Lisa Krinsky Transcript

Shira Hartman: Okay, so now it's on, so we can start. My first question for you is, can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Lisa Krinsky: Sure. I was born in Boston and grew up in Brookline. My family lived in the same house for fifty years total. My father, Norman, was a professor at Tufts Medical School. My mom, Susan, was a psychologist. They met in graduate school here. I have a brother who is twenty-six months younger than I am.. We belonged to Temple Sinai in Brookline. My parents were very involved in the synagogue. It was a big part of where we went and what we did. I went to private school all through my education. I went to Buckingham Browne & Nichols for kindergarten through eighth grade, and then I went to The Winsor School in Boston for high school.

SH: Okay, so I'm just going to continue on with the questions. Can you tell me a little bit about your coming-out story?

LK: Sure. You know, it's interesting growing up in the 1970s and the 1980s, there really was not any kind of discussion about people who were lesbian, gay, bi. We didn't even say bisexual or transgender at the time; it wasn't even on the radar. Into the ‘90s, it became more visible, particularly around HIV and AIDS. People started talking about it more, but by the time I came out to my parents, which I think of as kind of a key part of my coming out story, there was obviously coming out to myself.

SH: What happened in your twenties, early thirties?

LK: I think I was also in a place where I had figured out a lot of other parts of who I was, like who I was professionally, who I was as a friend, how I presented myself in the world. So, by the time I came out to my parents, and I told them about the person I was dating,

who they knew was a friend of mine, my mom's first response was, “Thank God she's Jewish.” So that seemed to be more [important] to them, or to her at least, then. If I had sort of come home with somebody who wasn't Jewish, who was a man, I think that would have been a little bit harder for them. My parents were always progressive and welcoming people. In the early 2000s, we were also having more public conversations about LGBT issues and visibility because of marriage equality in Massachusetts. That was such a big issue, and so, suddenly, people were talking about this everywhere. It was a social justice issue in the Jewish community. Everyone was talking about marriage equality. My mother got involved in the social justice thing through her synagogue, through Temple Israel, and I have a picture of her somewhere in front of the state house with a sign that says, “Another Jew for marriage equality.” An army of Jewish mothers going to her daughter’s wedding like anybody else is powerful. Well, I think that was kind of a piece of it. I've always worked in the social work field of some kind. In the work environment, that's always been really kind of welcoming and inclusive. It wasn't necessarily like, “Oh, what's going to happen to my job,” that some people have had in different environments. So, it's been relatively easy.

SH: It's really nice to hear your stories, first of all, just communicating and hearing that side, and then I never really heard that before. So, I'm really grateful to hear this story. The third question is, how did you get involved in your profession?

LK: I started my social work career in my teens. I think I was in ninth grade, probably. I started my career, I say – there was a program through the Bureau of Jewish Education called Project Shalom that had Jewish kids volunteering [for] Jewish community organizations. I started going every Friday afternoon to Hebrew Rehab – I volunteered there, and I went with a friend of mine. The first hour, I would visit with – I don't remember her name off the bat – she was a ninety-six-year-old woman who lived there. So, I spent an hour visiting with her. Then, in the second hour, my friend Ruth and I would lead Shabbat services on three different floors. We would light candles, and there would be

[challah?], and we would sing songs and then go on to the next floor. So that is how I started my career working with older adults. In my first job out of college, I wanted to work with people; I didn't know what I wanted. I took a job that I thought was going to be interesting and dynamic, and I hated it. So, I went back to something I looked at before, so I became a care manager. I had a caseload of sixty older adults in Brookline and Waltham. I think those were my two towns. I worked for West Suburban Elder Services. That then became Springwell. I really liked it. I was a care manager for a year. Fourteen months later, or whatever, I was promoted, and I became a supervisor, and really liked the work. Not just working with people that I liked, supervising people, and teaching them. I did that for another three years, and then I realized I need to go to social work school. I've learned what I can, but what are the skills that I want to gain? I looked at going to Boston College and doing sort of, it's called a SPA program, like Social Policy and Administration, or doing a clinical course at Simmons, and I decided that it would be easier to gain clinical skills first, and then move on and learn more macro skills, administrative, management, or policy stuff. So, I had the plan. I went to social work school when I was twenty-nine. I went to social work school, and my plan was that, at forty, I was going to go to Heller and then do policy. So that was the plan. I didn't get to Heller. So, I worked as an MSW, and I did mental health work, inpatient and outpatient, for my placements. Then I did some mental health work. When I first got out of school, [I was?] working in community mental health, but I really wanted to go back and do something different. I didn't want to do direct clinical work full-time; I wanted to have those skills. So I went back to elder services, and I did some grants management, and I did sort of programmatic things. Three of my friends called me, telling me that there is a job listing and said, “Lisa, this is the job for you.” So, I became the home care director at Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services and oversaw a department of around fifteen or twenty care managers. Then I did that for four years. I had the opportunity to go to this LGBT aging summit that someone in the eldercare told me about, and it was being hosted in June 2001. I went to represent Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services. I was

itching for something new in my job and what to do, and I went to this, and I was like, “Oh my God, this is amazing.” The people were just super interesting, and it was this topic that no one had ever heard. We had the speakers come in from New York because there was nobody here in Boston doing this work. There were a lot of LGBTQ folks who work in eldercare, and so there was a lot of overlap. So, some of it was personal motivation – what's going to happen to me when I get older – and it was just dynamic and very interesting. So, I joined a workgroup, and we go to those meetings and stuff. I then did an informational interview with one of the founders of the LGBT Aging Project and said, “I really want to do LGBT aging work,” and he said, “I don't know anyone else.” This is it, we're kind of doing the only thing, and so I was going to come on and do the training work. There was a woman working, I think, part-time as their director, and she decided to leave. So he called me and said, “Would you like to be the director of the LGBT Aging Project?” There was only one staff person. So, in 2004, I became the director of the LGBT Aging Project. I was the one person that worked full-time in Massachusetts who was thinking about LGBT older adults. So, I was creating it and building it as it happened. That overlaps with a lot of marriage equality stuff, so people really wanted to talk about this differently and talk about older adults because they never thought of gay people being old, just about gay people being young. So, it was those intersections of my career and my life and kind of what was happening publicly that just sort of happened. I have been there for seventeen years.

SH: The next question is, are you close to your family? How did this impact you?

LK: Yes, I think I've always been close to my family. My parents have had a big and important influence on my life. My dad died in 2008. He was sick for a while. That was a hard process. I think also, working in elder care, and then having my parents aging, brought a lot of what I know for work to my family. But I think we've always been very close. They've always been my parents and have always been behind me. My brother and I, we're close. My brother – he and his wife have two kids. They live in Washington,

DC, so not terribly far. But we can't just grab dinner anytime we want to, although with Zoom, now we can.

SH: Is your professional career related to any of the values or morals that you have? For example, social work and the kind of ethics and missions, values behind it. Is there any Jewish background around social justice and inclusion?

LK: I just feel like they all get braided together. I would say that my Jewish values are the core piece of where that came from. It is important to care for people, to take care of the world, all those kinds of things, and I sort of wove them together. Can I tell you the story about when I was in social work school?

SH: Sure.

LK: I don't remember [if it was?] my first or second year of social work school. There was a whole issue about classes being scheduled on Rosh Hashanah, on the High Holidays, and Jewish students were like, “We're not going to be here. This was exclusionary, and we're social workers.” So, it came into a conversation about how people were aware of Jewish issues or something, and someone said, “Well, you know what we should do is we should have a Holocaust memorial event in the spring.” I clearly said that it is important, and it's a huge piece of our history in our lives and our families, but I said that I want to do something different. Instead of talking about the Holocaust and the grief and the loss and the persecution and otherness, I want to do something that's positive and affirming, like how we share this culture. Judaism has all these other elements with people, and so another student and I created, with the social work school, a Freedom Seder. We created a seder where we invited the whole school community. I think we did not have enough space, so we must have had it on the Simmons main campus. We went through a gazillion different Haggadahs to pick readings and stories, and we found the progressive ones that talked about social work values. We really sort of said, “The story about Passover and freedom and what's important and really overlaps with being a social

worker, and our idea about justice in the world, and how people are treated." Anyway, that was a really fun thing, and I think they continued it for some number of years afterward. I don't think it's still happening there nowadays, but it definitely was this idea of trying to take my personal experience and my professional experience and mixing them together. I think we talked about the LGBTQ rights and social justice issues, and how it overlaps as well. The experiences flowed together. I pull the Haggadah out every so often; it is way funkier and more progressive than my family was used to it. This Haggadah was like, "You can achieve to uplift the poor and encourage people to speak their voices." Anyway, it was a fun thing to do. I brought the Haggadah back to my family. We used it for a little while with our family Seder. So, it was sort of nice.

SH: We kind of talked about this, but do you get any satisfaction from what you professionally do?

LK: I mean, I would be a social worker – I don't think I would be doing something else. What kind of social work I'd be doing? I don't know, this is just – this is what I do.

SH: Do you have any large obstacles that you had to achieve?

LK: I think there's been a variety of them; I think [my?] relationships with people have been. The challenge that I went through was a divorce, which was a really difficult time for me. We have a child, and going through that was really challenging recently, in terms of not having the family or not having the life that I thought I was going to have for the rest of my life. So, that was a hard thing to do, but learning how to rebuild your life. My work is consistent, and being able to navigate a new relationship with my child. Just do things differently than I expected them to do.

SH: Can you tell me a little bit about your first job experience? What did you do there, and how did you transfer into different jobs along the way?

LK: So, I was a care manager at a caseload of, I think, sixty clients. We did not have computers back in the day; everything was handwritten on notes. I had little index cards where I would write. I know the cycles of who's on and their four-monthly schedules. I would go and do home visits, and I would talk to people and get to know them, and then I was also assessing what their needs were for home-based services. For example, this person needs groceries once a week. Let me call the place that's the grocery vendor, get the groceries set up for them, and figure out what the budget is that I have. It is state-funded, right? So, I would say I have this much money per person. What services am I going to put together for them? How do I support them? So, it was helping people in a concrete way and also getting to know them. There was this one woman I used to visit in Waltham. She was about a hundred years old. She was turning one hundred. She lived alone; she didn't get out of her apartment very often. I sort of went in thinking, “Oh, this is sad.” The woman had the best spirit. She was just like, “Hello, sweetheart. Come in. How are you?” and, “What are you doing?” and “Let me show you this.” There were some musical things she used to play, and I saw pictures of her grandchildren. It just left me thinking that the way that we live our lives is not just about the circumstances that we're in. It's sort of how we engage and how we think about our own experiences in our life. So, I think of her as, “Wow, things were not great objectively for her, but subjectively, she was living a great life.” I've always liked older people. That's always been my population.

SH: The next question is: can you discuss your involvement in the LGBTQ community, and any activism that happened in the 1990s, 2010s, and today?

LK: I really kind of stepped into it around when marriage equality was taking place. I was not that connected to the community in the ‘90s. I knew people and what was going on around HIV and AIDS, but I wasn't necessarily connected to the community in that way, and part of it. So, I think my activism, and my LGBTQ activism, a lot of it was happening through work. It really has been this intersection about my professional role and career. I found myself at the statehouse and find myself advocating for legislation and for human

rights, locally in the state and nationally. That feels important to me. We were able, at the Aging Project, we were able to pass three pieces of legislation around LGBTQ equality for older adults in my career, and so it's been great to see that. We worked hard with folks in the legislature, and we passed a law in Massachusetts. We're the only state in the country that requires that the state's elder service network, home care, home health aides, adult day, health programs, assisted livings all to have LGBTQ training. What we do, obviously, has to do with activism and just making sure that people in our community are seen, valued, and respected.

SH: My question is, were you active in the LGBTQ movement? If so, what made you become [active]?

LK: There were things that just sort of mattered to me, and the marriage equality piece seemed such a huge issue, and it was. We got to the core. People would say that it was an asset. We had an older lesbian couple who would walk around the statehouse and talk to legislators, “We've been together for thirty-six years; we own a house in the suburbs.” So, I think that was part of how I started to become more active. I said just through work, and this is my community. Today, what we have to do to create and hold space for LGBTQ folks of color and for the trans community, supporting it, making phone calls, with doing whatever we have to do, creating community as well.

SH: The next question is: can you explain one moment in your day-to-day life in the LG Aging Project that was a hard day for you?

LK: I go into all sorts of places and do training and talk about LGBTQ aging. So, I'm usually going into aging providers or service providers to say, “I want to talk to you about people that maybe you don't think you're seeing in front of you and the folks that you work with.” They are already experts on working with older adults, so I'm just kind of adding to it. But I was doing this training with an organization, and I had trained their program staff and some of their administrative staff, and then there was a group of folks

who were transportation drivers. They would drive older people to different locations, and it was a group of all men. We were in a room that had no windows. I just remember it. I did not really have a single ally in the room, [except?] the staff person who was sort of there with me. I had my training agenda and things that I would say, and they were really hostile; they were really not budging an inch. This was around that time – a little bit after Caitlyn Jenner had come out as transgender. You probably know Caitlyn Jenner from the Kardashians. Before this, Jenner was an Olympic athlete and really well known. So these guys were of the generation who knew Bruce Jenner, the Olympic athlete, and thought that this transition business was crazy, insane, and disgusting. It was really hard. It was really tough. I left there thinking, “How do I keep going?” Sometimes I lean into more and ask, “Tell me more about that? How do you see that? What would it mean to think about it differently?” I found out that, for maybe forty-five minutes or an hour, they were not going to get anywhere past it. That was a super hard day. I left there feeling discouraged that I hadn't been able to make any inroads with them. Usually, I'll find some way to get people to think about it, and just being in the room with that level of hostility and tension was a really hard day.

SH: It is hard sometimes when you have to pass this information down, and people are not getting it.

LK: I've done this for a long time; I have tricks and ways that I will spin it and tell a story that seems similar or explains. You know, I'm a vegetarian. If I come to your house, I don't get to tell you what to eat in your house, but it's different when you come to my table. So yes, didn't work.

SH: What was the proudest moment that you had? Do you want to talk about it a little bit?

LK: Oh, my goodness. I guess I'm not sure if it's the proudest moment, [but] when my daughter was born. I think that feels like it was a long time coming with her pregnancy and all that kind of stuff. My ex-wife was the gestational parent. So, we were going

through the physical process of all that.

SH: You talked about this a little bit in your email about the documentary. Can you tell me a little bit about the impact?

LK: There was a filmmaker, a documentary filmmaker. He came to Boston to the LGBTQ Film Festival with another film that he had made. We met him, and he was lovely, and he said he wanted to make a film about LGBTQ aging. It was really interesting for him, and it was still innovative. He didn't want to make the movie in San Francisco or New York. He wanted to make it here. He wanted us to introduce him to some people, and we would talk with him about it. So, long story short, he spent about a year back and forth making this film here, and he filmed me doing training and as a subject matter expert. We kind of had no idea where this documentary was going to go; we had a big release that aired here because we had lots of links to people who lived here and the communities and the organizations. It has become the primary tool that so many people use. It's a one-hour documentary that many people use to convey the issues around LGBTQ aging. The folks in the film whose stories are told are friends of mine, and who I have known and cared about for many years, the older adults. It just has life and a legacy of its own, and so, frequently, I'll go places, and people were like, “Oh, my goodness, I recognized you.” My small-scale celebrity. It's an absolute privilege; none of us knew it was going to be as big as it was. But I'm really pleased that I could be a small part of something that tells the stories and brings the issues that matter [inaudible] about LGBTQ aging.

SH: I remember last time you were talking a little bit about your invitation in June to speak in the synagogue. I would love to hear more of that story and how you got into that.

LK: I joined Temple Isaiah three or four years ago, and it's been a welcoming place. It's been fine for a lesbian mom in the school, and people are very welcoming, but it was hard connecting to other LGBTQ folks in the community there. I met one other person,

and he also works in the field. We talked about how we could create something or do something there. So, we got connected with one of the staff people there to create Pride. The issues like the activism, this enormous increase in visibility around trans youth means that there are lots of cisgender, heterosexual parents who are suddenly committed to LGBTQ issues because of who their kids are. So anyway, there was a Pride Shabbat in June, and they had asked me to speak for, I don't know, ten minutes or something. Just about my experiences as a member of all of these communities, as well as a little bit about my work, and similar to the conversation today, how all those pieces intersect together for me. I talked a little bit about some of the things that synagogues could do or the Jewish community can do. The organization Keshet has just been amazing over the past twenty years of really working at that intersection of Jewish and LGBTQ communities. I work at the intersection of aging and LGBTQ, and think about the intersection of the Jewish world and LGBTQ.

SH: Can you tell me about a time that you and your friends, family, or community helped within the LGBTQ movement?

LK: There's another piece that I think is really important, and that is in making sure that the LGBTQ older adults are part of the Boston Pride Parade. It's such an enormous event. I don't know if you've ever been or seen it. Lots of people just come to stand on the streets. But it's an enormous event that takes place on the second Saturday of June during Pride week. Before COVID times, we could have hundreds of people gather publicly. This idea is about celebrating, this affirmation of the community. We always thought that it was super important that younger folks see older people. We will get trolleys because folks can't walk the distance, and we would have one or two trolleys of LGBTQ older adults waving. For the younger people, it's an opportunity to say, “This can be your future,” and I think for our folks to be appreciated and valued. I would not be here and do what I did if not for the generation of folks who were activists and did this work before me and came out and were brave and made it easy for the rest of us to live our

lives this way. There's this lovely kind of mutuality that takes place at Pride. So, it's super fun. I'm like, "This is my job today; I'm getting paid to put on rainbow stuff and march in a parade." But it's nice to have that affirmation of community. That's awesome.

SH: Before we continue, I just have a question about the LGBTQ IA+ Aging Project. Is it a place for people to live in?

LK: Excellent question, the LGBTQIA+ Aging Project is a part of Fenway Health in Boston, which is the largest LGBTQIA+ friendly health center in the area. The Aging Project's work really happens in three places. We do cultural competency training and education; therefore, aging services are more inclusive for LGBTQ older adults. We do some community engagement and building, so we do some programs for people to participate in. Now in Zoom-land, we host a drop-in. We also work with the policy work I talked about, but we do not have a physical space. We're not a senior center for people to come to or senior housing, but we work with those places in the community. There is an LGBTQ-friendly senior housing that's being built in the city of Boston right now that we're working with those folks on to create a community space, but we do not have space. Our job is really to catalyze the systems that exist already and not necessarily creating our own standalone space, but sometimes we have affinity group spaces for folks. People can come in if they want.

SH: So, is it a community?

LK: The Zoom drop-in group was a COVID response. So, on Mondays and Thursdays, we hold a drop-in, and anyone can come, and we just chat for an hour about whatever's happening. Sometimes people will contact us because they are looking for, let's say, "How do I find LGBTQ-friendly assisted living?" or "What kinds of services can I get? How do I navigate health care?" whatever that might be for them. Sometimes they want to continue to socialize as a group. I can refer them to a community-based group. This comes from my early case management job, helping to develop projects.

SH: Do you place the Jewish community in LGBTQ aging work?

LK: We don't have a particular LGBTQ seder. Talked to Keshet – working with Senior Hebrew Life and their senior building, working really closely with the services, my job is to look at existing organizations.

SH: Did your Judaism change over time?

LK: Consistently, it is a piece of my identity, and observing holidays has changed over time. It has been part of my identity and my values, and an important piece for my daughter. Shabbat is our time to rest, to understand that you are part of the community, join the synagogue. How do I connect with that? Sponsoring an Afghan family and giving away my daughter's clothes to help people – is it social work or a Jewish thing, or is it a human thing, or is it just what I do?

SH: Do you have a most significant Jewish memory?

LK: No, I don't have one. It has been a theme in my life regardless. It is a piece of who I am.

SH: Do you do any volunteer work on the side?

LK: One of the things I do here in Arlington is the LGBTQIA+ Rainbow Commission, built three to four years ago, and I want to make sure I am doing it here where I am living. I'm also on the board of LGBTQ Senior Housing, building the first LGBTQ friendlsy affordable senior housing in Boston.

SH: Do you belong to an organization?

LK: Nothing significant, I am at work and the Rainbow Commission.

SH: Are you involved in any other aspects of Jewish life?

LK: Joining the synagogue and finding a connection has been some of it. It is important for my daughter and me to have and be in a community, and what it means to be a community.