Gladys Maged and Lorry Sorgman Transcript

Rachel Eilbaum: Great. So, let's jump into it. I would love to just start off in here about what childhood was like and what it was like growing up.

Gladys Maged: Lorry, do you want to start, or do you want me to start? What would you like?

Lorry Sorgman: I'd like you to start.

GM: Okay, I'll start. I was born in Jersey City, but that's because that's where the major hospital was. I was actually raised in Hoboken, the next town over. And I think what's important for this interview was it was a poor and working-class city, it was a factory town, then. It's now a very hip place to live, if you want to move out of Manhattan – a lot of artists' communities, but it was very much a factory town, then major industry, and that's where people mostly worked, and that's who I grew up with. But the great part about that was it really gave me just a sense of people for who they are. That's just what there was. People were struggling, where they pulled together with the Community in a lot of ways, and that was really good. In addition, my parents had a very strong social justice bent. They were involved; they were activists. Before they met, when they met, and during the time they were raising me, they were very involved in social justice causes, and that was great because it gave me a perspective that you could take action, and you could build a better world, that was possible, so I think that's what's worth saying. Over to you, my friend Lori.

LS: Well, as I stated, I was born in Boston. I grew up in Dorchester, which is a little place in Boston, and it was a Jewish neighborhood, and we had a synagogue that everyone went to on Saturdays. I was brought up Orthodox for the first ten years of my

life. It was great; on Saturday morning, my sister would drag me, and we would schlep to the shul. Because we attended an Orthodox temple, we had to sit in the balcony, and I always resented the fact that my brothers got this downstairs, where all the action was, but eventually, I figured it out. We moved to a housing project, and there weren't that many Jews in the housing project area. Although every building – it was amazing how they set up the buildings; they would have – each building had one Black family, two Italian families, four Catholic families, three Jewish families. I mean, it was like you pigeon-holed everybody. That was an interesting experience, but we wound up assimilated. Remember, I'm one of – my mother had five children, but there were three marriages in the family; my father had two prior marriages, so I had some half-brothers and sisters, and I was next to the youngest, and both my grandparents were deaf. So, at an early age, I learned to sign and just to talk a little about the oppression of disabled people. When we were out in public, and I started to sign to my grandmother, she put her hands over mine and made me feel terrible about signing, so I eventually stopped signing to her because I didn't know what I had done wrong. I was only about five years old at the time, but I was born – WWII was still going on, and my dad was in the service. During that time, my mother's youngest brother was killed. He was in the Army. He was killed in France. And there was a big platform where they recognized his contribution, and there was a memorial, and there was a square that was named after him, which is what they did to a lot of veterans. I remember seeing all these women in uniform, and I decided right then and there that one day I was going to wear that uniform. Little did I know that years later, I would be attracted to all women in uniform. I want you to know that, even Salvation Army women in uniform. Eventually, I would go into service, but growing up with my family – I want to share why my grandmother did – that is, that she came from Poland, and when she came from Poland, and they hid her disability from customs. Because, if people found out she was deaf, they wouldn't let her in the country. They wouldn't even let her on the boat, so she was a stowaway on the boat in a potato sack for ten days until they got far enough out to the ocean that they couldn't turn back.

So, my grandmother had forever distress about having to go to the bathroom and being in this potato sack. Whenever she had to go to the bathroom, everyone had to go crazy to make sure she found the bathroom. But the oppression of disabled people coming into the country is just absolutely phenomenal and unacceptable. But she did come here, and she met my grandfather, who had gone to the Horace Mann School; he was also deaf, and they
married, and they had five children, and one of them was my mother. My mother was one of three girls, and they were a remarkable family. My one
uncle died in the Army, and the other one was in the Navy, and he became a magician. He was so busy with his signing, he learned to do things with his hands, so he became a magician, and his name was Mr. Fingers. He traveled all over the country, and he actually became quite famous in magic circles.

RE: Thank you for sharing.

GM: Well-told, Lorry.

LS: My family –

RE: It sounds like, in different ways, each of you was exposed to just a diverse set of people and had experiences with seeing different people be oppressed. I'm wondering, were there any particular events that sparked your involvement
and activism, and how did you really come into being an activist?

LS: Gladys?

GM: I'll start. Well, I went with my parents and then later on my own to things that had to do with the Civil Rights Movement because it was in – I was born in 1950, so it was already the early '60s, and that was the most prominent issue in the country. I went to all kinds of civil rights marches, including in 1963, the March on Washington, where Dr. King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. I was thirteen years old. I was there. So, these

were all very inspiring. They seem like this
is what life is about: that you get to speak up and you get to try and change things. So, that was all there. But I think I'm going to jump you forward, I think, when I came of age with my own activism, not just following my parents, was when I was finishing in college, yeah, basically in college. That's when Stonewall happened, while I was in college, as well as the assassination of Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy. Those things will happen during my college years, and I remember the night that I heard about Dr King being assassinated, and remember thinking, “Oh, okay, I'm an adult now. This is on me. I have to do something about it.” I was probably only eighteen or nineteen, but I felt like, “This is me.” Because I could remember very clearly – I know Lorry does, everybody in our age group remembers the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but we were so much younger then, and this one, I was like, “Oh, I can't avoid this. This is the nation's problem, too.” So, that was very pivotal. And then, later in college, gay rights and women's rights became very clear and obvious to me. It was new to me. I didn't understand women's rights before that, because there was no space to learn about women's rights. There was just no – it wasn't in the social discourse. People didn't know about it, didn't talk about it. But by the end of my college years, both of those things were something people talked about, and I began to understand there was a big oppression of women and of gay people. Lorry, how did it happen for you?

LS: Well, it's interesting. I wasn't an activist. I was nowhere near an activist; in fact, when Martin Luther King died, I had just gotten out of service, and I wondered, “Who was this guy?” But you have to understand that when you're in the military, all your news is propaganda. You only get the news that the military wants you to hear, which is very one-sided. I was eventually stationed in Germany, and as a Jew, it was a very difficult travel for me. I thought I would never see my family again, and it was only a matter of time. I thought, “Okay, they're going to come and get me because I'm a Jew in Germany.” But I did get to speak to a lot of the Jews in Germany and hear why they didn't leave during the Holocaust, and I began to understand that leaving your homeland

is a very hard thing to come to terms with, so my experience was mostly – my consciousness as a Jew got more raised while I was in Germany, and I didn't understand oppression. I certainly didn't understand the oppression of people of color. I didn't understand that until I was in the service. Well, I did see it in high school, but I didn't realize how prevalent it was. I think the first time I ever saw a person of color really being oppressed was when I was in high school, and I saw how the teachers talked to children of color. I went to an all-girls high school, which is great, because we didn't have those pesky boys there, and we didn't have to compete for anyone's attention. Although I really think that the girls I went to high school with were fantastic. They could sing, they could dance, they were talented, and they weren't shy about showing who they were. And they certainly didn't have to worry about
competing with another girl for some boy's attention. We didn't have
a football team. We didn't need a football team. But we had the arts, and every year, we would put on a fantastic play. I remember them putting on a lot of the H.M.S. Pinafore, and the other famous one. Anyway, moving on from there, I want to go into the word lesbian because that wasn't in my vocabulary. In my genre, we grew up with the word gay. And that was eventually more acceptable than the word lesbian. I mean, the word queer, you just never used the word queer; that was totally pejorative. And the word lesbian, it was like you just
didn't do it. I'll tell you an interesting story that crosses race lines. I was about ten years old, and my dad was bringing me with him to visit his friend Walter. You have to understand that up to this point, the only time I really saw my friends, my father's friends of color, is when he had to have his car repaired, he had a Black auto mechanic, and I thought, "Oh, Black men are smart. They're smart. They must be smart because they're smarter than my father, who can fix anything, but he can't fix his car." And then we have the TV break down. We didn't get a TV
until like [inaudible], where we got a TV and broke down, and my father had a Black friend who can fix the TV, and I said, "Black men are smart. They're smarter than my

father, so all Black men must be smart." I mean, when you're a kid, you make those generalities. And then, at ten years old, he was bringing me to meet with his friend Walter, who was managing an apartment building. Boy, he had to really be smart because my father couldn't manage anything. But this Black man could manage a whole apartment building. So, on the way in there, he had me, my hand, and he said, "Walter's wife is a lesbian." Well, that word was not in my vocabulary, but the word leper was, so I thought that Walter's wife is a leper. So, we got inside. My father immediately put me down in the kitchen with Walter's wife, and, by the way, you could smell bacon. I remember the smell of bacon because we were living in the projects, and people in the projects ate bacon. We didn't eat bacon. But they ate bacon, and so I knew it and the smell was – I said, "Oh, they have bacon here." My father went into the other room with his friend Walter and left me with his wife. I'm sitting at the table, and of course, I'm thinking she's a leper, so the skin or face is going to fall off. She was a light-skinned woman of color who had freckles. A woman of color with – oh, that must be the leprosy, and so I stared at her, and of course I made her completely uncomfortable, and I was completely uncomfortable. I didn't give it another thought, and a few years later, I was in an orphanage, and I was laying in bed with this girl, and we were reading True Love magazine. You remember those, Gladys? We were engrossed in reading True Love magazine. I got all excited, and I leaned over, and I kissed her on the cheek, and she said, "Get away from me, you lezzy." I said, "What's a lezzie?" She said, "Lesbian." I said, "I'm not Black, and I don't eat bacon." Well, of course, she went into hysterics about that, and I finally found out what the word lesbian really meant. And then I figured out that must be me, I must be a lesbian. She said I was a lesbian. But it wasn't a word that I kept in my vocabulary because obviously it was a pejorative word. I didn't get that word. I wasn't a bad person. And I realized that my entire life, whenever I had fantasies, they were always about women; they were never about men. Who wanted the mess with

boys? I had four brothers, and trust
me, I could never understand why any girl would be attracted to any of my brothers. I didn't grow up with a feeling, any good feelings, about boys or men, for that matter, but girls were different. Girls were more fun. I only had one girlfriend growing up, and I used to beat her up because I thought that's how you showed someone you love them, because I had grown up in a violent family. But it was interesting, the messages you get that you have to unlearn as you get older about abuse, but as far as the word lesbian goes, that's the first time I heard the word lesbian. When I was in the service, of course, you were not allowed to be gay. That was just frowned on, and I thought everyone in the service was gay because why else would you want to be living with a group of women? Why else would you go in? Although my dad didn't want me to go in. I learned later that if you go in, people thought that you were either a slut or a lesbian or you were an alcoholic, and I say, “Hey, two out of three isn't bad.” I went in. My father didn't want to sign papers, but I knew if I got him into an argument, he would sign them just to get rid of me, and he did. I was all of twenty years old when I went in. Of course, Vietnam was on, and there's been a lot written about Vietnam, and it was a very difficult time. Gladys was living in a time where the war was going on, and her family was anti-war, and I was in the middle of it. It was like two different sides of the same coin. Our background is very, very different. Even when I went to Germany, that was hard because I was assigned to the Special Ammunition Support Command Europe. It means that I had to get a security clearance, and one of the things you were required to do. I was stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, which I love by the way, beautiful city, but it's a little too Westernized. But I had to go to Berlin, and at that time, the Berlin Wall was up. You were told that if you got on the wrong streetcar, you could go into East Berlin and maybe never be heard from again. On the train to Berlin, I realized those trains were the same trains that carried the Jews to camps; they were that old. I feared I would never see my family again. Once I was on that train, we were told to give up all our identification. Then, we were told that if we got off the train before our destination, we would be shot; which is a horrible thing to live with.

It's not something that we hear in this country. I attended some propaganda meetings in West Berlin given and honored by the Third Brigade. Of course, I did get a chance to go to the Berlin Wall, and I saw some things that still haunt me to this day, on the one hand. On the other hand, I would like to turn around and build the wall between Manhattan and Brooklyn, which there is one, but nobody talks about it, and say, "Okay, you need permission to get from one end to the other," so that people could understand what it means to live in a divided city. As a Jew, I attended a seder with seven hundred Jews. The whole seder, of course, was in German, but I knew what they were saying. I knew what every symbol meant. I had been brought up that way, but it was scary to be in a room that size in Germany with other Jews. I remember how frightened I was to be there, but I needed to be there because I needed to make a statement, that as a Jew, everything else may change, no matter what uniform I may put on underneath it. I'm still a Jew, and therefore, come the holidays, I have to acknowledge them, especially the seder, to recognize the Exodus. I had to recognize it. I think I will stop here.

RE: This is a perfect segue. I was wondering what role your Jewish identity plays in your activism work.

LS: Gladys?

GM: I'll just say that the social justice values are just in everything. From my earliest childhood, the notion of you don't have to – Pirkei Avot – you don't have to finish the job, but neither can you desist from taking a step, and it was just always clear that's part of life. It's what life is about, and that you do that. In my later years, it was given an interesting twist; it was kind of the reverse. My family, because of our left leanings, had really separated themselves from the Jewish community and from practice of religion, not in a hostile way, but they just didn't do very much, so I had a real mishmash of cultural understanding. I went to a summer camp where people had a lot of Jewish cultural understanding. This is the days when everybody loved the founding of Israel, before all

the controversy in the ‘50s and ‘60s. So, there was a lot of cultural understanding. There was a lot of Yiddish around, folk singing, and folk dancing, and I knew many things, but we didn't really have a very organized approach to Judaism, and I longed for something. I knew there was something I was missing, so actually it's kind of the opposite of Judaism affecting my activism, but the reverse: I went to a Hanukkah party, probably would have been – I would have been about twenty-two years old, and it was given by a group of Jewish lesbians, and I went in and there was like thirty-five or forty women jammed into an apartment. Several frying pans going with the latkes, several women doing all the other Hanukkah rituals. I just felt very, very welcome, and I felt I was back in tradition. From then on, most of my Jewish education as a young adult – the parts I hadn't gotten since I didn't go to Sunday school, we didn't regularly attend temple – I got it from gay people, at first from those lesbians and, as time went on, the gay man I met in the gay Jewish Movement. They really taught me everything, because so many of them had had a very good Jewish education, different than – they were very learned, and they had done all the things you would do as a Jewish youth. And then they felt alienated from their tradition because of being gay, and it was kind of like they had all this rich Jewish learning and no place to put it. They were delighted when I came along, eager to learn from them and to be able to share it with any other gay and lesbian people who had not had that. So really, it’s the gay activism that informed the Judaism for me. How did Judaism affect your activism, Lorry?

LS: Well, I was thinking I remember an experience when I was in the orphanage. I had to go to the school in Brighton, and there were only four Jews in the whole school, and that was because Brighton wasn't exactly a Jewish community at that time. The orphanage was right down the hill from the school, the Winship school. On Thursday afternoon, they wanted to take all the non-Jewish kids for religious training for gentiles, and they left the Jews behind. There was one other Jew in my sixth-grade class, Jason, and they said you two can wash the Blackboards. And I said, “Where are they going?” and they said, “They're going for

religious training." I remember, I said, "If they're going for religious training, why don't you send me to Hebrew school? I wanted equal treatment. So, I was twelve years old, and I put my foot down. I'm not going to wash the blackboards. Moses freed the slaves! Well, they were very upset with me, and they called my mother. After the headmaster told my mother that I was being an obstinate child, they gave me the phone so I could talk to my mother. I told her the whole story, and she said, "You are not going to wash those blackboards." So, I gave the phone back to the headmaster, and instead, Jason can wash the blackboards because he wanted to, but I wasn't going to. I had to be punished and sit in my chair for the rest of the day, until school got out. But that was my first experience, as far as I'm concerned with blatant antisemitism. So, in a way, it stayed in the back of my mind. I didn't think of it as activism until, in retrospect, I realized it was my first act against the oppression of being a Jew, and it was placed on me. I didn't invite it; it came to me. I realized that Jews were treated differently. Of course, I was familiar with the Holocaust, because I was born in 1943. We had people in our homes with the numbers tattooed on their wrist. In fact, I remember, I went – I wanted a tattoo on my wrist. My mother's guest had a tattoo on her wrist. I went and put a number tattoo on my wrist. Hell broke loose at home, but it was explained why Jews were tattooed, and that was a learning experience. The Holocaust was still going on. I grew up during the war. Our basement windows were painted black so enemies couldn't find us. That was a very scary time to grow up. I was very happy when the war was over, but it had no meaning to me other than my father would come home from the war. He came home damaged. So, in that way, my activism without the word activism started at a very early age because I was a Jew. Later on, the realization that I was gay, I was a lesbian. That's the word we used, the word gay. We didn't use the word lesbian. In those days, it was a pejorative word, and that's the way it was. I think that I didn't become an activist until it became necessary. When I got out of the service, I was living in New York, in Brooklyn, and I started to go to gay clubs. Of course, I had never been to a gay club, although I did go to a couple while I was in the service. Oppression was pretty heavy back then. I

remember going to Houston Street in the village, and we would be dancing, and there was a black partition. We danced on the other side and in the back. In front of the bar, when the police came in, they would flash lights in back, and if we were dancing with a female, we had to switch to dance with the man. The other thing is, if you had more than three pieces of the opposite gender's clothing, you could be arrested. In those days, we used the word transsexual, not transgender, which is more acceptable today. Back then, it was transsexual. You could be arrested, and that was a very scary time in the '60s. I remember people actually got arrested. So, this is pre-Stonewall. Pre-Stonewall, you could be arrested for dancing with someone of your own gender. It was a very, very scary time, so when I got out of the service. I didn't want to move to Boston because I didn't know the community, the gay community, in Boston, but I did know it in New York. I used to go to the 82nd Club in Greenwich Village, which was all transsexuals – that word was acceptable back then – and there would be one female entertainer. In the end, you had to figure out who the female entertainer was. Eighty-one male entertainers dress as female, and there would be one real female entertainer. In the end, you had to figure it out, like the guessing game. It was a fun time. I used to go there, and I would smoke my stogies because that's what butches did in those days. It was a big and exciting time in its own way. Coming out was an exciting experience, but it was also a very, very scary. My Jewish activism didn't start until after I got out of the service, and I started hanging around with the gay community in Boston. There was a group that went to a church called the Metropolitan Community Church, led by then Larry Bernier. There was a group of us Jews who would go to church every Sunday. One of the guest speakers had accused the Jews of killing Christ. En masse, the Jews walked out. We went into the foyer of the church. We were totally disgusted by what we just heard. Larry Bernier said, "There's enough of you. Why don't you start your own Jewish gay group?" And so we met at the church, and that was fine for a while, but we wanted our own meeting place. We wanted to meet in a Jewish environment. I think at that time, the first meetings outside of that were at BU [Boston University]. And BU was renting space to us.

But they found out it was a Jewish gay group. A young many, immediately contacted his parents, and his wealthy parents decided they weren't going to donate any more money to BU, so long as there was a gay Jewish group there. BU refused to give us any more space to worship in. Instead, they rented the space to a ballet group. We had an opportunity to meet with the Hillels – BU, Northeastern, Harvard, MIT – all of them. I had never come out publicly, but I was the spokesperson for the group. So, I got up, and I said "we're not asking for the whole state of Israel; we're asking for a little house to worship in. How can you turn Jews away? How can you deny Jews a place for worshipping just because they're gay?" Well, I broke down in tears, and what they thought I was crying about was the substance of what I was talking about. I wasn't. I broke down in tears because I was coming out publicly for the first time in my life. At that moment, I became an activist. My activism after that led not only to the lesbian and gay Jewish movement, but it also got me involved with BLGPA, Boston Lesbian Gay Political Alliance. I was on their
reproductive rights committee. When we're activists, we don't just talk about being an activist for gay issues, we're activists for all issues. You ask what part of my Jewish identity helped me become an activist. I think it is the recognition that I'm not just for myself. But if I'm only for myself, then what am I, and this is consistent with my Jewish teaching. I think that whatever I do to make the world a better place, and I hope I have, it's not because I'm Lorry Sorgman, but it's because I'm Jewish and I have a responsibility to leave the world a better place. According to my own understanding of what that better place means.

RE: This will be the last question before we do a little bio break. But I would love to hear maybe some highlights from your activism, or something you're most proud of. And then, in both of your biographical questionnaires, you cited each other as inspirations. Gladys, you wrote that Lorry and you have collaborated for social change for almost fifty years, so I would love to hear how you met, and maybe something you guys are most proud of doing together.

GM: So, as Lorry just referred to, after the first gay synagogue in Boston, B'nai Haskalah, then there was one called Am Tikvah, which still exists. As she said, it went from “Children of the Enlightenment” to “People of Hope.” That was a good progression, and then we were at BU. But then we quickly ended up at Northeastern, and we were in people's living rooms as well. We called ourselves a shopping bag synagogue because we had carried around bags to whatever our location for that meeting was. That's where I met Lorry. In those early days of Am Tikvah, we met, and we just – it's great to be in a gay Jewish group. So much speaks to your being a whole person. You could bring out both of those aspects in the same place, and that was really great. I think of the bulk of what we should talk about in the remainder of this interview is what we did with the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jews. Lorry was first to get pulled into that work. She could talk about that, but she quickly pulled me in with her and said, “We really have to do this.” So, that's where we went. You just asked about things I'm particularly proud of. Lorry, I don't know if I could jump ahead to a few of the highlights we discussed about the World Congress, but I was looking over my notes, and I noted that there was the founding, which you should go back and talk about the founding and the role of women. I'll just talk about our first trip to Israel, which was 1979. We went to Israel because the gay people in Israel were one of the first groups to say they would like to hold a conference, a get-together, where we would have a meeting, and we'd also have educational opportunities and social opportunities. It was so much more than we had bargained for. Like many other Jewish groups, we had collected money to plant trees in Israel. We had collected nine thousand dollars for the same reasons other groups collected; for births, anniversaries, weddings, and celebrations. Everybody had contributed for whatever honor they wanted to acknowledge. We had our nine thousand dollars, and we contacted the Jewish National Fund, and said, “We want to contribute this nine thousand dollars. It's from the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jews.” Unbeknownst to us until we got to Israel, from a lot of countries – the US, Canada, Israel, and some European countries. When we arrived in Lahav, we discovered that JNF

(Jewish National Fund) were not willing to plant the trees with the plaque we had requested. They would not put “Gay and Lesbian Jews” on the plaque that would reside in the forest. The most memorable story to me is that we were in Israel debating what to do. We're sitting in some dining place, about twenty or thirty of us. What will we do? Since we've already contributed the money, they already have our money. We could accept that they won't put our plaque up and be done with it, but it would be a dishonor to all those people who had given us the money. It wasn't just our money. It was many people's money, and they've given it for a reason. An older man, Henry, – I laugh because now I'm older than he was then, but he was probably in his sixties. He stood up and said, “My doctor said I couldn’t come on this trip. I was forbidden to come on this trip, because I have serious heart trouble. And my doctor said, ‘You will not survive this trip.’ And I said, ‘Well, if I die in the land of Israel, then so be it. That's where I die. I've never been. I'm going to go on this trip.” So, he did. By the way, he did go back home again alive. He was so courageous to say that and to galvanize us, and he said, “We go to the forest, and we plant the trees, and we just keep fighting until we get the plaque we want.” So, we went. We had a chartered bus because we were a tour group, and we hopped on the bus and we told the driver to go to Lahav, which is where one of the JNF [Jewish National Fund] forests is. When we arrived, the caretaker says “Oh, I didn't think it was anything scheduled for today,” because, of course, they had canceled us. We said, “Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We have a tour group full of people. We're here to plant trees.” He said, “Okay.” What he did was bring out a ceremonial tree, and we planted it. So, we planted our tree and, many of our gay men, were very well educated Judaically. They said prayers. We danced, we sang, we got back on our bus, and we left. We were very happy because we had planted our trees nonetheless. We fought for ten years with the JNF in New York. We fought and fought for it, and they eventually did put up the correct plaque. That's one of the things of which I am really proud.

RE: Lorry, will you share some highlights of your activism work, something you're most proud of, and maybe something you're most proud of that you got to do with Gladys.

LS: Well, I was a student at Suffolk University then. I was on a summer one-week break between classes. There was a conference. I think I mentioned to you in my writings that one of the things that brought a lot of gay Jewish groups together, was that the United Nations had put out a proclamation that Zionism was equal to racism. We were up in arms. A number of Jewish communities got together, but particularly for me, the gay Jewish community across the United States got together, and met in Washington, DC. This was 1976. They thought it was so good to get together; they scheduled another conference that Congregation Beit
Simchat Torah in New York would host in New York City. I was just a poor student then, but my girlfriend said to me, “We have to go.” Also, Mark Solomon said, “I'll get your scholarship, but you have to go. There are not going to be that many women so we have to go.” Janet, my then girlfriend, and I went. It was my first time attending a Jewish Conference. I was brought up Orthodox, so I was completely accepting of the oppression of women within our religion. I mean, to me it was nothing new, so why get bent out of shape about it? But there was a play that went on, and the play that went on was a Jewish mother who found out her son was gay, and so she brought in a prostitute to sleep with him, and, of course, this was supposed to be humorous the way it was brought out. It brought out a lot of humor. But the women in CBST [Congregation Beit Simchat Torah] were activists. They had their consciousness raised a long time ago, and they got up in the middle of the play and walked out. I didn't understand the issue. My girlfriend, who is not Jewish, had to explain to me what the issue was, and that was impressive. Janet said to me, how could you not see it? At that point, the conference stopped and we went into a consciousness-raising session. Jay Fryer, from Miami Dade Florida, (God rest his soul, died of AIDS) – chaired the meeting with all women, to find out what the issues were and how could we make it better. Very courageous man, the animosity that came at him was chilling. One of the things that makes working with this kind of group a total pleasure is that it was less difficult bringing a consciousness to the disparity of how men and women in the general society. Throughout my experience with

the conferences I would be dismissive if I didn't recognize the willingness of my gay brothers to listen in earnest, how to make Judaism more open and accepting on the ways of women. So the next meeting was in 1978, hosted by Beth Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles, CA.

BCC, the Los Angeles Jewish group, had been working very closely with the Reform Jewish movement, held a conference, and it was in Los Angeles. I couldn't afford to go, but my girlfriend Janet, said to me, "You have to go. You have to be there. They need your presence, and you need to voice what's going on." So, I went. The conference was at the Sportsmen's Lodge, which was renamed for the weekend the Sports Lodge. We weren't going to have a man's lodge. In the organizational meetings, there was a group of women that said, "You can't have a gay Jewish group, it's got to be gay and lesbian or lesbian and gay, but the word lesbian has to be in there!" Well, again, I told you, I was at the age where the word lesbian was pejorative. So the idea that I was going to have to put a word out there that had been offensive my whole life, meant that I had to come to terms with that word! I stated, "Well, if that's what is necessary then we should do it." Of course, their training and my training was different. As Gladys pointed out many times, if you're going to be a feminist, you got to be on the West Coast or the East Coast. In between doesn't count. So the West Coast had a very high consciousness-raising ability that we didn't yet have on the East Coast to the degree that they had. The women present demanded that I serve on the bylaws committee and I did. I was very vocal, and I made some mistakes along the way, because nothing in my personal history could show that I should be a leader in this organization. I wasn't raised middle-class, and working-class people aren't exactly known for joining groups and doing the things that they were asking me to do, and I wasn't exposed to that, so I had a lot to learn. But the bylaws committee gave me an opportunity to learn about structure, already having been the leader, both in B'nai Haskalah and Am Tikva. Just a footnote on Am Tikva. When we put in the bylaws together for Am Tikva, our bylaws dictated that at least one position on the board be reserved for a minority gender. Never in my life, did I ever think that that

position would have to be protected for a male position. But we became so active as lesbian feminists within Am Tikva, that we had to find one man who would be willing to serve on the board with all these strong, vocal women. Yeah, that always amuses me how that turned out. I got involved with the Bylaws Committee of the World Congress. When I came back from that summer trip, I immediately called Gladys. She met me on Beacon Hill during my lunch hour and her lunch break, and I said okay, “I have to tell you what's going on.” She said to me, “I'm getting my private report.” I said, “Yes, you're getting your private report,” and all the time I was thinking, “I want this woman in leadership. I want her in bigger leadership than just Am Tikva. She's got a lot to share.” I could see that in her, and I could see what an enormous contribution she had already made to Am Tikva. I knew that I wanted her influence on the World Congress. Of course, I had my underlying ideas. I knew that she was going to get involved because once you get a taste of this, you can't go back. We did create bylaws for the organization, and we went to Israel in '79. The next international conference was in San Francisco, September 1, 1980. We held and passed the bylaws to create the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations. The name actually came from me. At that time, I was a subscriber to the American Jewish Congress, and I said, “Congress. I like that word. That's what we are.” So I pulled the word from that, and we became the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations. I had a good influence, and I was glad that I did. I learned how to be a feminist because I hadn't been trained to be one, and between Gladys and my girlfriend Janet, who beat me over the head with concepts, I finally learned what a raised consciousness was necessary to do. I mean, Janet dragged me to the Equal Rights Amendment March in Washington, DC, in 1978, and it was hot, is all I can tell you. Although we didn't pass the ERA, we found out how strongly we are as women. So a lot of things that I took for granted and overlooked in my consciousness raising of my friends – you can't raise someone's consciousness, unless you care about them. You have to care enough. You have to think that what you're going to do will make a difference. Between Janet and Gladys, I was getting there, and it was useful

because it was necessary to be able to move the World Congress forward. The biggest issue that we dealt with starting the World Congress was the accessibility, both economic and physical, of the conference. We had to make sure that there was the ability for scholarships, economic scholarships, so that people could attend conferences. We had to make sure that there were workshops that would be acceptable to the lesbian part of the community. There was a lot of hostility between the men and the women. But there was enough there that we could raise each other's consciousness. As explained, I became the founding leader, the founding president. I became the coordinating secretary, but later it was renamed president, so I became the founding president of the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations. Our constituency at that time was in twelve countries, so we have really grown, and the conference in Israel was a huge help to that.

RE: We're going to talk more about the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations and hear about some more of the work that you guys have done with them.

GM: Well, Lorry referenced the battle around women's participation and I thought of a couple of interesting things regarding that. For example, Lorry's story about how she had to learn to grapple with the term lesbian. It's an interesting statement when you think about the progression around labels that have happened since then. We've been through, of course, bisexual, and I remember the battle that happened around bisexual. It happened at the Congress later, but in Am Tikva, there were women by then who were probably in their twenties and thirties, and I was already in my forties. The younger women were like, "Lesbian does not represent us. We are bisexuals." And we were like, "Well …" We were doing the same thing that the men had done to us, like, "Why do you need another word? You fall under the same umbrella." They were like, "No, we don't fall under the same umbrella. We are a distinct group. We're bisexuals." We went back and forth about that, and of course, we

then added bisexual. As it goes on, of course, each group feels like one of the generations before them does not speak to who they are. Identity is important, and to them, a new identity they want to articulate is important, so that's kind of going on in Am Tikva, in the World Congress, and it went on as going on, of course, broadly in the gay movement which isn't even called the gay movement, anymore. It's called the queer movement now - Queer pride.

GM: The second point I wanted to make is that at the time when the World Congress was formed, as well as when Am Tikva was formed, it was remarkably different how the liberal Jewish community reacted to gay people. That's one of the great beauties of what we did. At this time, right now, many segments of the liberal Jewish community, and I mean by that Reform Movement to Reconstructionist certainly, and really the Conservative Movement as well, are eager for gay congregants. Many Reform synagogues, the one I'm most familiar with, have formed a havurah, made sure to recruit amongst the rabbinic and cantorial staff people that are gay. They've done many things to make sure that gay families feel like they can join. That was not the case; people did not feel welcome into congregations of their parents, of their childhood, of the ones they met in Boston. When they lived as independent adults, they did not feel welcome, and so the big beauty of what we did was make a space where you could be gay and Jewish in the same place. Over time, that wasn't as necessary. Discrimination lessened, and that particular need was not there as much, and people didn't feel hated by the Jewish world as much. In fact, Lorry made one reference about AIDS. This was the time period when every time Lorry called me, it felt like she was telling me about another man who had died, who had been the leader of one of our congregations, because people were dying very quickly of AIDS; it was before the treatments had become successful enough to keep people alive. You turn to the Jewish community or your community when there are deaths. You turn to a place you can grieve, you can bury, and you can honor. We couldn't, and that really brought it home. In fact, I'll tell one more story. One of the first things I remember where that tide began to turn, is that I was at a meeting in New York

City. I was there representing the World Congress. I was the development director, and I was there, supporting some people in New York. We're meeting with the Reform Movement representative in New York. It was something like this. We had a program we wanted them to fund. It had to do with education around the AIDS issue, so that our congregants would feel more comfortable coming there for the services they needed when people were dying. There were healing services that are now so common. I remember the representatives in the New York congregation sitting next to me. They couldn't believe it when the Reform Movement representative said yes. Basically, we present what we wanted, and the Reform Movement rep said, “Yeah, okay. We’ll look into it. We’re probably going to do it.” The person next to me was still arguing with him, and I said, “I think he said yes. Stop arguing with him.” A single door would open, and we had pried open the door, and now it was open, and we couldn't believe we could walk in. So, that's just a story about what the contribution was of those times to actually – like Lorry insisted we'd be legitimate, we'd be a real – we are an organization, we have a name, we have status in the world, and that was enough to give us the standing that later allowed us to move into the broader community. One specific thing I want to appreciate Lorry for – Lorry's background professionally is as an accountant, and she really understands something about money and how it fuels social justice. One thing she did was to figure out a funding scheme for the World Congress. Because everything was volunteer, we had no money. Where are we going to get money from – no one even wanted us. They certainly weren’t giving us grants at that point. She figured out that if we had these annual conferences that were so popular because people wanted to come together, and have this social, cultural, educational opportunity, we could charge fees at the conference. People wouldn't mind that, and we could fundraise for the organization’s year-round administrative needs. It worked perfectly well for quite a few years. Lorry was thinking about how do we make this into a substantial and worthy organization that would stick around. She made that happen. That's the fiduciary responsibility of any Jewish community. We didn't know about that. We hadn't been trained, and she thought

about it, and it made the Congress sustain itself.

LS: Two things I want to adlib on. One of them is right after we got the World Congress established, and we had our first meeting of the management committee, which is what it was called then. The question came up of, well, now that we're not running the conferences anymore, because it's at a different level, how are we going to earn money? I said, “Well, it’s simple. We just charge everyone who attends a conference a surcharge of five dollars. They said a surcharge. I said, “Yeah, because the responsibility of the World Congress coordinating secretary, our President, is to coordinate with that organization that's going to hold the conference to make sure that it meets certain criteria, so we're going to do it, we might as well get paid for it. The way we get paid for it is a surcharge on every participant in every conference, and nobody complained about it. We set up a dues structure for the organization, and all the organizations would pay one dollar per person per member. Well, the only people who complained were the larger organizations, the larger congregations. They said, “Well, we have a membership of 350, and Am Tikva only has a membership of fifty. Why should they only pay fifty, and we pay $350? I said, “Ah, we've already got three members of Am Tikva heavily involved in the Congress. We have zero people from the larger community involved in the Congress. Maybe you should just pay those of us who are doing the work for our congregation,” and they shut right up.

GM: Hold on, Lorry. This is exactly what any Jewish community that sticks around has to do. Good job, Lorry.

LS: The other thing is that most of the organizations in the bylaws had a requirement that you had to be gay and Jewish. That was a requirement. Well, when we started going after membership in the Reform Movement, the Reform Movement said, “You can't do that. We cannot have an organization that's a member of the Reform Movement that excludes heterosexuals. Heterosexuals, you're worried about us excluding you? That's

interesting. Many of the organizations – Etz Chaim Chadashim on the West Coast and BCC, Beit Simchat Torah, New York – had to change their bylaws so that, if they weren't exclusive, they have to be eighteen – you had to be eighteen, and you either had to be gay or Jewish, and there was no provision for bisexuality because that was what it was at the time. So, many, many organizations who wanted to join as members of the Jewish Reform Movement – I forget what it's called – had to change their bylaws so that it would be acceptable to the Reform Movement. Of course, and I say this with tongue in cheek, many of the organizations would rather be connected closely to the Reconstructionist than the Reform Movement, but given that a lot of people don't understand what Reconstruction is in the Jewish moment, it was easier to say no.

GM: We had to become gay friendly, not exclusive.

LS: These were interesting times. I had been asked this several times by Jewish rabbis; Why do you need a separate congregation? Why can't you just join our congregation? I reached out, and I grabbed his hand and, of course, he was startled, and I said to him, “We can't do this in your congregation. Two women can’t hold hands in your congregation. Until that's acceptable we have to have our own congregations. Interestingly, we can look back fifty years. We can look back, and we can say where have we come with our raising consciousness within the Jewish community about the gay Jewish population. We can say what have we done. Look at the progress that we have made. By saying that, we don't want to be exclusive, or that if you accept us, we won't need that exclusivity. But now we look back. Now, we see that we've come a long way. There are temples that are completely open to gay participants. That wasn't true fifty years ago. People reminded you of all the commandments that said man shall not lay with man as he does with women. I can't remember the rabbi's name. We had a male Jew by choice who was involved with Bnai Haskalah and Am Tikva for a while. He told the rabbi that he was gay. He was afraid of being ostracized for it. The rabbi responded, “Do you follow all 613 commandments?” He said, “No.” The rabbi

responded, “Well, why worry about one?” which I thought was a really embracing answer. It made him more comfortable with who he was. We can only grow when we can speak about what's keeping us from being closer. So, they opened the door, and they made it a lot easier. We've done many, many, many events over the years, and I want to share one event that went on every year with Am Tikva. It was called the gay liberation seder. It was a different kind of seder. It was right around the same time as Gay Pride. It was a blending of the Exodus story and the permission of our Jewish community to relate.

LS: We are gay and lesbian Jews. Whether we were born gay, whether we chose to be gay. We know we were born Jewish. We also have people who have chosen – they chose to be Jewish. I think Jews by choice says a great deal when someone could avoid being Jewish by being the religion they were born to be. My friend Cherie Brown says that there is no Jewish gene. I personally don't believe that. There's no Jewish gene. While it is true that we are all born alike, there is something we take in from our parents from the very beginning.
GM: I think you covered it beautifully, Lorry.

LS: Thank you.

RE: You both touched on the progression of not being able to participate in other congregations and having to form your own areas to be gay and Jewish or lesbian and Jewish, to now, like you said, Gladys, congregations are eager for gay families and gay members. So, I was curious, are there any other areas besides maybe congregation membership that you've seen Jewish communities – or maybe this broader acceptance that you've seen Jewish communities work to embrace LGBTQ participants, and what work do you think still has to be done to make Jewish spaces more not only spaces that welcome other people, but spaces where everybody feels like they can belong?

GM: Oh, one thing that occurred to me was an organization like Keshet, which is based here in Boston. Keshet has had such national influence, which is of a younger

generation than me and Lorry, not excluding older people, but really born for a younger generation of activists; which has had such influence and so many people in the Jewish community turn to it. It's not quite what you're saying about integrating us in the Jewish community, but the Jewish media has turned to it in many ways for education, and guidance about making things accessible, so that's one way. I also offer my personal experience that in supplementary Sunday schools in summer camps, in JCC, in all the Jewish organizations that are not synagogue based, I think that people have become very sensitive. For instance, the issue of gay and trans youth has progressed really fast. I'm affiliated with Kahal B'raira in Cambridge, and our Sunday school has moved really fast on those issues. Honestly, they've had to because young Jewish children, teens, and young adult Jews just won't be stopped; it will be repressed, and their families stand behind them, for the most part, in liberal Judaism. So, I can't say that I have any specifics about places I'd like to see more happen, but I think it is happening in a big, big way.

LS: I think you hit it right on that they're a lot more accepting today. In my own family, years ago, I was ostracized as a lesbian. But once it became fashionable to know someone who is a lesbian, okay, then they wanted you. My own sister used to broadcast to everyone that she had a lesbian sister, and I used to get the biggest kick out of it because, instead of being ostracized now, oh, I'm proud of my lesbian sister, just her being a lesbian. Years ago, I was working as comptroller of New Age magazine, and Peggy Taylor, who was then the editor, was entertaining a consultant to help us pull things together. She said to the consultant, who she knew was a lesbian, “Oh, our comptroller is gay.” When I realized that Peggy had done that, I was furious. It sounds crazy, I know, but I was furious with her, and not because I wasn't out – because I was – but would she say if I were a heterosexual, “Oh, and here's my heterosexual comptroller?” No. So, by saying, “Here's my gay comptroller,” she isolated me, and that is not what should happen. It shouldn't be an anomaly. It should be something just accepted. I think that's what people need to realize today. You don't say, “Oh, this is my

gay neighbor or my heterosexual neighbor, or my bisexual neighbor." You say, "I want you to meet my friend." To entertain under the subheading of sexuality is just as insulting as anything else.

LS: I think it's important as we move forward with people being comfortable with sexualities. That it not be identified as a primary identification. If you are truly accepting, it's no big deal. I'm a big fan of Wheel of Fortune. I love that show, and I'm amazed at how many times they have people on who are lesbian or gay. They'll say, "My husband." A man will say, "My husband," or someone says, "My wife," a female, and of course, the title doesn't escape me; it has its own implications but it was nice to be able to see a game show where people could talk about their mate without it being a big deal.

RE: Great. I was wondering who – some people that had significant influence in your lives as just people or activists, and why they had such a big impact on you.

GM: Just say all the feminist heroes. I didn't name any when I wrote to you, Rachel, because there are just so many, but I've been inspired by all the female heroes. I've been inspired by the gay activists, someone like Harvey Milk, who was able to speak and organize people in a way. I mentioned to you Diane Balser because she's a women's activist that I've known since maybe '76 or '77, and has never given up on the issue of women's liberation. , It seems like women's liberation has almost a passe kind of feel to it because we moved on to so many new realms in the world of sexuality and identities. But I don't think it's actually lost its need. Diane's taught me is that it is still the case that we women are not in many of the most powerful positions, and that we women are not equally paid, and we don't have the opportunities. Most women still have and raise children, and that means we carry the burden of the next generation, which also decreases our career advancement, our economics, etc. In the Jewish religion, I think there are still barriers. I think that just the issue of fighting for women's rights is still very valid, and I care about it, and I feel like I learned that from Diane. As you know, I mentioned Lorry. I'll just say it again. Lorry's been so inspirational to me. She just won't

stand for it. She's told several of her stories. She just won't take it, and so that means we have to do something. That's it.

LS: Yeah. You remind me, Gladys, I was invited to speak to a group of young Jews at Wesleyan College years ago, and public speaking wasn't something I was comfortable with at all, but I forced myself to go. One of the questions that came up from a young Jewish boy there was, “Well, if you go along with this lesbian parenting issue, you don't need men, what are we going to be good for?” I said, “I'm amused. At the same time, it's not amusing, so let me comfort you. Many of us want to have children. In the gay and lesbian community, many of us want to have children.” “Where do you think the sperm is going to come from?” Of course, the whole place laughed, and I said, “I'm not saying that you’re only good for a sperm donor, but one of the reasons that men and women have had
different roles throughout the ages is because of childbearing, because of procreation, and that's not going to change.” So, I said, almost insultingly, and I regret it now, “So, honey, we still need you.” Of course, you have to add a little humor to the situation, or you lose your audience, but it's true things have changed. But my hero, and I have many of them – Golda Meir was my hero because she was a pioneer. So, when I see women who are pioneers, they're my heroes. Gladys has always been my hero because her clarity of thinking has always enabled me to take the next step. Without her support over the years, I don't know what I would have done. Everyone needs someone to help them think, and Gladys has always been my thinking post. I rely on her for a lot of things. Diane Balser, like Gladys, Diane is one of my heroes because she doesn't get upset when you say something that's completely contrary to what she believes. She sits there and has the patience to explain to you her thinking, and her clarity of vision is inspiring. I have other heroes besides them, and going back a little further to Eleanor Roosevelt, who was married to a very difficult person, she didn't let it hold her back. She was a woman. She was a visionary. I learned once that vision without execution is fantasy. When I think of Eleanor Roosevelt, I think of vision with execution as success. That

pretty much is it. I mean, in my own life, I live by the mantra that the capacity to learn is a gift, the ability to learn is a skill, the willingness to learn is a choice, and I live by that. I always have had to be willing to learn, although sometimes my head is a lot harder than Gladys would like it to be. Those are my heras.

RE: Then my final question is, what advice would you give a young activist now?

GM: Right. Build your base. Nothing gets done without relationships. You have to be able to relate to people, to listen. Being right is not going to get you there. You do need to be right in the sense that you need to think, and you have a good analysis. You need to learn and have good policies. But just that alone will never get you there. It has to be done with relationships of trust and people knowing each other and building from that base. So, don't ever let it get ahead of you, or away from you. You need the people around you. You have to build with them for you to survive and for it to get anywhere. Whatever you're doing, and then hopefully creating good policies; you're thinking, your good ideas, they will actually get somewhere great. Thank you.

LS: Gladys said it beautifully, but I say build a relationship with your adversaries because once you do that, anything is possible. Did you want to go on talking about the World Congress?

GM: No, I didn't, I was done with that section, Lorry. If you had to add something, you certainly should, but I was done.

LS: Oh, Rachel said she wanted to know more about the World Congress.

GM: That was right after the break, and I added a couple of more stories then.

RE: Yeah. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

LS: Well, originally, we were in twelve countries. Today, we're in eighteen countries. My final act as President in 1989 was to sign an application for membership in the United Nations non-governmental body. We then, instead of doing it on our own, joined with the International Lesbian, Gay Political Alliance, which is ILGA. They put the application in, and only one country objected to it. To be non-governmental, you have to have a hundred percent. Because of that, we were not able to go in as an NGO. Today, at last count, of the eighteen countries that the World Congress now represents, there are many that are still battling the issues. I know that the World Congress exists today very differently. They've added a lot of words to their organizational name – World Congress of Lesbian and Gay, Transgender, etc. organizations, and now they've dropped the word organizations completely, and they're calling themselves Gay, Lesbian, etc., Jews at that. It's really not bad. I think the concept from an organizational point of view was an organization of organizations, and now they're thinking it's just an organization of gay Jews. I think there's a difference because they have different goals. The organization of organizations has to think about the organization and the external issues that keep the oppression in place. Whereas the Conference of Gay Jews is just something that has a conference, and it holds workshops that expands the knowledge of the attendees, but it doesn't look at it from an organizational point of view, and an international point of view only. It's just the Conference. So, it's really changed what it was, and I think they call it the World Conference now rather than Congress. So, things reconstitute themselves, and I just have to sit back and say that that was what it was, and I retired.

GM: Rachel, I want to add one more thing to your question about young activists. I want to pay respect to what young activists are doing today, which is that we broke a lot of barriers, and I hope and assume that was helpful for women and for gay people. But we didn't in any way repair the world completely, and we did leave a lot of jobs undone, and the world has changed and moved forward, and a lot of new things have come up. So, an example of that would be, we certainly were against role stereotypes, but we didn't erase them, and so today's younger population of activists are completely not willing to

accept gender roles, and they're rebelling against that in a very good way, because we didn't finish that job. Also, I think that there's a beautiful resurgence of activism across many, many issues, and the intersectionality is so amazing. People really understand, as Lorry referenced earlier, you can't be against one thing; it won't work. You have to be in unity and against many things, and that's what a lot of the activists today are doing. And they're just doing an amazing, wonderful job and taking on all the issues of today, including climate, and including disunity amongst groups of people, etc. So, thank you.

RE: Well, thank you both so much for taking the time to speak with me. I really, really appreciate it.