

Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

Interviewee: Denise Marshall

Interviewer: Rashid Ramin

Place of Interview: Eve's Housing, Kennington, London

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Key

RR: = Interviewer, Rashid Ramin

DM: = Interviewee, Denise Marshall

[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: Can you just state your date of birth and where you were born?

DM: 12.12.1961, Highbury ... London. <Laughs>

RR: OK Denise, tell me a little bit about yourself and where we are and what you do.

DM: What I do now? I run Eve's which is a women's project that does a number of things actually. We run domestic violence services for women and children escaping abuse, we run the Poppy Project, which is a project I set up which gives support and accommodation to women who've been trafficked into prostitution from all over the world; we run Poppy Research and Development, which produces reports on all issues of violence against women, so we did something called Big Brothel, which was around the sex industry and women being exploited in the sex industry. We did something called Just Representation, which was around women who've been raped and sexually assaulted and their portrayals in the media. We also run Amina, which is a volunteer project for women who work with women who've been raped or sexually assaulted, and it's women, the volunteers are all women who've experienced rape or sexual assault in the past and they work on a one-to-one-to-one basis with women who are currently going through that. And that can be anything, it's quite a practical project so you might go to court with a woman during the court process or you might help a woman get re-housed, or we worked recently on quite a big case where a woman was having trouble dealing with the press who were at her door. She was a victim and we ran interference for her, working with the press. And we've got the Scarlet Centre, which is about to open, which is a centre for women who've experienced any form of gendered violence. So we're quite big and I'm the Chief Executive.

RR: And how long have you been here?

DM: I've been here since 2000. I'm always leaving, but it never happens 'cause new things happen and I like it. So I stay.

RR: Right, we're going to rewind now back to the start. Can you tell me a little bit about your background and your childhood, where you grew up, when you came to London and how you came into this community housing?

DM: Well I come from London, I was born and brought up in Highbury, and I come from a ... I was going to say a very working-class background, but I think they aspired to be working class. I come from an Irish family of migrants who'd come to this country who'd settled in Highbury because that's where Irish people moved at the time, they were all Kilburn, so they settled in Highbury. I grew up there and at that time, 'cause that was the sixties, seventies, there wasn't really any aspirations for working-class girls who came from that area, so I left school at fourteen, two years early, and did waitressing, and went off and ... I was expected to get married. I certainly wasn't expected to become a lesbian! I was expected to marry a brickie or a builder or someone who had good Irish heritage and good Catholic politics, but that wasn't for me. And I worked in a variety of jobs actually, from the age of fourteen, until I was about nineteen or twenty, and I decided to apply for a job in housing. I saw this advert for this job at an organisation that's now defunct called 59 Greek Street, which was a women's hostel that was I think for the women that other hostels wouldn't take. And it was a collective, this was the early eighties, and they decided that they didn't have enough black women or working class women in their collective. It was terribly middle class. And they actually put an ad out that said, 'We welcome applications from black and working class women' so it was hilarious! I thought, 'Alright, I'll try that' and in those days the application form was so bizarre, because it had the normal kind of questions, what have you done, and my answer was not very much to do with housing, I'd done a variety of jobs, but it also said things like 'What are your politics?' And I think I said something like, 'to the left of Lenin but to the right of Stalin' or something very bizarre, I can't actually remember what it was, and they decided on those grounds to give me an interview. Then they decided to employ me as their working-class woman, and also two black women were employed at the same time, which sounds fab but of course they'd made this decision to appoint us but they had absolutely no idea how to give us training. It hadn't occurred to them actually we were being in a sense set up to fail, because we were taken on, three women who didn't have any experience, and were then left to flounder. So I spent a really ... unhappy eighteen months, and I was very young, not being told what to do but being left to do things without knowing and kind of feeling my way through the job, but of course feeling terribly ... I don't know how to put it, low self-esteem, feeling crap really, for quite a long time, and I decided to leave, because I really hated it, but what I did get from it was that actually I really liked working in social care, that I really wanted to do something that meant something. What I really liked was actually working with the service users, and one of the things I realised was I was actually quite good at it. And so I made a decision to go from there to work in a much more traditional housing project, and by then I had the experience, I'd had eighteen months, and I went off to work in a hostel for young offenders, and it was much more structured, they didn't have any politics but it was much more structured and it enabled me to get the experience in a more structured way, which was useful. But it wasn't really floating my boat. It was OK but it was mainly men I was working with, and I wanted to work with both men and women at the time, and it was ... it wasn't very innovative really. It was just clearly providing accommodation until people reoffended and then they were going back to prison, so it seemed to me to be not doing very much.

And then I remember seeing the ad, and I actually was in the bath <laughs> and I was reading The Voice, 'cause everyone read The Voice then, and I was reading The Voice and they always had jobs in The Voice and there was this advertisement for this Stonewall and I can remember wetting the paper and then getting out of the bath and then going 'That's the job that I want. That's what I want to do' and by then I'd had about two-and-a-half years, three years' experience, and made the decision to apply for the Stonewall job, so that's how I came to Stonewall. That was my background really.

RR: And you were a gay woman at this point?

DM: I was an out lesbian. We definitely weren't gay women at that point. This was the early eighties and you were never ... and I never have been a gay woman, you were either a dike or a lesbian.

RR: And tell me a bit about London at the time you were in Stonewall Housing. That would have been 1983, is that right?

DM: Yeah. It was really interesting. I'd been out for a while and as a lesbian ... when I first came out I made a decision ... I'd been involved with men before ... it wasn't a great partnership really. But I made a decision when I very first came out that I wouldn't get involved with anyone for a year, that if I was a lesbian...which I knew I was, but I wasn't going to fall straight into a relationship, I was going to make sure I was who I was, and I was the sort of woman that I wanted to be and the sort of lesbian that I wanted to be. And I didn't, I didn't get involved with anyone for a year. But when I first came out it was so funny, 'cause it was really split into two, the lesbian community at that time. And it certainly wasn't a lesbian and gay community, I wouldn't say. It was lesbians did lesbian things and gay men were somewhere else. I was very involved in a lesbian world. But that was really split into two, so it was like where you went clubbing, the social scene, if you went to places, there were these clubs, there's always Gateways, which is really famous, and there was a club in Haringey and I lived in Haringey by then, called Beryl's, and if you went there it was all ... <Laughs> collars turned up and butch and fem. It was very, very butch and fem. Which was ... really funny, but there were no politics. But on the other hand, if you wanted politics you went to the 10:29 Red Lion or Rackets. These were the clubs that were for the political lesbians. But if you did anything like wear makeup it was like you weren't a proper lesbian, and the very first march I went on, which was a Lesbian Strength march, I went on this march and I went off on my own, and the first thing that happened to me was a policeman asked me if I was on the right march, if I knew what the march was. And I can remember being terribly offended and going, 'Well yes – of course!' But two lesbians came up to me and told me that I couldn't be a lesbian because I was wearing mascara, and that's kind of what it was like then. It was like there was a real division. There were two camps, and you couldn't be in both. And because ... I don't know if this is making sense but because of where I came from and because of my class politics, I sometimes had a lot more in common with the working class lesbians and it was like ... found the middle class lesbians drove me absolutely up the wall, and had no concept of class politics. But then sometimes the working class lesbians hated the politics and did identify as gay women, and I didn't. So it was really, really bizarre. That was that sort of coming out.

Coming out in the more general public, at work I came out... from the moment I came out, I came out at work, I came out everywhere.

RR: And when was this?

DM: I came out in 1981, so at work it wasn't too bad 'cause don't forget I was working in Greek Street, it was full of dikes, which was very nice actually. That was one nice thing, although as I say they drove me up the wall a bit, but it was full of them. So you kind of had that and then you'd go home, and I come from an Irish Catholic background, and <laughs> I came out straight away to my family, just thought it was the best thing to do, and I remember my mother just kind of going ... that this was dreadful, this was the worst thing that could ever possibly happen, and I can remember someone in my family got arrested for a crime but my uncle, who was the father of the person who got arrested, in a conversation with my mother at the time, said, 'Yes, well, it is terrible but at least he won't be a deviant all his life, like your daughter' so it was hilarious, it was really funny. And I didn't care, to be honest, and I remember also, don't forget this was when AIDS first came about and I was working on a volunteer on Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, and I was going to visit my mum and I kept going round and she'd give me tea and I realised after I'd been going there for about two months that she kept giving me tea from the same cup, and it was *always* the same cup. <Laughs> And I realised that she thought that she was going to catch AIDS from me, so she <laughs> ... and I challenged here and I said, 'Why do you keep giving me that cup?' And she sort of mumbled something and I said, 'you've given this to me 'cause you think I'm going to give you AIDS!' And she was like, 'Well ... if you're mixing with those people I can't take the risks' and all this business. And I just remember thinking, 'Oh for god's sake!' But it was just ... that was what it was like then. It was a really weird world, 'cause you could be really out, and I was really out, I was really out to all my family and I was really out where I lived, I was out, out, out, but you also had all those prejudices. But I kind of worked on the theory, from the moment I came out, and I think I still believe this, that if you acted like you were ashamed of it then people would respond to you in that way, and if you were like, 'Yep, and this is great' people, in a sense ... it took them off balance. And that was absolutely true. And I can remember again ('cause I come from a large family) a load of relatives, and I remember one of them going, at some family gathering, 'Oh, you're a lesbian!' (Some bloke in the family) and I was like, 'Yeah, and I've had more women than you!' And that just shut them up, and I can remember the others going, 'Ha ha, she told you!' So it was kind of like, it depended how you approached it. Does that make sense?

RR: Yeah

DM: But it was funny. I'm not very spottable as a lesbian in lots of ways, it's ... but one place I got spotted was in Cromer. I'd gone away with a girlfriend and we went to Cromer in Norfolk and we thought we'd go and get B&B and she was very obviously a dike and every door we kept knocking on that said vacancies, 'cause we hadn't booked anywhere, was opening the door and going, 'No, sorry, we're full' and shutting the door, which was so weird. And she kept going and in the end I went, 'Look, you're so obviously a lesbian and we're not going to find anywhere to sleep, so I'll go...' And I went up to the door and knocked and the person did everything exactly the same, 'Oh sorry, no vacancies' and I came away and I realised at that time I had bright pink

hair <laughs>, I dressed like a dike, and it was like I was deluding myself that I was going to be the more acceptable face of lesbianism!

And we got spotted there, I can remember some boys along the street going, 'Lesbians!' And I remember being really shocked and going, 'Who? Me? How did they spot me?' But it was yeah ... it was kind of weird ... I don't know what else to say about it really. That was it.

There were terrible things. We had dreadful fashion sense in the eighties. It was like lesbian fashion sense in the eighties should never be shown, there should never be any photos, I've decided they should all be destroyed, we just dressed so dreadfully! <Laughs> I don't know what else to say about that.

RR: So what were you listening to in the clubs at the time? That would have been post punk, New Romantic wasn't it?

DM: Mm. Well ... <pause> I was quite into, and I'd always been into, I'd grown up going to Soul weekends in Clacton and Camber Sands as a teenager, so for me ... and I used to go to Blues as well and there used to be a place called the All Nations Club in Hackney, so my music tastes were much more around what I liked, much more around Reggae and Dub and Soul, and that was what I listened to and the club music was ... I hated loads of the New Romantic stuff, but that was all that played. And you'd have to listen to Tom Robinson Oh I just fucking hated ... (are we allowed to swear?) which I just hated, and that was electro-pop synthesiser shit that was just unbelievable. But I lived with a musician you see as well, and she had a band and so you'd go to ... 'cause you'd always go to women's gigs, and you did that always, no matter what you went to women's gigs, and so she was doing much more souly stuff so I'd do stuff with her, and we'd go outside of the lesbian and gay scene really to go to gigs.

But on the lesbian scene it was just ... women's bands were so ... dire, and ... they were so up themselves. I mean honestly if you were a lesbian musician in the early eighties it was so full of such posers But they didn't really have anything to pose for, do you know what I mean? And their music was just ... for me, I came from a background of jazz, reggae, and I just thought it was just dire, the music scene for me was dire in the early eighties.

RR: Obviously you mentioned AIDS was hitting at this point. How did it impact on lesbian London as opposed to [\[19:12 IA\]](#)

DM: I think for me it was ... I was working as a volunteer on Lesbian and Gay Switchboard and I can remember before it was called AIDS it was just this thing that was killing gay men. It was really scary. I mean now you ... I think it's really hard to believe what was going on. You were working at Switchboard and people were getting ill and you were hearing conversations about people getting ill, and particularly about what was going on in the States as well, so you were hearing stuff that was going on and there was this illness and I can remember just ... men were dying and you really didn't know why. Seriously, being there at that time ... and people were just dropping around you, quite literally really, and getting this illness, and I can remember hearing for the first time, being on shift and hearing about Kaposi sarcoma and it was like that was the first time it had ever been mentioned, this illness, and there was a feeling that everyone was going to die. And there was a feeling about was this a conspiracy? Some of the conversations were... now when you look

at it really bizarre, but there was this was this a conspiracy and we did, in the lesbian and gay community, see it as only hitting gay men. It didn't seem to be hitting heterosexuals, it did seem to be just hitting gay men, and it was like was somebody killing off, was there this conspiracy that people were killing off gay men? It was really scary and it was really horrible and I think it impacted on me because I was working at Switchboard, so I wasn't ... as I say, the lesbian and gay scene was very separate at that time, I think, so for loads of the dikes who I hung out with and who I socialised with, it was almost one step removed. There wasn't that unity. It was like people were sympathetic but they didn't know what was going on. But for those of us who were working at Switchboard or had gay men friends it was... very different.

And then it was kind of they talked about AIDS, they didn't even talk initially about HIV, they just talked about AIDS, and then you had the Iceberg ads which meant sod all. No one could work out what they were about. And it was so awful. I remember that there was a guy who worked on Switchboard who fell down stairs and broke his neck and died, and there was almost a feeling of relief that he hadn't died of this disease. It was a death of somebody but it wasn't this kind of tsunami that it almost felt like of deaths that were surrounding you. And it was awful, but I don't think at that time ... unless you were a lesbian doing that kind of stuff, that it did impact as much initially. It was only later that that happened really.

But I was there before it had its name, in a sense, so it was yeah ... it was really scary, and it was things like you'd go round to your mother's and she'd give you tea in the same cup, and it was like ... you didn't know how it was contracted, you didn't know anything, this was before anything was known at all. You didn't know if it was airborne, you didn't know what was going on, so it felt scary, it felt like you didn't know if you were going to get it. Lesbians didn't seem to be getting it but it was like ... you didn't know. It was pretty horrible, it was a pretty horrible time, and it was like... I've got this friend who's still alive now who... contracted it, and for years we spent thinking he was going to die, because if you got AIDS ... no one sid HIV then ... if you got AIDS you were going to die. And he didn't die. But he thought he was going to die as well, and he went off and he had this boyfriend and he thought he was going to die, so he got all these loans out on credit, on the telephone, and he did really mad things like he actually ... 'cause he ran quite a successful company and he looked ravaged, but he bought a boat on the phone ... he did everything on the phone <laughs> and he bought all these things and spent loads of money, and then he stayed well <laughs>. He had these huge debts and he has stayed well. He's very sick now but he stayed well ever since, until more recently. He's now on the medication that you can take, but yeah ... it was a horrible time, it was really horrible being around people and ... it was just ... tragic really.

<end of part 1>

RR: Going back to you in the bath with your copy of The Voice ... and you spotted the advert for Stonewall Housing, had you heard of Stonewall Housing before?

DM: No

RR: So tell me about what happened next.

DM: I sent off for an application, filled in the form and yeah, got an interview, which It was held at a housing association offices and it was a collective, or it was going to be a collective, and I went to the interview and by then I had the experience, I knew what I was doing, so that was quite handy really. The interview was with a group of lesbians and gay men who worked in the housing field at the time, and ... I mean to be honest it wasn't particularly rigorous, the interview, but it was ... I know at least one of the interviewers said that I should have the job based on the suit I was wearing, so it was a bit odd! So that was how I got it, and I was delighted. I wanted to work in a lesbian and gay organisation. It was great.

RR: And who had founded the organisation?

DM: I think it was the group who were on the board, so it was ... there was a guy called Martin Jones, who'd been part of Piccadilly Advice Centre, and they I think had been real proponents of setting up a scheme, The Piccadilly Advice Centre, so it was ... I think the idea had initially come from them. There was a guy called Cliff Prior who worked in a housing association, David Akinsanya, who I think now is an advocate for children's rights, for children in care's rights, at the time he worked in housing. A woman called Marilyn Griffin who worked in housing. They're the ones I remember. But they'd all been part of a group that had set up Stonewall, but they were the board, so to speak, so that's who it was.

RR: And you were employed as a worker?

DM: As a worker, yes. With responsibility, as well as doing work with service users, for admin, so I was admin and working directly with the clients, but I think probably I was one of the only people who'd worked actually with clients, so it was probably quite handy that they employed me.

RR: And give me an outline of the work that was going on in those early days.

DM: Well when I went for the interview and when I first started, they didn't even have the houses, so we were setting up the office and getting stuff ready and we were based at the Lesbian and Gay Centre in Farringdon, and it was around doing all the work around making sure the buildings were there, getting to know agencies. One of the first houses that we were going to get for a housing association which was going ahead, hit a real problem because the land that had been given to the housing association was owned by the Catholic church, and when they found out that they were going to give Stonewall one of the properties on there, said that they wouldn't give the housing association the land. So the housing association threw us off the scheme <laughs> because obviously they had to listen to the Catholic church. So it was difficult, and I mean it was in some senses we utilised that and made them feel really bad, and ended up getting two properties elsewhere, but it was in those days you could do that. You could go, 'Lesbian and gay project? We're not going to give you a house.' So we got two houses out of that and I can remember the first properties we got, one was in Tollington Park and the other was in Tufnell Park, so it was getting ready for that, going out to the agencies, which was ... in those days ... we were really out, which was actually quite unusual in a sense of as an organisation, so you were going out visiting organisations in Central London and most were kind of OK, but you'd have things like I can remember turning up for one at a centre around Kings Cross, a homelessness centre, and I turned up for the meeting

and the woman who was meant to be meeting with me came out into the waiting room, where there were like loads of homeless young guys, and went, 'Oh right, so you're the lesbian from Stonewall Housing Association.' You know, you just sort of think woohaha, OK, now you've just outed me to everyone, people I don't know, and people who might be homophobic, and that wasn't that unusual.

Even the Piccadilly Advice Centre, who'd been really keen on getting the project, when I went to meet with them they used to run a kiosk, and I was saying ... the meetings that people had with them who were service users would be in the open, and I can remember going, 'It might be really difficult for a young gay man or a young lesbian to actually talk about their housing problem and being evicted because of their sexuality here.' And they were just like, 'No, no, it's fine.' So it was clear straight away that there was actually going to be a lot of work needing to be done.

And then you'd get people who went the other way, who'd be like terribly ... they wanted to be politically correct, so it'd be telling about their friends who were lesbians or friends who were gay men, I mean seriously! But you have to remember this was also the age of equal opportunities training, so these came around at the same time, this was the GLC, so people were being sent on equal opportunities training and it was... <laughs> they tried to do the right thing but it was more lip service than any innate understanding of what was going on. It was very odd, it was a very odd time really, but there was definitely a need. I think at that time if you were a young person and you were lesbian or you were gay and you were trying to actually get re-housed, the options were pretty shitty, and actually the chances were that you would have to be covert about your sexuality in most hotels across London. Even if a lot of the workers were lesbian and gay, they weren't there at night when the other residents were there, so it was ... there was a definite need, and you saw it all the time, and I'd seen it in Greek Street where I worked, and I'd seen it in Northwest London Housing where I worked, it was ... a sector that did pay lip service, that knew enough, that had done its training, but hadn't taken the needs to heart of lesbians and gay men. It wasn't easy.

RR: So just to go over different strands of the organisations work at the time, obviously there was helping people that would call up the organisation to re-house them or help them through the system. And you ran housing projects yourself as well.

DM: Yep

RR: And the advocacy side, did that come later?

DM: That came later. You ended up doing advocacy because what you did was get ... a) we were full quite quickly, so that demonstrated the need, so you couldn't actually help everyone out who was phoning up, and also you were getting calls ... at that time I think it was 17 to 25, and I don't know if it's changed but it was 17 to 25-year-olds and you were getting loads of people over that, loads of people had problems with their housing, or you were getting stuff around couples. You'd get a couple who'd come to you. So you did advocacy, but it wasn't ... in your remit, but you did it anyway. You had to do it, had to try and assist. But it came I think formally later. It certainly wasn't formal when I was there.

RR: What were the biggest challenges to Stonewall Housing in those early days?

DM: <Pause> I think ... <pause> in some ways ... it's quite a difficult question, because actually I think there was a political will in those days, as I say it might have been lip service but there was a political will. People wanted to be associated. You have to remember this was a time when lots of local authorities had lesbian and gay units working in the local authorities, particularly in Haringey which was where I lived. People wanted to do the right thing. So actually I think we were given, in terms of political will, people were quite tolerant for quite a while. They didn't want to be seen to be being homophobic. Even if they were, they didn't want to be seen to be doing it, so it was like money from the GLC, or whoever its succour was, wasn't particularly short in being supplied. It was a sexy organisation to fund if you wanted to be seen to be being cool really, so that wasn't a challenge.

Some of the stuff around working with other groups was challenging, but you could always complain and go to the top, to the people who wanted to be sexy and cool, so in a sense you could override some particular decisions or some bad practices going on on the ground. I think ... it's quite hard to say what problems it faced, 'cause in a really weird way it didn't face that many. Apart from needing more accommodation, because as I say we were full, and apart from being wheeled out by various local authorities to show how cool they were, and having to associate with heterosexuals ... I mean I had five lovely years of being cocooned in a lesbian and gay little microcosm. I mean actually ... I think if anyone tells you there were problems ... they were the problems in setting up any new organisation, they were the problems in the fact that most of us were very young. I was twenty-four I think when it was set up, it was ... yes, I was about twenty-four, and actually I was probably too young to do that job at that time really, and most of us were. Working as a collective was an absolute pain in the arse, and was the downfall of many organisations, but if you were young you wanted to work in a collective 'cause you didn't want anyone to tell you what to do! So there were those ... there were more internal problems in a sense than there were external. It was like homophobia existed but it didn't really bother us, because we just knew those people were wrong. Does that make sense?

It was like you could write those people off, whereas the people that you were working with who you didn't really like <laughs> were much more of a difficulty, so it was like I'd been around gay men but there hadn't been that coming together necessarily before, so there were more ... it was more internal stuff, and then we had ... they appointed, the board appointed, on the most spurious grounds really, god love them. So it was one of the guys they appointed, they forgot to check whether he had any finance experience, and it was only after we'd been working there for six months and one day someone ... we were a collective so no one could manage him, when he was off sick yet again and someone opened the books and found out that he hadn't actually completed any books for six months, so we were running six months with no finance being done, and it was those were the problems! The problems were internally. It was An environment of Rescue Remedy. Very popular, Rescue Remedy! Relationships ... we were all young, we were all shagging our hearts out all over the place, so you went through this kind of thing where people would come in, if you were traumatised you'd come in at six in the morning because obviously you couldn't stay at home with the girlfriend or the boyfriend or whoever, and everyone would spend like hours just going 'Ah, it's just so dreadful' or you were breaking up or you were

getting together ... and actually those ... I mean in some ways it's really bizarre, 'cause it's like I'm a really hard-working woman now, but I know when I worked at Stonewall I was a baby, I thought it was perfectly OK to spend two hours discussing the trauma of my love life, or to go clubbing all night ... and then go to work the next morning. That kind of thing about youth where you think well, I can perform, I'm marvellous at this job! And those were the bigger problems, quite frankly, not the outside.

We get carried away sometimes by our own oppression, and we would always use it, we would always go, 'Oh these *dreadful* heterosexuals ...' But actually they didn't do that much to us. They might have done to our service users, and you were certainly dealing with people who had had a really shitty time, and you were taking them in, but as the workers we were actually quite privileged. We were quite indulged, quite frankly. So yeah ...

RR: OK.

DM: Is that not what you've heard? <Laughs>

RR: I know very little about the background about the organisation, just collecting the stories.

DM: But the whole lesbian and gay scene at that time, the working scene where you were employed, 'cause don't forget, you had all these units within local authorities, you had Galop, there was LAGER, the Lesbian and Gay Employment Rights one, you had ... there were lots. They all sprouted around the same time, so we had ... quite a large group of people who we could all talk about how dreadful our life was, and actually as workers we were all quite privileged and able to be really out and able to ... it was all collectives so there was no management really, and it was a time of high indulgence I would say.

RR: Tell me about the service users that came to you. How much accommodation did you have at that time?

DM: When I first started there were two and then we opened a third, so there was Tollington Park, Tufnell Park (I think it was Tufnell Road) and Holmdale Terrace, so there was ... I don't know, about 26, something like that, around those kind of numbers. All 17 to 25-year-olds, and don't forget I was 24, and I certainly wasn't the youngest. They were a real mix, but you were getting people who really had needs, who had been thrown out of home or had been living homeless or had been in ... it wasn't uncommon to get people who'd been living in other hostel accommodation that had proved to be too dangerous for them to live in as lesbians and gay men. And they were really a very mixed group in terms of need. So you'd get people who'd come in and the issue was that they couldn't live in a hostel because other people were being horrible to them, and once you removed that homophobia and they were in a lesbian and gay environment, they were absolutely fine, and their needs were actually quite limited. But then you'd get other people who'd come in who'd actually have quite high support needs and it wouldn't necessarily be recognisable at first but actually their problem ... they had many other issues in addition to their sexuality. So you were getting a really, really mixed group. It was pretty even when I worked there men and women, the houses were split. I would say it was about 50/50. We had the flats in Tufnell Park, so they were much more self-contained, and then we had the hostel where you had

the office, which was in Tollington Park, where you tended to get people with higher support needs, and then Holmdale Terrace tended again to be low to medium support needs. It was very mixed in terms of ethnicity, very mixed in terms of gender, and I think probably in terms of support needs it was as well. I mean some people purely went there because they were lesbians and gay men, and that was it. We had one woman who came within the first eighteen months, Violet, I don't remember her surname which is probably fine, who came to us who later turned out not to be a lesbian, but she had been living in a hostel and she thought the accommodation at Stonewall was much better so she pretended to be a lesbian until she came and got re-housed. And she slipped through the net, she ... said she was a lesbian; who wasn't going to believe her? <Laughs> So But you had people with some very high support needs, so you'd be doing stuff like making mental health referrals or talking to social services, or helping people around alcohol and drug problems, the whole lot really that you do now in supported housing, with the added identifier that someone was lesbian or gay.

And I think it was really important to have the project. It definitely was. And what was worrying, I think, was all the other people who were phoning and couldn't get in. That was quite hard. But it was also funny in lots of ways 'cause you were dealing with ... as I said, the workers, we were having our problems in our personal lives, and what you did was bring in twenty-odd kids really, seventeen, eighteen-year-olds, who also had their problems in their love life, so it was just a mass of hormones and you were dealing with people's love-lives constantly, and people sobbing constantly and people breaking up constantly and people having their girlfriend stay over and then the break-up would happen in the hostel. I mean it was high drama. It was great, but it was high drama the whole time. And it's like then you'd get people who'd hate you. 'I just *hate* you,' you know, <Laughs> or people who *loved* you, and they'd follow you around ... until they hated you.

So it was kind of ... yeah, it was a mix in terms of service users. And in terms of their needs.

RR: And obviously Stonewall Housing is here 25 years later. Did it grow, did it get more secure in terms of its funding ...

DM: I think it probably went through a harder time. I worked there for five years, and I left because I actually had a baby with one of the other workers, which was ... Casey Galloway, he started work there and we were great friends and we'd been friends on Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, and we decided ... I had a conversation with him one day at work about wanting a baby and how difficult it was, 'cause poor me, I was a lesbian ... and he said, 'Well you think it's difficult for you? What about gay men?' So yes, we had a baby, our Stonewall baby, and we did artificial insemination and ... I got pregnant in the third month, which was kind of pretty quick, and had my son Declan, who's now eighteen, so he comes from Stonewall. And Casey and I have co-parented him actually for eighteen years, from when he was ten days old he spent four days a week at his dad's and four days at week at mine, so it rotated. So I left ... I got pregnant and went on maternity leave, which I certainly don't think at that time people were expecting to happen, a maternity leave in a lesbian and gay organisation at that time. And then I decided to go to university, so I left. And I think Casey went to work at LEAN, London East Aids Network, as well.

It was once you left you felt ...because we'd been the founders it felt best to stay away, to let people do it, do you know what I mean? Before Declan, Stonewall was my baby in a sense, so it was best to let people get on with it. But my understanding is the political climate changed, it was no longer necessary to be cool about lesbians and gays, it was no longer necessary to go on equal opportunities training, it was no longer necessary to say the right thing, and my understanding is that then of course all the closets who'd never said anything when we were then, closet homophobes came out, and I would imagine that it got quite a tough time, and that's my understanding. That it had to really fight for its funding, it had to fight to keep its relevance, 'cause there was a real thing around 'We've all done the training now, we've all done the diversity training, we know what it is and we know how to integrate.' Now personally I think that's complete bollocks. I work in a women's organisation and I know that's the case for women still, that there are real issues around the hostel sector and the homelessness sector, and I certainly think it will be the same for lesbians and gay men quite honestly.

I think it's a much harsher environment. I was really lucky. I worked there when you didn't, in a sense, have to justify stuff, and you didn't have to be twice as good to be half as bad, and I think now that probably is the case. To justify that specialism and that separation it is almost you constantly have to prove that, you constantly have to rationalise it and justify it, and I think with Supporting People it's probably even harder. So I feel like I was quite lucky, I feel like I worked there during the honeymoon phase, and that it's probably been quite a hard slog ever since. I don't think things have got better. I think things have got much tougher. It was lovely when I was there, and you didn't have to ... you just had to shout at people and then they'd kind of go, 'Oh yes, I must be homophobic.' <Laughs> And I think now that ... I don't think that's the same. I think it must be a really tough place to work and to manage and to be strategic and to justify what you do and to justify your funding.

RR: We're going to hang around on that kind of period, so you left in '88, is that right?

DM: No, I started I think in '85 I think, or might have been '84, I was there for five years, then I went on maternity leave, yeah.

RR: OK, '89. There was a different climate then, wasn't there?

DM: I was on maternity leave, my maternity leave lasted about a year, so my last year I wasn't actually there anyway, and then I went to university so it was kind of ... I was really fortunate, I missed all the hard bit really, which seems a bit unfair but ...that's how they fall.

RR: And how was it for you being a lesbian parent in 1989?

DM: Oh it was *really cool!* It was really ... I've been really lucky. I'll tell you, I have, sometimes I can't believe it. I can remember having Decs, he was born on December 14 1990, and it was still before they threw you out of hospital two minutes after they've removed the placenta, so they kept you overnight in those days, and I remember <laughs> that you could have guests or visitors and I had 52 people come and visit me to visit this baby, because no one had babies, or it wasn't that usual, and particularly to have babies where the gay man was still involved and was going to be a parent. So it was amazing, and it was the people who feel even now, Declan's 18, who feel like they have a

kind of say in his life or feel like they have an investment in who he is, is astonishing. It's in a sense never gone away – he's truly been a child of A.I.D and of lesbian and gay parents, which I think is quite different. I mean Declan says that he has so many aunties and uncles and he's deeply heterosexual, which he was from about the age of five. You know they say you can't tell? Well at the age of five we had two dikes come over and when they left there's one who knows him quite well and she came with her new girlfriend, and we said oh, did you like so-and-so? He went, 'Oh yes, I liked her better than Vic' who was the woman that he'd known since he was born. We said, 'Why?' He went, 'Oh she wears lovely lipstick!' <Laughs> He was five! And you just thought, 'There's no hope here!' And he is, he's rabidly heterosexual. But he's kind of grown up in this lesbian and gay environment, and it makes him ... a) quite dangerous, because he really is very successful with women because he's been brought up to know how to talk to them, to be very socialised, very chatty, and it makes him, I think, quite dangerous. The amount of girls who phone up and go, 'Ooh, I just love him. He's so different from all the other boys ...' That's just a constant refrain. But it's like he's a sweetheart as well. He's great, he's really nice, and he's very cool. He's a nice kid. But he has definitely, I would say, been brought up within the lesbian and gay community, and I think it's done him the world of good. And his dad's from Montserrat, so he's mixed race, Declan, he's a young black man, and that's another added dimension, to be a young black man who was brought up by lesbian and gay parents. And he's really cool about his race politics and he's really cool about lesbian and gay politics. Yeah. He's nice, he's a nice kid. And at the time it was alright.

What was really difficult, weirdly, was leaving Stonewall and going to university, because I'd spent five years in this lovely bubble of complete happiness where everyone was cool about it and if you went to visit anyone outside you were terribly ... I mean I was terribly out. And I went to university and of course I was still really out and I didn't get heterosexuality at all. It was ... I can remember going into a university, which is full of heterosexuals and full of things that women ... stuff around being a woman that people don't talk about, and I can remember the first day, I went into university one day and I'd got my period. Now when I had my period at Stonewall, I could weep and wail and take Rescue Remedy and send one of the men to buy my pads from the Boots 'cause obviously I couldn't walk <Laughs>. And I remember going into uni and I'd got my period and it was high drama and I was like, 'Ooh god, I've got my period!' I was in the cafeteria with this bunch of students, 'I've got my period and I've got thrush and it's just like strawberry yogurt down there!' And these people blanched, and I didn't get it! I'd spent five years at Stonewall with gay men who were sympathetic and who understood and who you could talk about periods with, and then suddenly I was surrounded by these heterosexual people who just obviously hadn't been trained and were just being wilful and not understanding that someone needed to get me coffee, and that someone needed to get me obviously something with sugar in so that I could increase my sugar to my blood-flow, and it was dreadful! I was quite traumatised <laughs> for about the first year after I left there, by the heterosexual world!

So I was very spoilt.

RR: I suppose we've touched on this already, but the impact of Stonewall Housing on housing and housing policy in general – anything to add to that? Do you think it had an impact in the way that people saw differing needs?

DM: I think it did at the time, but I think it came at the same time in terms of an impact as the other stuff that I talked about, so the local authority Lesbian and Gay Unit, so all of those kind of groups, but I quite often think that it's quite interesting, because I think people did what they needed to do. I went out of housing for quite a few years after I went to university. So I went to university, then when I left I went and worked in a women's aid project, so that was all women, and it was only when I came here, 'cause Eves used to do supported housing for women when I first started in 2000, that I came back into the homelessness field. And I was gobsmacked at the changes.

I thought that there was a real retrograde step had been taken. There was no longer this feeling I suppose on the part of the mainstream that they had to appease, that they had to listen to us, that they had to pretend to pay lip service to those specialist issues, that it was a bit New Labour, integration, and actually integration is not always right. And I remember the first meeting I went to, and this was as a director of a women's organisation, when I left apparently people called me militant, and they wouldn't have dared to have done that in the eighties. I'd been gone out of it for ten years, and it felt like we'd taken two steps forward and five or six steps back. And I think that's true in terms of women's issues and I think it's also true in terms of lesbian and gay issues. I think that there's more problem now justifying and rationalising the decision and the need. I think people don't think that they need to do it. So you'll get homelessness projects going, 'Well, we take in this percentage of lesbians and gay men' but actually a) I don't think it's necessarily true b) I don't think they monitor anymore, they don't see the need to monitor, and I think actually it's quite a homophobic environment. I think it's quite anti women as well, the homelessness sector, the environment. So it's stuff like when you look at it, it goes right across, so things like you can take a mixed gender organisation and you can tell where they are. We did a report on women's issues so we wrote to them and went, 'What's your policy on domestic violence?' When we wrote to them as part of this report we did, 95% of them didn't have a policy on domestic violence. We said, 'What do you do if a woman is raped in your hostel?' 98% of them didn't have a policy on rape. None of them had a policy on self harming, none of them had a policy on sexual harassment, and in fact one worker at one mixed hostel said if a woman was being sexually harassed in the hostel 'I'd advise her to talk to the person and try to have a conversation'. This is somebody who's sexually harassing here. 'If that didn't work, I'd advise her to bring it up at a house meeting.' <Laughs> So you should talk about this sexual harassment. And then the third thing was, 'And if not, write a letter.' And you thought shit, this stuff *would not have happened* back then, they wouldn't have done that. And I think it's really similar for lesbians and gay men. I think it's a really similar situation and I think it's not a very healthy environment, the homelessness sector, and in fact I think it's so unhealthy it's one that we chose as an organisation to come out of, because actually we feel that we can challenge it better externally because we now do stuff around violence against women, so we can go, 'What are you going to do about it?', we can lobby local authorities to go 'How many of your projects have policies on rape and sexual assault; how many of your projects have policies on domestic violence?' And it's actually easier to do that. So I don't think it's a very healthy environment. I think it was cyclical and I think we were fooled a bit. It was like everyone did the equal opportunities and learnt how to pay lip service, but it wasn't in their hearts, lip service is all it was. And their consciousness, as we used to say in the eighties, was not raised at all. I think it's not a nice place, that sector.

RR: And what do you think was behind that? Obviously there was the GLC, which was there giving out money and then was gone.

DM: Yeah. I think when the GLC went I think in a really weird way, when Labour got in there was a bit like everything's fine now, because we'd had Thatcher, and everything's integrationist, so it was like Labour had a real policy of integration, which is great if everyone's actually worked out the social issues and agreed on them, and that we live in a kind of society that is no longer homophobic. That would be great then, but we don't. So pretending that everything's fine and integrating it is not good. We still have the same issues, you still have young men dying from homophobic attacks, you still have lesbians experiencing discrimination, you still have all those things going on, but what we have is this sticking plaster and this pretence that everything's really cool, and it's not, it's not at all. And I find it really worrying. I find it ... in terms of I suppose the homelessness sector, which is what we're talking about, I find it really scary that the people at the top are generally white heterosexual men who actually don't give a shit about lesbians and gays, they don't give a shit about women and what they care about, it's become a thing of the bottom line and Supporting People and bed spaces and not valuing diversity, but this kind of melting pot, which means that people get shafted really, and usually it's the minorities.

That's cheerful, isn't it?

RR: Yeah well ... sounds like it's the case, anyway.

The impact of your time ... I suppose you've touched on this as well, the impact of Stonewall Housing and its work on yourself?

DM: Well I've got my baby, my eighteen-year-old, I've got my boy!

RR: <Laughs> That's as big as it gets, isn't it?

DM: Yeah, it is kind of as big as it gets! I've got him.

I ... had a lovely time there. I was in the right place at the right time and I know how lucky I am. It's had quite a lot of impact on me really, because it made me very confident, you had to be really kind of bolshie and confident and it was ... I was. But I was cocooned for five years in a state of heaven, which was very lovely. And I've never lost, since I was Stonewall, the political edge to my work. So like working here, our organisation has a reputation for being radical, we're called a feminist organisation, some men's groups call us feminazis, we do quite a lot of campaigning, lobbying work. It's meant I've never been afraid of new ideas and Stonewall gave me that. That was something really new and it was being used to put into place something new, and that's meant since I came here, when I came here in 2000 there was only supported housing, but we now have domestic violence projects, we now have a trafficking project, we now have a rape project. When I started here there was 23 workers and a budget of 1.5 million, we now have 95 workers and a budget of nearer 6 million, and my confidence around that as the chief executive is ... I think does link back to Stonewall and does link back to not being afraid to try something new. I think it's very, very directly related to how I am in my work every day.

RR: So when you talk about new ideas, you were a collective at Stonewall Housing, so things came organically I guess?

DM: Yes, they did. They did come organically. So it was kind of ... evolving right from the development of the housing. It was right from things as basic as in those days most hostels were pits, quite frankly, and it was being able to go, 'Actually we don't want to be like that. We want to actually give people good quality accommodation. We do think that people who've been traumatised because of other people's reaction to their sexuality should have the best accommodation. It should be like a hotel.' And not being scared to say that, and not being scared to say, 'There is a need for division. There is a need for a separate ... being an organisation that will work with people who can't fit in with heterosexual wants and needs.' So it was being able to do that, about being able to try things, not being scared to write to local papers if they were publishing homophobic stuff, and say, 'As a worker at Stonewall I just want to say that ...' Not being scared to go to meetings and go, 'Actually you know what, that language is not acceptable.' And that happens all the time. Not being scared to point out there's a need. So it's like when I started the Poppy Project, which is a trafficking project, there wasn't one in the UK and actually the British government said trafficking is not a problem, we're an island. And through being at Stonewall you were able to go, 'Actually, yes there is a problem. This is the problem. We're going to do this.' And when we first started Poppy we didn't get any funding. We did it out of reserves and then got the funding, and I wasn't scared to do that because Stonewall meant that in a sense you couldn't be scared to do those things, you were the out lesbian, there could be other lesbians round the table at meetings but by virtue of where you came from you were the out one, so you didn't have ever that choice, and I think that was a really good thing, to go well I'll just be a bit quiet here. That person's being homophobic but I'm tired... or I feel shitty, or he's intimidating. You couldn't do that, and I think that's a really good training ground and has been ever since, to kind of go actually, that's not right. And that's what I spend a lot of my time doing here, going 'That's not right. Government policy is not right on that. This is not acceptable. The homelessness sector is not acceptable.' It makes you unpopular with some people, but I think it's the best training you can have if you want to be a campaigner and if you want to change things really, and Stonewall definitely gave me that.

RR: Great.

Tell me about the changes that you've witnessed for the LGBT community, both generally and in terms of housing? Again you've touched on points of this.

DM: I think the fact that there is an LGBT community at all, because there wasn't, and I don't think ... not meaningfully for lesbians, but for a lot of lesbians in the eighties ... I mean interestingly I'm far less involved with it now than I've ever been. I'm actually far more involved with women's politics and women's issues, but I think that that is a change. I think that there are potential conflicts because actually our political agenda is not always the same. As a woman and as a feminist I think it's not always the same. Sometimes I think ... my cousin's daughter's a young lesbian who actually lived in one of the Stonewall houses, and it's ... <laughs> I just think they don't know they're born sometimes. It's like she's ... she's dead sweet but sometimes when she talks about stuff you just think you've got no idea! It's like there's this whole thing

about being bisexual and it was like when I was coming out ... that wasn't really an option. It was the group of outsiders, bisexuals. I can remember people going, 'You can't have it both ways. You can't be on a bicycle and ride both ways ...' and various kind of things. It was quite exclusive rather than inclusive. And then now it's a very inclusive community but I'm not sure that it's as political as it was. I'm not sure that there's as many politics going on. Sometimes you read *Diva* and you lose the will to live. It's not like that. And I think there are some things like with lesbians and gay men, whether there's real separateness, and I do think that sometimes with the gay male community it feels really different.

It's like I went to the Stonewall Awards thing quite recently, 'cause a friend of mine's the writer Val McDermid and I think she'd won an award the year before or whatever. Anyway, I went as one of her guests at the table and to be honest with you it was like ... I had a great time, I got there and it was like a great time, but it was so *full* of these people who just have *no idea* what life is like for so many other people. I think it's class politics, it's like there's this middle class gay community and you just think you've still got no idea, you've got no idea of what goes on for really a lot of working-class lesbians and gay men, and young people. Those things still exist, it's still if you live in the middle of a council estate, as a gay man or as a lesbian, your life is likely to be more difficult than if you're living in Primrose Hill and it's going and attending the Stonewall bash in your tux, it's not the same thing. So it's ... it's not an environment that I find particularly appealing really, the LGBT community.

Having said that, I of course live a very middle-class lifestyle, but in Wood Green, which means that by nature it can't be a middle-class lifestyle.
<Laughs>

RR: They've got a branch **of Dash** in Wood Green, haven't they?

DM: <Laughs> But we're getting Primark.

RR: Anything else you'd like to add?

DM: No. I hope the organisation prospers. I have a fondness for it, although I have very little to do with it now. But I think there is a real need for it and I hope that in the climate which feels like it's even getting harder, particularly with the move from Supporting People to tendering and procurement, I fear for its safety, so I hope it continues.

RR: OK. Denise, thank you very much.

DM: No worries.

<End of recording>