no one to play music on stage either, and yet, it's meant to be a rally for everybody and entertainment for everybody as well, which means to me that the trans identity is really masked by the community in general.
- MH:** OK, well thank you very much for that.
- CC:** It's OK.

MH: That's fine.

<End of Part 7>

<End of recording>