

Ohio Lesbian Archives

August 31, 2019

Interview with Phebe Karen Beiser & Victoria "Vic" Ramstetter
Clifton United Methodist Church, 3416 Clifton Ave, Cincinnati, OH 45220

PB = Phebe Beiser, VR = Victoria Ramstetter, CW = Cameron Wood

CW: Today is August 31, 2019, I'm Cameron Wood, here at the Clifton United Methodist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. I'm here with Phebe Karen Beiser and Victoria "Vic" Ramstetter. They're going to talk to us about the Ohio Lesbian Archives and the lesbian community in Cincinnati. Ladies, can you please introduce yourselves and tell us about your work?

PB: You go first.

VR: Age before beauty.

PB: [laughter] I'll take it. Or it could be--it's not necessarily an either/or. So, I go by Phebe. I took that name, added that name, in the 70s. It was the 70s "creative and spirituality" kind of thing with the women's community. Anyway, I am retired, and the Ohio Lesbian Archives is probably my most passionate project. We're totally volunteer, God forbid, yeah, we're volunteer. Well, I don't want to get too much into the Archives, but in another week, exactly one week, we're having a 30th anniversary of this organization as a single entity and a public space. So, I was a librarian at the downtown Cincinnati Public Library, as turned out to be a career. I did not intentionally go into that, but it happened. What else? I facilitate a class, part-time, and I do get paid, at Women Writing for a Change, which also men and all genders now, but mostly women and girls. So that is another joy, creative writing and being with others, doing that, and I live in an A-frame by a creek with a dog and a cat right now. Nature and animals are important to me and bring me joy. So, that's enough to start.

VR: I was born in Cincinnati, actually, at Good Sam Hospital [Good Samaritan Hospital]. I'm the oldest of eight. My mother had nine kids in 12 years, and she said, "Your dad and I have chemistry." But anyway, growing up, my favorite songs as a little kid were "Standing On The Corner Watching All The Girls Go

By” [“Standing On The Corner” by Dean Martin] and “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini” [by Brian Hyland], so somebody should’ve had a clue. [laughter] But anyway, and I fell in love with a classmate in high school, and I remember thinking, at some point, when I had these dreams about her, I finally thought, “Oh, you must be a queer.” And then I thought, I don’t want to cut my hair really short and drive a truck and smoke a cigar. Because my mother had a cousin who was a lesbian, and she was one of those kind of butch-y lesbians, which I have always thought of myself as a more of an androgynous kind of a lesbian, going both ways, as far as not really totally butch, not really totally femme. Just, I think that’s part of the modern feminist movement, is to be able to be who you are without having to fit into any kind of block or square or whatever. And especially, we quickly got into the lesbian feminist movement, which kind of straddled the gay movement and the emerging feminist movement. And so, we were, a lot of people thought we were pretty radical, but not really.

PB: Or maybe midwest radical.

VR: We lived together in, Phebe and I lived together in a commune in Clifton, two different communes with some other women, lesbian, feminist, and my best gay guy friend always digs at me about when he would come to visit, and he--he makes up things too--and all of a sudden, the call would go through the house, “There’s a man in the house!” But anyway, we also, some older lesbians, who really were radical, left Cincinnati to go to the Land, and they gave us their traveling lesbian bookstore. Lesbian feminist bookstore, actually. So we, for a few years, we had that in our living room, and women would come, and we’d end up having spontaneous discussions, and our house was kind of open, and that’s how I met Phebe--she came to buy books--and then she stayed.

PB: You’re not going to say the part about how I was so cute?

VR: Oh I did, I was upstairs, and I came downstairs--

PB: You can edit it out.

VR: And I grabbed one of my roommates, and took ‘em into the kitchen, I said “Who’s that cute girl in the overalls?” And it was Phebe.

PB: The rest is herstory.

VR: So, anyways, what was I going to say? We used to have lots of dances, and that's how you met people, in gay bars, and--

PB: The 70s...

VR: Right, but before that, just to backtrack a little bit, I did come out with my softball coach.

PB: That is such a stereotype.

VR: Because I, and the story of my life, I had an unrequited love affair with this girl from high school, and I still, sometimes, of course I can't help but think about her.

PB: Wow, that is--

VR: Although, I've had quite a few other girlfriends in the meantime. [laughter]

PB: She's like the fantasy, the woman you'll never have, or something.

VR: Right, right.

PB: Your muse, like your earthly muse.

VR: So, anyway, I don't know if that answers the question, but, next.

PB: No, I'd like to get into--just spark some conversation with me. I was born in Hamilton, Ohio. I like to say I survived Hamilton, Ohio. It was a very, you know, conservative, whites on the west side, African American community and some lower, you know, class people on the east side, and I--so right from the start, it's like, this is not right. Then the Cohens, our babysitter, who I had my first crush--a babysitter, I'm sure--she was beautiful. People don't even like the Cohen family, they're Jewish, and some people are against that, you know. I found out about racism, anti-semitism, like at an early age, and I thought this is so wrong, or what are they teaching us in school? We're not getting the whole

story. So that did stick with me, those two examples. But, in high school, I met Barbara, who we have reconnected on Facebook, and she lives in the Greater Cincinnati area, but somehow, she knew--there's a phenomenon called "gaydar," radar and you just, somehow, psychically know--most of the time you're right, but Barbara told me she had a crush on the gym teacher, and I had a crush on the journalism teacher, and so we were buddies--we were friends, and I was not alone, you know, we could talk and giggle about our crushes on our teachers. And I do believe, you know, editor's note, crushes are, I think, very normal. In our case, it was a glimpse of lesbianism that was not on TV, in films, or anywhere, and we knew we needed to keep it quiet, be pretty invisible. So, invisibility has been a theme in my life, and one reason with the Archives, we don't want to be...Vic and I grew up in the 50s, 60s. I'm a little bit older than her, not by much though, so we know what it's like to be invisible.

CW: So you [VR] grew up in Cincinnati, but Phebe, you came to Cincinnati. Was Cincinnati considered kind of a safe space?

VR: Hmm, no.

PB: For homosexuals?

CW: Yeah.

PB: No, but it was the bigger, in the area, it was the bigger city. You know, Columbus--well, you had Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, and then, so, yeah, Dayton, Toledo, but anyway, it was the better than--not as bad as Hamilton. It was the big city, and in the 70s, things were starting to happen, so I went to Miami University and graduated--well, came out, Christmas vacation, 1971. I literally, like, followed Jean to Ann Arbor, and she brought me out. And there was kind of this understanding that, probably, something might happen. But we were not, you know, lovers or girlfriends; it was, you know, a friendly thing. Friends with benefits, I guess, now they would call it. So I came out, but when I graduated with a Bachelor's in English, I didn't want to teach--at least right away, I didn't want to teach. And I also, did not, the worst thing that could happen is to come back home and live with my parents. I would be captive in Hamilton, get a clerical job as like--I could never escape, I didn't have a car, I mean, it's just like, no, no, no, I'm not--I felt this strong karmic message: "Do

not go back. You must stay up here." I got a girlfriend, we sublet an apartment for the summer, anyway, I stayed up in Oxford for about another year, and then I did come down, and then there was one of, like, a handful of lesbians-- Oh, there was gay activism. There was a group called Gay People of Oxford, and it was mostly guys. There was a lesbian couple, and there was Debbie and Margie, and me, and we were like this--it's kind of hard to explain--threesome. Debbie and I were lovers, but then we broke up, because Debbie and Margie got together, but we were all friends, but threesomes are very--

VR: Messy.

PB: Anyway, and the guys at the Gay People of Oxford would say, "Well, what do lesbians think about this?" It's like God, I just, I've only been out a year; I really don't know. But it became clear I needed to move to the big city--the closest big city, which was Cincinnati, so, and that was '73, probably.

VR: And she was the only single lesbian in the city for awhile, so everybody thought she was a homewrecker.

PB: [laughter] But, you know, that's--

VR: They told me that! They told me that about you.

PB: Well, but as we know, there always are long-time couples in the suburbs that you don't even know about until they break up and end up coming to groups and meetings, you know. [fake crying] "My partner of 20 years split up." You know, and then it's like, oh! There's other lesbians in the suburbs! There always are--very quiet back then, of course. So, there were some, but, we find out from lesbians older than us, the women in their 70s or 80s, that they would meet, you know, these cliques of people--I think there will be always be cliques or groups, specialized groups--and they would meet at, they'd have house parties and meet other couples and people. But, maybe I was the single activist lesbian for a time. Yeah.

VR: Speaking of house parties, that reminds me. When I came out with my softball coach, there were different house parties with lesbians, and one of her best friends' parents were out of town for the weekend, so her best friend had a huge party in the basement, and I remember, it was so exciting, because I

walked down the basement and Mitch Ryder and The Detroit Wheels [1960s American rock artist and his band] were singing "Sock It to Me-Baby." All these lesbians were bumping and grinding. [laughter] I thought, "Oh, I'm home."

PB: No, really, you could be free! I mean, the parents were gone; hopefully, they didn't come home early. Well, just girls having a party, I mean...

VR: But everybody was in the closet, really.

PB: Had to be.

VR: And I didn't really understand that, and my lover would say, "Well, there are like these places, like Chicago. If you go to Chicago, you can hold hands on the street. Yeah, nobody knows you in Chicago. But it was seen as kind of a nirvana from Cincinnati; it was more of an open city. So, they would talk about that, and I remember thinking, "I don't want to live like this. What's wrong with being in love with a woman?" You know, from the very beginning, I had no guilt about it, and I thought, "Why should I change myself?" Like, hide or try to go straight or whatever, when I can change the world? Because that just totally made sense to me, to help the world accept us, and so that's been part of, I think, both of our goals, has been to be...And I've found that, the more I came out, and the more comfortable I was with myself, and not even thinking about that I was doing something wrong or something weird or--

PB: Sinful. What about sinful?

VR: Yeah, I didn't really get too much of that, but I just realized that, because I was more comfortable, that other people become more comfortable with you, and so, it was not that big of a deal, eventually, to just blab to everybody that I was a lesbian, because they became really comfortable, and a lot of times, they would say, "Oh, I knew that."

PB: And that reminds me of, again, I feel so fortunate to have been young--in my 20s--in the 70s. I was still up at Miami University, and I was...Well, I say it was a time of...the "L" word was "liberation," not "lesbian," per se. Really not that early, really. Liberation movements. Well, the yippies, and anti, the war was Vietnam War, and we did come down to Cincinnati for some...And Hamilton, around the courthouse. Anti-Vietnam war marches, and what else? Oh, there

were free university classes where some of the women would try to learn electricity or about cars--I didn't have a car, so that's a mute point--but electricity, some of the basics of electricity, which I've totally forgotten, but you know, just some very, you know, I think there's some socialist groups, and what else? Anti-war, pro-drug experimentation, so we say. I found an alternative crowd--Miami is big, or at least was big, on fraternities and sororities, I believe still is, a lot--but I found alternative people and friends of friends, and at some point, a couple of them weren't even taking classes at Miami, but they, you know, rented a house there, and you would get together, and many of us ended up gay or bisexual. The 70s was a time of questioning, and we realized we had been lied, or a lot of history has been omitted from our textbooks in high school and college, and you know, it's a time to be really livened activists, so yeah, that really was the roots of my activism.

CW: So, you consider yourself an activist?

PB: Yes. And still, and even with the Archives, which, you know, doesn't seem like a lively place--well, maybe with more of these paintings, pictures put on the wall, it's more lively. But, you know, a repository of books and articles and flyers of gay and lesbian events from the 80s, 90s, and on. Some 70s. Those flyers--way before the Internet and cell phones--flyers would be tacked up on kiosks by Graeter's in Clifton.

VR: Windows.

PB: Yeah, windows, passed around at events, different events, let people know. And there was a lesbian newsletter, called Dinah, and it lasted from the late 70s, to, I think, the early 2000s. I can't quite remember, but a long time. It's spanned quite a few decades. And it was activist to even have a calendar: here are these events going on. Jerry Falwell [American Southern Baptist pastor, televangelist, and conservative activist], fundamentalist...I don't know if I can say that word. [laughter] Fundamentalist preacher who became an activist on the right.

VR: Anti-homosexual. That was his downfall.

PB: But he came to Cincinnati, so you had to hustle to get the word out. Phone, you know, landlines, flyers. He's going to be in Cincinnati, we're going

to be at City Hall. I mean, that of that kind of activism. City Hall, try to be there, we want numbers out there, and you know, we don't agree with your philosophy. But we've kept these flyers, which are grassroots history, that would really, a lot of it would be lost, because it's not in the local papers at all, or on TV.

VR: That reminds me of a couple years ago, I went to D.C. with one of my gay friends--best boyfriend--and to see Romaine Brooks [American lesbian painter] exhibit, and it was an exhibit that I had wanted to see for many, many years. She's a famous lesbian painter; she was lovers with Natalie Barney [American expatriate, playwright, poet and novelist], who they called the Amazon and the wild girl from Cincinnati and Paris, where they were all living in the 20s, 30s, 40s.

PB: Expats [Expatriates], yeah.

VR: I was so excited to go to that, and he ended up going with me, and we saw another gay guy that I knew there, but I started reflecting on the only times I'd ever been to D.C. was getting on a bus at night, getting off the bus in the morning and marching, and getting back on the bus at night. And I'd done that like four different times: twice for gay marches, once for women's Pentagon action, and once was for that...what was that thing that they tried to pass about the equal rights and the--

PB: The ERA [Equal Rights Amendment: proposed amendment to the United States Constitution designed to guarantee equal legal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex]? Yeah, it still has nothing.

VR: Right, so those four times with other times I had gone to D.C., and I thought, "That's so weird." So...

PB: Just for our, like, in that art, I mean, they were filthy rich, for the most part, Natalie and Romaine, and they're kind of like role models, because they live, as bigots said, live their life freely, "I am who I am. You know, get over it."
[laughter]

VR: Which has been our attitude, really.

PB: In the early 1900s, basically. Wasn't it?

VR: Yeah.

PB: And in-your-face lesbian, but they had the money and the means to live their life and paint and have salons and hang out with, you know, painters and writers.

VR: But, we were self-educated a lot, as far as lesbian feminism evolving, and it all started with the search for books, which is...[gestures to bookshelves behind her] voila. But, I remember, I looked in the library downtown, in the card catalogue. There were a couple weird homosexual studies that were listed, but they were no longer in the library, and somehow, I heard about, I don't know how, but I must have tried to do some research, maybe I saw...maybe *The Well of Loneliness* [lesbian novel by British author Radclyffe Hall] was one that was there. And then, I found it in a bookstore, a used bookstore, and it really wasn't worth all that, because it was very sad and depressing, but when it was published in 1928, it was banned in most countries, and even though it had a really sad, depressing--

PB: There were no sex scenes! There were no sex scenes, it was all about...were there?

VR: There were, like, lots of things about feelings and kissing, but no raw sex, that's true.

PB: Attracted to women, yeah.

VR: So, just the fact that it was about women loving women.

PB: We might get ideas. Women around the world might get ideas. Ooh. [laughter] Independent ideas.

VR: And then, I'm not exactly sure what happened, how...eventually, I heard about the lesbian feminist bookstore, and that was the older, more radical...yeah, the lesbian feminist bookstore Labyris. Older lesbians in Cincinnati, which I gradually heard about, that they were, like, really hated men, and I knew I wasn't that kind of a lesbian.

PB: More of the patriarchy, the one had been married to a man.

VR: Yeah, but that's what I thought, or that's what the rumor was, because we had a Gay Women's Alliance, which we were all kind of alike as far as: college students, still lipstick lesbians--for the most part--and that sort of thing.

PB: And this group was very angry and said, you know, "Men, the patriarchy." And yeah, and I went through a phase like that, and I don't forget the patriarchy. Look at the people running this country--we'll just leave it at that.

VR: But I remember the time we decided to have a joint meeting, and three of them came from the class that they took about repairing cars, so they were like...They didn't have bras, which I hadn't gotten to that point yet, and they were, like, covered with grease, and [laughter] because they were so different, but then we found out that they had a bookstore, so I was like "Oh my gosh!" So, gradually, you know, maybe they had ten books, I don't know, but maybe more than that. Because they had a lot of socialist kind of books too, because a couple of them had come from Yellow Springs [Ohio], and they were more like that sort of radicals. And then they gradually, you know, everybody kind of came together under the gay-lib, and then, because lesbians didn't really feel that included, and so, we started our own little groups, but the books there--I think about Rubyfruit Jungle [lesbian coming-of-age autobiography by Rita Mae Brown]--because that's like the first one. Rita Mae Brown, and it was like a happy book.

PB: Fun, it was fun.

VR: It was really fun, coming-of-age, and just really entertaining, and then they had some other books like that, and sometimes, you would find some really old books with--you could tell it was lesbians--like, living in the shadows, and they'd be, like, half-undressed, and one would be kind of butch, and one would be kind of femme. And so you'd read those, and they'd all have unhappy endings, too, like the one would get married--

PB: Ann Bannon [American author of The Beebo Brinker Chronicles, a series of lesbian pulp fiction novels]. As the name of one, yeah. A series...

VR: As one, yeah. So it was so much fun to read these new books that were coming out.

PB: At least it was about lesbians, even though, you know, some of them had a sad or shadowy...

VR: And a lot of them had, the ones at the Labyris books. They were really positive, and happy, and we could keep up with every single book that came out--no kidding. So maybe there were like three or four a year.

PB: They were independent women's...

VR: Small presses.

PB: Presses, yeah.

VR: Which we have many first-editions here--we even have a first edition of *The Well of Loneliness*. And so, that was so exciting, that was kind of...it gave us, what is it? Hope, and kind of ratified what we believed.

PB: We both believed in the power of the printed word. We were college-educated.

VR: And so, gradually, more and more books came out; we got review copies, and we bought lots of books, and we reviewed books for Dinah, and pretty soon, you couldn't read every book that came out.

PB: Yeah, like now.

VR: No, there's no way.

PB: Keep up with it.

VR: But we're not complaining. [laughter]

PB: I fall asleep, because at night, I fall asleep, okay, I asked to be during the day--that's an elder thing, perhaps. It's a nice problem, the abundance.

VR: We have both been involved in writing, we taught a poetry class with UC's [University of Cincinnati] Free University for a few years.

PB: Then, the "Free" got lost somewhere along the way. What does that say? Comm University, community.

VR: Then we started writing our own books, and Phebe's published a couple books of poetry and a couple...most recently, she published with another woman who's Indian, so it has like the two cultures, one straight, one a lesbian, and it's called The Buddha and the Bitch. And she's not the bitch [gestures toward Phebe]. The Indian woman who is in an arranged marriage and everything. But she's, you know... [inaudible].

PB: They thought she had to be the Buddah because she lives in India.

VR: But she wanted to be the bitch.

PB: Yeah she self defined as a bitch. Speaking of Feminism, I mean define bitch. It means assertive, makes your own mind up and...

VR: Right, I like some postcard that I have on my desk at work "You call me a bitch like it's a bad thing" [both laugh]. So anyway I think at some point we went through a kind of really more radical kind of angry phase. And we didn't really say 'there's a man in the house' but he wasn't really welcome.

PB: I mean if you are running around just with a t-shirt on...

VR: No we really didn't associate with men.

PB: No I'm saying when Nick came in the house. You know 'cause with other women you can just have your t-shirt on or something. Like you might put underpants on or shorts on.

VR: But that's not really why. Nobody really wanted to hang with men, even gay men, at some point, during a couple year period. But eventually you mellow out and eventually we met gay guys who were kindred spirits and weren't... because a lot of gay guys, you're too young to remember, but back in the early 70's, gay men had their own culture and it didn't include lesbians because lesbians were seen as...you know sometimes there was a lesbian who

would fall in love with a drag queen but [laughs]. But usually lesbians were seen as 'other' and kind of low class. Not as educated, not good jobs because women, lesbians didn't get good jobs because if somebody saw you as a lesbian, like if you thought nobody thought you were a lesbian, but if you had real short hair and wore men's clothes, people figured it out even if you thought it was a secret, it wasn't a secret. So that influenced what kind of jobs they could get. A lot of them were Blue Collar jobs and not that much money and all that sort of thing. And then a lot a lesbian's got married because they wanted to have kids. And that's all different now 'cause with 'turkey-baster babies' and whatever you know, you can just have kids. So, but thank god.

PB: You find a very nice-looking gay male friend and make an arrangement. That happens a lot.

VR: So I think it had to do with mellowing and it had to do with going back in a way to that whole liberation movement. Equal rights for gays and lesbians and African Americans and Native Americans, how all those kind of movements kind of meld together and have ebb and flow with each other and at some point you realize, it's all the same. If I'm liberated and somebody else isn't liberated then that's wrong.

PB: It's still not even. I think it's okay, there are at least phases of different groups even now sometimes. Like women writers, the women just want to share their stories that other women will understand, you know, and that's not even talking politics so much. I think it's fine for black people to just be by themselves at certain times and talk about their experiences. How can I get through the week, it's so racist out there and they all understand. And lesbians, gay men, sometimes we come together, rallies against fundamentalists, the big marches, Pride day, week, month, now it's Pride month really. We come together and march and play and dance and all that, you know. And if there's a big issue, like in Cincinnati, I can never remember the dates but in the '90's the City voted, was very conservative on City council, they voted that it was okay to discriminate, it was legal to discriminate against homosexuals you know basically. Issue 3 and article 12, it's kind of a maze to piece 'em together. But yeah it was put on the ballot to vote and the city limits voted that it was okay for employers and landlords to not have to be nice to homosexuals. And there was a boycott Cincinnati group that said let's get these conventions coming in, once a year annual conventions to not come. I know one group went to

Mason, Ohio just outside Hamilton County, Mason instead. Teachers, maybe the NAACP, I mean several groups did not come and have their summer convention here and the city lost tens of thousands, maybe a hundred thousand dollars, a lot. And then we voted in more open minded, liberal council people and that changed. But there was a really, I would say, dark period in the '90's. There weren't even Gay Prides. I say gay for short, even though now it LGBTQIA etcetera. There were no Prides for a couple years, activists were so, felt so beaten down. They were like 'god they voted against our lives' I mean it was very demoralizing.

VR: So that is the thing now that a lot of young girls who think 'why feminism, that's the past'.

PB: There's Post-feminism in academia, it's not 'Post'.

VR: Whatever that is, and you think it hasn't even been a hundred years since white women could vote. And it's only been fifty sixty years since including African American women could vote. And you think everything changes, depending on who is in power. Some people say, why don't you move the archives into a University library or another library and the reason why we keep it as a separate entity is just for those reasons. Political climate can change anytime and somebody can say 'Oh why are we hanging on to this crap' and chuck it all. So that's why it's very important. And the name Ohio Lesbian Archives we picked that because for many years we were in the gay movement and everybody would say 'oh that includes lesbians.' Or the feminist movement because in the language, when your reading, it's supposed to be 'men or women' you know, whatever.

PB: Humankind...

VR: But, not really. So that's why we wanted to be straight up front, even though we have a huge gay history section. We are collecting and preserving a lot of newsletters and flyers and things from many different gay and lesbian organizations in the Tristate area. So, I forget where else I was going with that, somewhere, it'll come back to me.

PB: So we are more than Ohio too, you know we're kind of the greater Midwest. There is a, The Lesbian, the mother of all archives, The Lesbian

Herstory, they were a '70's thing. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, and they're basically US though they probably have international things, we have some. Vic and I visited, they are a house in Brooklyn at this point, an entire house and they were so glad to meet us and to know that there could be more regional archives. They said oh we really need them, you come here and there's boxes of books and things and it's just too much. No one group can keep this. So we got their blessing and what else. Oh, so we are more than Ohio and in fact we are running out of space so one of our big goals and needs is a larger space, which we are working on. And more money for the finances, donations, we are a 501c3, we should say that. But we are more than lesbian so we have some trans people visiting that I've met recently. You know, non-binary, I mean we're growing and learning as elders, we're learning new terms and new concepts.

VR: But as English majors, I'm not going to call one single person 'them.'

PB: Well this non-binary person I know, her pronouns are, the pronoun is they. So I understand it intellectually but, as English majors it's hard to change over but we'll learn.

VR: Go back to the drawing board, kid.

PB: Uh Oh, controversy. But anyway we collect, we have a 'Cross-Port' a trans newsletter from way back in Cincinnati. An archives is basically a reference library but Nancy Yarian who we should give a lot of credit to, a real history, actual major from Smith College who is now going out of state with a graduate degree. We have a Facebook page, she started calling it a museum because we have the Dinah Softball trophy, maybe from the '80's, I forget offhand. We have, gay trivia sets, what else do we have, statues, we have wonder woman on our door. But we can't that prove that wonder woman was a lesbian but she did grow up an Amazon and watch the beginning of the movie again. It's inspiring and Ellen and some celebrity lesbians, we have a file, just to keep us going as long as we have space in the file cabinet. Academic books, little home-made books, small press, independent books and books that you might be able to find on Amazon and have delivered to your door. But so many of them quickly go out of print, so yeah.

VR: Well I would say too that I'm really proud of us because from the moment we identified as activists and were actively trying to change the world we have not let up on that goal. And the Archives is not just some little pretentious hangout for intellectuals.

PB: No, not at all.

VR: And we see it as a(n) activist part of our lives, really.

PB: And it does trace, materials literally trace our lives. '70's, '80's and on and changes. Where were you going with that? [both laugh]

VR: Maybe Cameron has a question that can prompt us.

PB: Yea, our batteries are running down, yes.

CW: So what do you think is the most rewarding part about working on the Archives?

VR: That we know we are changing history. That we know it's important. It's important no matter if anybody else thinks it's important, we know it's important.

PB: Yeah because for those early decades, you know a handful of us collecting things and women would you know move to Florida, you know retire. We've had quite a few couples retire, move to Florida they know they can't throw, they just feel like we can't throw away these magazines or these books, maybe the Archives. Oh we can give them to the Archives, they would keep them. You know, they are starting to trust us and um, I forget I was going to say something else too. Oh for me, what's really rewarding, especially this summer with the 50th anniversary of Stonewall there've been a lot more visitors. In the summer you tend to have more people too as opposed to winter. But I've met a lot of younger, I say younger well I'm in my sixties so 'younger' covers a lot but I mean people in their 20's and 30's. And I'm just, they just have so much energy. I always drag myself in even though I'm mostly retired, drive in and it's like ugh, at the Archives is a stranger and by the time they leave we had this interaction, you know, here's what we have and collect and what's your special interest. And I always go away, I usually learn something from the visitors, and I always go away with more energy from their, I Vampire suck up this youthful

energy [both laugh]. No really, their interest and most of them will say 'Oh my god' you know they just can't believe there weren't smart phones and internet, I mean that's one of the big, they just can't believe. I like to think they feel empowered seeing all these images especially now that you've put all these paintings up. And you know they got all of these books that go way back, when you see a whole room of lesbian and gay people, images, it's just, you know where else can you see something that like, really. It's empowering. I just walk in and really these paintings have really made a difference. You know not everything's in file cabinets. It doesn't come alive until you start taking papers and flyers out and 'oh wow, this happened in 1982" you know.

VR: So I think the thing that is most disturbing is that whole idea of Post-Feminism. That whole idea that gay people 'oh we can get married now in some places, it's fine blah blah blah.' But then you have a president that says 'If I'm re-elected, I'm gonna get rid of AIDS.' And I think, what are you gonna do, put people in concentration camps? Because the same president pointed to Pence and said something like 'he wants to hang them all' gay people. And you think these people in power are actually saying things like that. And you think 'Oh everything's good.' No!

PB: And some people that haven't been through the discrimination and the invisibility and the hiding. And the forced invisibility because it wasn't safe. Like would you have to see a psychiatrist, would your social life be really watched or blocked, you know with suspicion. Some people haven't experienced some of that, but some do. When you have a job and all kinds of different people, you don't know how safe you are until you meet the personalities. And as a general rule we see a lot of the younger people I've met have found like-minded people to hang out with. And I'll say the 'younger generation', which is pretty broad, is pretty cool with it 'oh you know, I have gay friends, trans friends you know what's the problem, what's the big deal' which is very encouraging. But there are forces stronger than us politically, to still be aware of and we remember times like that. The dark times, so we keep watch like we don't want this to happen again.

VR: And throughout history even starting with Sappho who could write her lesbian poetry and live her life and then for thousands and thousands of years there was no gay literature.

PB: Yea, or all underground or just personal relationship on the side or something.

VR: And the thing that breaks my heart is that gay people would internalize that self-hatred, and hate themselves and want to hurt themselves and not want to live and are bullied.

PB: And that still happens, teenage and young people commit suicide more than non-gay teenagers.

VR: So that's another part of the activism, is to help build a community, a self-confident, self-loving community that fits in with the world. And that also helps change the world not just in their lives but also in other, press people's lives too.

PB: And I don't think we've mentioned, before we started filming. I did mention 'Crazy Ladies Bookstore and Women's Center' where the archives had a small room on the third floor above the bookstore. But that was a meeting, to have a space like that, 1989 is when we started that room, to have a physical space is so important.

VR: The season of all the lesbian bookstores, I mean feminist bookstores that opened around the country and gay bookstores and then one by one closing and that really...

PB: Made a difference, it made a difference. And so what do we do? We, after Crazy Ladies it was depressing. Well that's how we ended up in a room at the Clifton United Methodist Church and this church is welcoming, we're not members but very welcoming to any outsiders whether you're lesbian gay. They have a sign up that says 'Jesus was a refugee', I forget but anyway they are a sanctuary kind of a church to all, any so called outsiders so we feel comfortable here. So this church is a safe space.

VR: There are Christians that try to help people instead of hurt people. Which is very encouraging.

PB: And a physical space I guess. There are some gay bars like Tilly's in Northside you know they have trivia night. I mean it's not just get drunk and

they don't really have a big dance space. You know a more friendly, community feel where people can talk to each other. There are some bars and spaces like that. I guess maybe people don't feel they need spaces as much since the internet, you can meet people and then go. There is some talk among some of the younger gay activists right now that I know from groups on Facebook. Some of them are talking about, they want a physical gay community center. And some of the oldsters especially the older gay guys like our friend Michael are saying 'okay but we did it.' So there's this discussion. "We did it and it takes people power, money, just know, don't deceive yourself, it's a lot of work." So there's cautioning the younger people but then balancing all this and having conversations hopefully and discussions about where it could be and how would it look. And is there really the energy to stick with it. Not like oh be excited there is one, now who's gonna keep the lights on every night when people come by physically and want to have discussion groups and all that. It is a lot of work. So anyway that was interesting, that there's this, in spite of all the internet and bars and Pride. I mean Pride is one month, well there will be gay history coming up in October and there will be some activities around that. But what do you do from January to May? Come to the Archives, be online, watch TV shows that have cool characters and stuff like that. But to meet people and have friends, feel a sense of community, to me is kind of strange there's still a need to find that even though we have same sex marriage, we're fairly free, we're the freest we've been in our lifetimes. And I never thought I'd see same sex marriage. It wasn't a big issue for me, but same sex marriage, I never thought I'd see that in my lifetime.

VR: Right, right.

PB: As a big federal issue that is positive and not against gay people. Anyway, winding down here.

VR: So I was thinking too that I guess with the archives, we've kind of found our niche. I think if everybody in the world found something they could do to help save the world as far as a free happy place, I think that would be a good thing. And we found it, for us.

PB: And there are some groups, you know nationally, you say 'Save the Environment' but you gotta narrow it down. Your friend in Alaska was very involved and still is, you know Greenpeace. She's in Alaska so she deals with

Alaskan issues a lot and there is a fear of losing some of that land to oil and gas drilling. Find your passion, like you said [gestures toward Vic]. And do the work that fulfills you and interests you might have to narrow it down pretty much. I mean Ohio, Midwest Gay and Lesbian Library. It sounds like a small thing but it's a lot of work. And it can flourish but you have to hang in there and when people don't come by in the winter, we take a little, well deserved rest. You said [gestures toward Vic] along the way not so long ago 'we do what we want, you know and have fun doing it.'

VR: Sometimes Phebe would get a little down and I'd say "Phebe, it's ebb and flow, don't get down on yourself, if you get tired, just take a break." And so sometimes we've kept, when we were [pauses] the thirty-year anniversary has to do with being at Crazy Ladies and being open to the public.

PB: But we've been here thirteen years. [gestures to the room they are currently in]

VR: Right, that's when it started. Before that it was in Phebe's apartment.

PB: Yeah, various places.

VR: Right, and so anyway to have my thought come back to me, I don't know. [laughs]

PB: Don't become old, that's our advice. Umm, that we used to be open certain things. Like we'll be open Tuesday nights from 5-7 or Thursday nights or whatever. Sometimes people would come but mostly they wouldn't, you know you can't just get, there's not a formula, like what night of the week or day of the week is best.

VR: And if we've had a student intern from one of the colleges we would work with their schedule and be open then as well as working with the student. But I know several years in a row we kept it open on Tuesday and Thursday nights. And sometimes nobody would come, often. Although a lot of people would drop by more often at Crazy Ladies because they would go to a meeting and then they'd just wander upstairs. We had a library outside of multiple copies of books that they could just borrow.

PB: Duplicates, yeah.

VR: And we could do that again but I don't know if the church really wants us to clutter up their hallway.

PB: Well, things to explore, maybe ten books at a time.

VR: But when we move we could do that again because we still have those library books.

CW: So you said you got the space in 1989 above Crazy Ladies but when did you start collecting?

PB: Oh before then, all throughout the '70's really. Once there started being lesbian books and vinyl records, there was a flourishing, what they called 'women's music' scene and women would come to town and have concerts.

VR: An envisioning of a lesbian archives occurred after Phebe and her lover, who just passed away, had gone to the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Which we had heard about and we had been sending things to and even when you were there, she thought, why don't we do something in Cincinnati and have it be open to the public.

PB: You get the credit [gestures toward Vic] in Adina, early on you said, we had a little space in the issue, a little empty space where a paid ad should go and you put "anyone interested in, maybe we put womyn with a 'y', women's history group leading to an archives but no one really, we were interested, but no one came forward.

VR: Right, it was 'Lesbian History.'

PB: Lesbian history, but no one came forward until later. You know you just can only control so much. The energy has to be there and it wasn't, until the mid-80's when crazy ladies bought a building and we said we are very interested in a room. I mean we'll do whatever, scrape wallpaper to earn that room. And pay a nominal amount. But they were partly driven by some younger women and women my age. Said yeah this is important, like a history. I even know Connie from way back, I don't even know where she is now. But a

student was involved and some of the older lesbian activists said ' this sounds like a cool thing.' You know they loved to read books and you only have to love to read books to like a library.

CW: I get the feeling you thought of yourself as an activist for quite a long time.

PB: Since the seventies, with the liberation movements you know with anti-war and with women's in feminism and then later with lesbian and gay. You know, I'm lesbian and not just a feminist but lesbain so then you have your foot in the lesbian community, well you need three feet [both laugh]. Lesbian, gay and women's and if you're African American or Disabled you've got five quantifiers!

CW: Vic, do you consider yourself an activist?

VR: Oh yes definitely, (president of) 'UC Gays Society' when I was in college and I was one of the co-founders of the 'Cincinnati Gay Women's Alliance.' Because we weren't comfortable with the 'biker lesbian' at that point [laughs]. So you continuously evolve. So I've always done things like that. I remember the first Gay Pride march in Cincinnati. Phebe was in it, I didn't know her then.

PB: I went to it, 1973.

VR: But I went down with one of my friends, a young lesbian. We were all like 17 or something like that, 16 - 17. And my best gay boyfriend went along, who I can't stop talking about, but he is a really cool guy.

PB: Just say Nick.

VR: But he was afraid to go in the march, so we just followed along on the sidewalk.

PB: But you were there.

VR: So we didn't want to leave him to go march. Well we probably didn't feel all that comfortable but if he wanted to do it, all three of us would have done it.

PB: And it was small in 1973!

VR: And he's gotten to the point now, he's been the faculty advisor for the Gay group at the college where he teaches. So people evolve at their own rates as well. I guess I would just urge people to think about "Don't get too comfortable, ever." Because things could always change. I mean just the fact that a president would be talking about hanging gay people in public. Really? That's not a joke, that's not funny, so that's all.

PB: And again an archives might seem like, oh it's laid back, obscure library, focused. But to have these preserved, women's in particular, words and images. And to deal with the IRS and call this a 501c3 Lesbian Archives and have the name on the door, be out there in 'CityBeat' and in the world online, it is activism, an act of empowerment to even say the word lesbian still in 20 what is it 2019. The fact that it's a symbol and it is a strength to have such an institution. Small room that it is, we have probably nearly a thousand books. We are going to do a count sometime in our spare time. Vic still works full time, so our hobby slash passion. It's a place of empowerment and that is, it is an act to keep this door open. And to use words that are not taken kindly by everyone, even in 2019.

VR: And also to having in the back of your head, and this is true for gay men, this is true for every woman and every lesbian. That, when you least expect it, somebody who doesn't like 'gay people' could commit a hate crime. So that's always a possibility and that's always been, you know you just never know.

PB: Followed to the parking lot and we haven't had the windows smashed but any of these things could happen.

VR: And it's not just gay people or lesbians. But a lot of women don't think about walking alone in the dark at night. And you should be able to do whatever you want that's why we would go camping at the Michigan Women's Music Festival year after year because it was the one place where you could feel absolutely safe.

PB: You had women watching all night, security, you had security, observing the perimeters of however many acres of fields.

VR: You could walk around naked and feel totally safe.

CW: Is there anything else you like to say because I think (inaudible) we have everything.

PB: No we gotta end strong, we're kind of limping along now [both laugh].

VR: I would say find your love, find your passion and your way to help make the world a better place and just do it.

PB: Do what you love.

VR: Right, no matter what anyone else thinks just own it, do it, don't despair. Realize that your energy sometimes is going to go down or up, sometimes you're going to have helpers and sometimes not. And just make your own commitment to something.

PB: Find like-minded people to do whatever you like to do. Your hobby becomes your passion. Saving some books becomes this lifelong, 30 years is a career I mean, it is.

END 1:01:40