

Oral History Interview with Jennifer Bills

Interview conducted on August 2, 2018

By Professor Judith Raiskin, UO Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality
Studies and Linda J. Long, Curator of Manuscripts, UO Special Collections and
University Archives, UO Libraries

For

The Eugene Lesbian Oral History Project



Jennifer Bills, ca. 1989-1990



Jennifer Bills, August 2, 2018

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Preface

This is an ongoing community-engaged oral history project. Linda J. Long, Curator of Manuscripts in the University of Oregon Libraries, and Professor Judith Raiskin of the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department at the University of Oregon, conducted video interviews with eighty-three narrators in the summers of 2018 and 2019. The interviews were held in the UO Libraries' recording studio. This collection includes the video interviews and the bound and on-line transcripts. Associated with the interviews are materials collected from the narrators, including photographs, diaries, flyers, business records, letters, posters, buttons, and T-shirts that document the businesses, organizations, and cultural and political activities discussed in the interviews. These collections will be made available separately as individual archival collections and can be searched and retrieved using the Library's Online Catalog.

In the 1960s-1990s hundreds of lesbian-identified women came to Eugene, Oregon from across the United States. These women founded cornerstone organizations central to Eugene's history and influenced Oregon's political landscape. They created and worked in collective businesses, ran printing presses, and founded cultural organizations (theater companies and dance troupes, music bands and choirs) and gathered in lesbian cultural spaces (book stores, martial arts studios, restaurants, bars, and softball teams). They became leaders of Eugene community service agencies and worked in City and State government positions. A number were instrumental in leading important legal challenges of discriminatory policies at the county and state levels regarding employment and housing protections, benefits, lesbian and gay adoption, and marriage equality. Those who came to study or teach at the University of Oregon were influential in making institutional change protecting the rights of lesbians and gay men.

The artist Tee Corinne, whose papers and photographs also reside in the University of Oregon Special Collections, asserted, "The lack of a publicly accessible history is a devastating form of oppression; lesbians face it constantly." The Eugene Lesbian Oral History Project seeks to preserve a specific and vibrant history that otherwise is lost. This collection of interviews captures a range of engaging and important stories that reveal new angles on lesbian history, women's history, the counterculture movement in the 1960s-1980s, Oregon history, feminism, sexuality, intentional communities, and women working in jobs reserved for men. Looking back over twenty-five - fifty years, the narrators reflect on the complex relationship of individual aspirations and larger social

movements in times of dramatic historical change. Many of the narrators have retired and continue to be involved in vibrant artistic, scientific and political work.

Abstract

Interview conducted August 2, 2018. Jennifer was born in Reno, Nevada and grew up in Charleston, Oregon. She discusses her growing up years on the south Oregon coast and the antisemitism she experienced in high school. She also recognized she was gay while in high school. As a student at the University of Oregon, Jennifer learned about the student organization, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA) but felt some trepidation about it. Later, she became the director of GALA. Jennifer worked in student government and was elected—as an open lesbian—president of the Associated Students of the University of Oregon (ASUO). After college, she became a police officer with the City of Eugene and she discusses her experiences in the police force, including discrimination, her leadership of the SWAT team, and her work in hostage negotiation. She discusses parenting her son with her former partner, Karen Gaffney.

Additional subjects: Artificial insemination, Human; Civil service – Oregon – Eugene; Discrimination in criminal justice administration; Hate crimes; Gays – crimes against; hostage negotiations; Law enforcement; Judaism; Lesbian mothers -- United States; Parenting; Police – Oregon – Eugene; Jews—Oregon; Self-insemination; Sexual minority college students; Student government; SWAT; University of Oregon.

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Narrator: Jennifer Bills

Location: University of Oregon
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Interviewers: Linda Long and
Judith Raiskin

Date: August 2, 2018

Bills: We can do the easy banter if it's not recording anyway, right? No?
Fine, okay, nice to know that.

Long: This interview is part of the Eugene Lesbian Oral History Project. The recordings will be made available through the University of Oregon Libraries' Special Collections and University Archives. This is an oral history interview with Jen Bills on August 2, 2018 taking place in the University of Oregon Libraries' recording studio in the Center for Media and Educational Technologies. The interviewers are Linda Long, Curator of Manuscripts in the UO libraries' Special Collections and University Archives and Professor Judith Raiskin of the UO Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies. Jen, please let us know if you agree to be recorded for this project and that you give your permission for the university to preserve and make available your recorded and transcribed interview.

Bills: I enthusiastically consent.

Long: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

Bills: You're welcome.

Long: Let's just start out with a basic question. Can you please tell us where you were born, where you grew up and something about your early background?

Bills: Sure. I grew up in, well, I was born in Reno, Nevada. My mom is French. She immigrated to the States in 1964. My dad was an American and they met while she was in Reno. She got an ear infection and he was the nice doctor who lived upstairs. So that's how they got to know each other. We moved to the Oregon coast when I was five years old and that's really where I grew up. I grew up in Charleston, Oregon. It's a really small town, about two and a half hours South of Eugene. Population 600 or so. I'm the youngest of six children total. I've got five half brothers and sisters who are significantly older than I am. I grew up essentially an only child living out in the country.

What was unique about my childhood was for four to six months out of the year until I was sixteen, we had traveled back to France. I had spent time in Paris, of course, a huge metropolitan city, and then go back to a small fishing village on the Oregon coast. What was also unique is I was the only Jew in my entire school, K through high school. There weren't any others that I went to school

with. I'd have private Hebrew lessons occasionally at my house and whatnot with physicians who worked at the hospital with my dad.

Long: Can I ask, did you experience any discrimination or problems with being the only Jew in your school?

Bills: You know, I think back on it and really not much happened. I was a pretty savvy kid and so it was back in the days when there whistle prayer and they'd have celebrations for holidays and everything in the classroom. I'd managed to go to the Christmas party, have a great time, and then scamper out and go to the library and hang out with my friend who was a Jehovah's Witness. And we pretty much figured out that system as young kids. And so that was fine. The sort of discrimination I would say didn't really occur until probably the very end of high school. And that's when a lot of kids were getting involved with Young Life and the Oregon Citizens Alliance was becoming very active in Oregon at that time. This was about 1986-'87 when they started to pick up some steam. That was when it was a little bit more noteworthy that I was Jewish. But Quaker dad, Jewish mom, we celebrated everything in the sun. I mean, just everything. So, it was an interesting place to grow up. I got more guff for being bilingual. I was the only little kid who would bring a briefcase to school with me. A "sac de classe" is what they're called, it's basically a briefcase with backpack straps. And in Charleston, Oregon, it's kind of unique. I was the kid who kind of stood out because I spoke another language.

It was a very white, very poor part of the Oregon coast. Working poor, working class and then it's close to Coos Bay where you get a different demographic. But it was an interesting place to grow up.

I was a feral child. I liked to play outside and we lived right on the beach and spent a lot of time in the water in the woods. I came out when I figured it out when I was fifteen in high school. About 1985 I figured out I was lesbian. The term was "gay" because lesbian was a really hard word to say for me.

Raiskin: Why was that?

Bills: It was just, it felt so stodgy, I suppose. You know, it was just, gay is just easier. But there weren't at that time any other lesbians that I knew of in high school. I was lucky, though. One of my classmates and his name is Bernie Smith, and he was fabulous and he was out and proud and a drag queen and eventually ended up working at a bar in Portland called Ourselves. He was a Dolly Parton impersonator. He did this actually in elementary school, up on stage, dressed as Dolly Parton and singing "Nine to Five." It was brilliant. You have to love that man for that. He eventually died of complications from AIDS. Not too long ago actually. But a remarkable man. He was out and he took all the heat from everybody because he was so visible. And I kind of melted back into the background. I played sports, did all the honors stuff, speech and debate, student government. I was under the radar for a little bit.

Raiskin: How did you know that you were a lesbian?

Bills: Well, it was— family friends came and it took me about five minutes to figure out that the family friends were a couple, two women. And I just remember sticking to them like glue and I wanted to dress like them. They were amazing. I think I was probably a little shadow to them. I was fifteen and they seemed really old. They were probably early twenties. But I just remember absolutely adoring them. And finally kind of putting it all together of that— that made sense to me. And you know, I struggled with it. It wasn't like an easy "Aha moment" where you're like, "Oh yeah, that's it." And you know, I had a boyfriend ironically turned out to be gay. We came out to each other. We went to the prom together, he left with his boyfriend. I left with my girlfriend. It all worked out well. But yeah, I felt I probably had a mad crush on them as what it really was boiled down to. And then when I was seventeen for spring break, I went down to San Francisco and stayed with them. And I will say that cemented how I felt. So shortly thereafter —

Long: Did you come out to them when you were down in San Francisco?

Bills: No, I did not. I hadn't come out to anybody at this point. It was just the fascination, the following, the how was the newspapers? A New York newspaper *Village Voice*. Picking up the *Village Voice* because it was sort of the only queer thing you could find with, there's no Internet, there's no cell phones. So you get a copy of the *Village Voice* that felt edgy. And yeah, no I didn't come out. I just

remember they took me to a place called Hamburger Mary's in San Francisco and here I am, I'm just I'm seventeen years old and I'm with all these lesbians and gay men and I'm like, okay, this is it. This is my tribe. These were the people that I belong with. Then I came back home. And a friend of mine, she had two moms. Her mom had a girlfriend and I knew this. I wanted to connect with them. I knew I needed to find some people at that point. And so I told my friend, I said, "Well, I want to connect with your mom because you know, I'm gay." And she looked at me and said, "Well, I think I am too." That actually turned out to be my girlfriend. Worked pretty well.

Long: What year was this?

Bills: Eighty-seven. Yeah, 1987. And the interesting thing about Marshfield High School, which is where I went to school, is that from that class, there are probably easily a dozen gay and lesbian people between the last two classes. The '87 class and '88 class had a number of gays and lesbians including Jeff Whitty who won the Tony award for *Avenue Q*. He was one of my classmates. And so looking back, we had a very gay class. It was leaving school at pretty much all of us came out except for three or four of us that came out in high school.

Raiskin: It's sad you couldn't connect there in high school.

Bills: We hung out though. We were all together. We all did speech and debate together. I think half my soccer team were lesbians, they'll

probably regret that I said that. But yeah, there were a lot of gays and lesbians and we spent time together. We just didn't know. Bernie was the easy one. My friend John became the easy one. And it wasn't easy. It was coming out to people that I had known. Like I said, it was the time of the Oregon Citizens Alliance. Coos Bay is very conservative. It's a timber town. But it has a nice underbelly of liberalness that people don't know about. But it was trying to connect with that liberal side. But my friends were conservative. They came from religious households. There's a lot of judgment, a lot of anger. And then we evolved to mature adults and everybody's wonderful. I think we all worked through our own stuff and they work through their stuff and so that's good.

Raiskin: What did you think your parents, how your parents would take it if you were to talk to them?

Bills: At that time?

Raiskin: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Bills: At that time my parents were divorced, so I actually didn't come out to my mom till college and actually my father later on. I was devastated. There was no way I was telling my parents. The first family member I told was my eldest sister, Virginia. I'm very close with her and she was amazing. She was wonderful. I remember I was in college, it was my freshman year. I was living in the dorms and I wrote her a letter. And I came out to her. I told her that I had a girlfriend.

And I remember the dorm phone rings and someone picks it up and they knock on your door. And it was my sister and her first words were, "I love you and I've always known since you were a little kid." And so that was good and refreshing. And I've been blessed with my sisters. Virginia and Elizabeth are just remarkable women who don't bat an eye at any of this. In fact, I think Elizabeth has married a lesbian couple, so you know, they're good. I was lucky. But—

Long: If I could ask: if your parents had friends who were a lesbian couple why do you think they would have been concerned about you?

Bills: Because for me it was more of a sense of loss, risk and you know, your parents are supporting you. They have plans for you. I'm the only one in my family without an advanced degree. Which is kind of unique. All my siblings are very well educated. My parents had a certain path that we were to follow, very high expectations and it felt like I'd disappoint them because you know, at that, at that time, even somewhat now it's still marginalized to a degree. And I was on the margins for that hidden subculture and I didn't want to be, I didn't want parents to like throw me to the curb. And it ended up being a good call eventually. I came out to my mom right before I started college. It was actually, I was in the dorms and she was asking me about birth control if I needed any because she was hip and groovy, right? And I said no. And she asked if I was sexually active and here's the point where I could have said no, but I said

yes. And then the following conversation happened. And you know, she said, she was mad, angry, hurt. She said, "You betrayed me. You've betrayed God. You know, how do you know you're a lesbian? Really?" And kicked me out of the house. She was absolutely furious. I mean, just hot anger and you know, I remember leaving and heading back and my girlfriend's mom and her girlfriend were there and meeting me to send me off to, to college too. And talked to them about it and they said, "Well, you'll be okay. You know, you've got a landing spot, you're gonna be okay." That was really reassuring. And my mom got ahold of me the next day and she'd contacted PFLAG. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. It probably has a different name then, or now. But she had talked to somebody and she said, "I love you. Come home, let's talk about it." And she became a fierce advocate. I mean she, I think she outed me more than anyone has ever outed me. And I think sometimes she liked it just to watch what people do, that she had a lesbian daughter. And she has been, she was absolutely wonderful afterwards. Blips here and there. Certainly parents have fears and want their children to be safe. Those things would come up. But for the most part she became wonderful and you know, eventually had a son. She was an amazing grandmother, so it worked out pretty well. And then for my dad I was a sophomore in college and he came to visit and I wanted to tell him and I didn't want to tell him and hemmed and hawed and eventually did tell him during that visit.

And he just laughed and said, "I always knew you were." And I said, "So why didn't you let me know that?" And he said, "I was waiting for you to tell me." And I said, "Okay, well, it'd been nice that you gave me a hint." And he was great. He was great too. You know, he was older, quite conservative, Republican and not a problem. It was always very kind towards my partners and girlfriends and never an issue. Ended up pretty lucky at the end of this whole game with wonderful parents and family. A lot of people aren't so blessed. So I got pretty blessed.

Raiskin: So you came to the University of Oregon?

Bills: I did.

Raiskin: For college? Why did you choose Oregon and what did you know about Eugene when you came here?

Bills: For Eugene, a couple of things. One there was a synagogue here, which is where we'd come to attend services. There was an old synagogue at 25th and Portland, no longer there. And my mom was really good friends with the rabbi's wife, who was a French speaking Palestinian Jew. My mom who had spent a lot of time in the Middle East and North Africa and French and Jewish and spoken, they each spoken number of languages. So there are good friends. So we came here a lot to go to a temple and also had some good family friends who lived here. We'd come up here and as a teenager I'd come up here and screw off all the time. We'd tell my parents that we were going to X location and drive to Eugene. In

fact, on my senior night I was supposed to be in Coos Bay, Oregon at a athletic club for the whole senior night and did that for about an hour. And my girlfriend and I hopped in her car and drove to Eugene and stayed at her mom's house, who was down in Coos Bay for my graduation, and spent the night there, then drove back early the next morning. Eugene, I loved Eugene. It was fun. We'd come up here and go to U of O for debate tournaments between debate tournaments. And so I had applied to a variety of colleges. My mother made me apply to U of O. At that time I thought that we are living still under the financial umbrella of my dad. It wasn't until recently I learned that we weren't. And so I got into some really wonderful schools, but turned out Eugene was the only school I could afford to go to. So I ended up here.

Started off as a Russian major, which lasted all of about a term because I took a Women's Studies class and one of the small group leaders for women's studies played rugby. And so I thought, Hmm, that sounds interesting. So I played rugby and what I learned is you can't study Russian and do that full time and play rugby and go to bars and drink and have a really fun time. I switched my major to the premed sport and exercise science because it's just easier. I did that until Ballot Measure 5 hit and my department was going to be cut. Eventually it was cut. And so I just switched to English literature, which really at the end was perfect. It's what I should have done at the very start. But I found my way there eventually.

Long: Can you tell us what the campus was like when you, so you arrived fall of 1987?

Bills: Yes.

Long: You lived in a dorm?

Bills: I did. I lived in Burgess. Yeah. Burgess Hall. It's over— so at that time I was in one of the ones that is on Agate street, Hamilton Complex. I had a roommate and the campus at that time— I was, I was still being a good student at the very start of my college experience. That ebbed and flowed throughout my college time. I had other interests that would pop in. Campus was—Dorms were the dorms, I think in terms of how it felt, it was an all-women's dorm. I wasn't out to my roommate. I had a girlfriend still back home in Coos Bay. And it was basically my little nucleus was the rugby team and I was the youngest on the team. I was seventeen when I started the school. And I had just turned seventeen. And they were— that's where I spent a lot of time and they were all grad students or you know, nearing the end of their careers here at U of O. You didn't see young women and men holding hands like you do now. The place to go if you wanted to meet any gays and lesbians was the Gay and Lesbian Alliance, which is in the Erb Memorial Student Union or Women's Resource and Referral. There wasn't a women's center, there was just Women's R&R, women and you know, different programs. But there wasn't one big center.

And I still wasn't out into that whole getting to know everybody. What I would do is I'd walked by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance and kind of look in and they look scary because there are people with Mohawks that were purple and I pretty much dress the same now as I did when I was seventeen. Thank God the eighties are coming back, is all I can say, polo shirts are back in. Yay. And I'd walk by, I'd look in, they were scary. They were out, I walk away.

The same thing happened with a bookstore that I learned about, Mother Kali's Books. And I remember riding my bike by a few times before getting the nerve to go in. The only lesbian book I had read at that time was *Breaking the Silence*. It was the only book I could find in our public library was about lesbian nuns. That was my understanding really. And then my girlfriend's mom's had the, I think *Lesbian Sex* by, I forget who wrote it, but so you'd peek at those books. But it was like "Oh."

I'd go into Mother Kali's and I'd go right back to the record section and not look at any of the books or the magazines because those were lesbian. Eventually it was Izzie I think was the name of the woman who owned the place. And she had beautiful gray hair and really butch. I remember she didn't wear a bra, which I found very shocking as a seventeen-year-old. And she was wonderful. Started getting me away from the record section back to other things to read and to look at. But you know, I'd pick records out by their cover and Tret Fure and Meg Christian and Cris Williamson and all those—Holly Near— all of those things.

But I ended up getting involved with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance near the end of my freshman year just talking with folks and getting to know them and being more active. And then the other place that we'd go was a bar called, there's two bars at the time in Eugene. One called the Riviera room, the Riv, and the other one called Club Arena. It was Perry's I think is what it was called, Perry's. And the Riv was sort of an old school dive bar. I only went in there once and it was beer bottles stocked up on a table with, now mind you, I'm young, so really butch looking women that I found scary and everybody was smoking because you could smoke inside those days. And then I watched two women get into a fight with pool cues and I thought, no, I don't want to be here. I ended up at Perry's at the time, and the rugby team would sneak us in because we were all minors. Again, I was seventeen. I had a fake ID which was a terrible fake ID, but I had a fake ID and they'd let me in on it and we'd have fun and dance all night and then go back.

Long: Where was it?

Bills: Perry's was right by the Greyhound bus station on Pearl Street, so probably Broadway and Pearl Street. Then the Riviera was Broadway and Willamette Street. By what is now the McDonald theater and across the street from the Downtown Athletic Club. It's Actors Cabaret now, I believe. And those were sort of the hubs where you'd go. There weren't T dances until much later when there'd be women's dances.

For me, Eugene ended up being a place where there are a lot and you evoked a lot of lesbians. I'll say the Women's Studies classes, my English classes not so much in the sports and exercise sciences at that time, which I thought was interesting, looking back. But I got involved with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance my sophomore year. I ended up being the director of it. And it was GALA and the LGBTQ parts didn't come till I left much longer, much long time after.

Long: What did that involve, being the head of that?

Bills: There was a Gay and Lesbian film festival. A queer film festival was one piece that we'd do. Bringing things like Vito Russo's movies in. Movies that you just couldn't get access to. I mean, there weren't things that you could watch on television that represented gay and lesbian culture very much. And if there were, there'd be actual viewing parties where everybody would show up and watch somebody kiss on TV or talk about being gay or lesbian on TV. We bring the film festival in. It entailed keeping the office open so people could have a safe space to just come to and sit down. We had magazines and books that you could borrow and look at that were a part of queer culture. There weren't things like *Curve* Magazine or *Out* Magazine.

We're talking, there was a local paper here called the *Lavender Network*. That was the info sharing device at the time and you know, you get your hands on that and that was pretty spectacular. You could figure out what's going on in town and there wasn't a

gay pride event here in Eugene. Everybody was still going down to San Francisco for that. So I did that. I had a, a co-director then eventually it was just the director of it and that was fantastic. And then I, that sort of launched me into my student government stuff that I did here at U of O.

Long: Can I ask first about your memories of the Measure 8 Campaign? Because that would have been 1987, 88 when you were a freshman.

Bills: Yeah, that was the first time I ever got to vote. Eventually I turned eighteen just in the nick of time. Everybody I voted for did not win. I think I voted for Jesse Jackson. The Oregon Citizens Alliance was really spearheading a lot of this at the time and they had been pretty active in Coos Bay, Oregon, where I grew up. They were trying to ban *Playboy* from the public library, which of course just made it so everybody knew there was *Playboy* at the public library and it's Coos Bay, Oregon for God's sake. But I remember really wanting to fight them on the free speech basis and access to this. And you know, it was, you shouldn't ban things just because there's, what's pornography? I'll know when I see it. The OCA was pretty hideous. When the Ballot Measure 8 started I was pretty young, pretty new. A couple things happened. One, it was pretty evident that gays and lesbians were being targeted. I remember having a No on 8 sticker on my truck and someone drove by and very loudly yelled "Faggot!" They got it wrong, but those was still the intent I think. I understood that. And it was scary. It was a scary

time. You know, we had 8-9-13-9 were the ballot measure sequences.

We were all amazed that it passed, when Ballot Measure 8 passed. I was like, "Oh, wow, okay." Not knowing that there had been a fight earlier in the City of Eugene, I forget in the '70s, where there was another ballot measure and some stuff that was happening. So people that have been here had already experienced that. But for me it was brand new. And again, it wasn't out to everybody in the world. You know, I wasn't coming out left and right. I was pretty much, I had my nucleus of people that I spent time with and other people. You still didn't hold hands in public, you still didn't do public displays of affection. Clearly, now I do. But then I wouldn't have, I was so small. But it was— I think for those who had lived through different parts, it was coming back and feeling worse for them. For me it was like, "Oh my God. What now?" It was a interesting time. We didn't know where it would lead.

Raiskin: Talk about getting involved in student government here.

Bills: Sure. I started off with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance and then ran for what was called the Incidental Fee Committee, which was the body that approved all the budgets for everybody. It's a little different now, but that's what worked then. You had student union groups, student groups, and then you have the incidental fee committee that approves their budget. And then you have the executive branch, which was the student body president and the vice president and that crew that then would sign off or veto

whatever the IFC put forward to them. In '88 I started dating a woman who at the time was the student body president and I was the director of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance. She was Student Body President. That kind of made me a little bit more interested. I was walking in those circles, getting to know what was going on. And so she encouraged me and I ended up being on the Incidental Fee Committee and eventually being the chair of that body for a period of time. I was also on the board of directors for the US Student Association, USSA. And at that time we were working of course, on access to higher ed for funding, but also on gay and lesbian issues, on immigrant rights issues, on issues of racism. Not so much sexism. Which is interesting looking back on all that, but you know, it was a very activist body. You members from the young communist league there. It was definitely left of center as a lobbying body to Congress.

So I did that and ended up being the head of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus for the US Student Association. It's a huge body that represented schools from all over the United States. And then I decided to run for student body president and I won. I ran against a very right wing, right of center opponent and then a more moderate group. It was good. It worked out. And being student body president at that time of course was sort of the start of Ballot Measure 5, and what was going on with funding for higher ed.

Apartheid was still on the table. Gays in the military and the university's support of allowing recruitment on campus was key.

And at the time, Miles Brand was the university president and at one point students went into his office and took over his office regarding allowing the military to recruit. Because if it's banned for gay and lesbian service members. And Dr. Brand and I got together and decided that we would go do joint lobbying to Congress on behalf of removing the ban for gays and lesbians in the military. Tremendous respect for that man on that. And my mom ended up having a heart attack, so I stayed here, but he still went and did that.

Raiskin: Did you run for ASUO president as an out lesbian?

Bills: Oh yeah. Yeah. I was an out lesbian when I ran. Out lesbian for IFC as well. And the Incidental Fee Committee.

Raiskin: And did you get reaction to that? Positive or negative?

Bills: No. You know, I don't really recall exactly the reaction that I got to it. I got endorsed by the sororities, which was pretty spectacular. And I remember going in and the sororities were pretty foreign to me, but I remember getting to go and visit all the sororities and sort of talk about my platform and they endorsed me. The Panhellenic, which was pretty, it was fantastic. Inter-Fraternity did not. They went for the other candidate who is a Beta. So that made sense. I understood that. But no. Not so much. My experience in terms of the harassment I never got any hate mail. I never got anything like that. Only had really one incident happened to me at U of O. My girlfriend and I were sitting in the car outside of the Erb Memorial

Union. And we were kissing goodbye right inside the car. And it was the beer garden. It was like a Friday or something. And some guys walked out and they saw us kissing and then they stopped and I heard them yell, "It's two women, its two women."

Then they banged on the hood of the car. And I was in the passenger seat, my girlfriend was in the driver's seat and it was scary. They leave. And then moments later they pulled their car in behind ours and they got out and they're banging on our hood and calling us dykes and I wanted to get out of the car and my girlfriend said, "Do not get out of the car." And I really wanted to get out of the car. I didn't like being trapped in the car. If they're going to bring the fight to me, they will meet the fight. Probably is why I do what I do now. But yeah, it was terrifying and I got their license plate and immediately reported it to the Campus Public Safety and there was on site — Eugene police Department was also on site. I had the plate and they really sort of let it go. They didn't do anything about it. And looking back, was there a crime? No, there really wasn't a crime. But it was sure scary in the fact that we didn't get treated really well. And there was a woman who was a lesbian and worked for public safety and got ahold of me and said, "Look, we know where they're at. They're at this fraternity house on this location. But we can't do anything about it." And just feeling so powerless at that time and just hating that fear and powerlessness trapped in your car. Three big guys, they're blocking us in. None of this was okay.

And I remember that feeling. Now as a police officer, I remember that feeling when I talk to people who are victims of bias crime. Because sometimes there's nothing that we can do ask the police, but maybe just listening because it's, I remember being there. I remember being essentially what I would say gay bashed. They didn't put hands on me, but I was certainly afraid and you know, they took something significant away in that moment.

Long: How did you get out of that situation?

Bills: They left. They got bored and left. I think had I gotten out of the car had been worse. It was a good call to stay in the car. Just wasn't the call I wanted to make at the time.

Raiskin: How did you get from a degree in English literature to the police department?

Bills: And don't forget the minor in Women's Studies. That's a key part to allow me to get my job. I graduated and worked for U of O for a bit in human resources and then sold advertising for the *Lavender Network*, which then had a different name. And I sold advertising in Eastern Oregon. That was my territory. For a gay and lesbian magazine in Eastern Oregon, it wasn't really lucrative in terms of a target area. There are lesbian and gay dude ranches in Eastern Oregon, just so you know. Not many though. I did that and I was basically an underemployed college grad is what happened. I had worked with Officer Ken Saxon who was a Eugene police officer and worked in the East University part here in Eugene on

Thirteenth Street. There wasn't a substation then. He just basically drove around and dealt with community-oriented problems. I also knew a female Eugene police officer because she played basketball with a bunch of friends of mine. She had been a D1 basketball player in Chicago, moved out here for her, for who knows what reason became a police officer.

They were recruiting. And by this time I was working as a barista at a place called Coffee Corner at Fifth Street Market. All the police officers would come there to get coffee and so I'd chat them up a bit. And I applied. My background was lefty liberal student activist, degree in English literature, no military background whatsoever. I wore Doc Martins with yellow stitching. You know, shorts. I had a flat top at various points, would go to the Michigan Women's Music Festival. I don't know why they picked me, but I got hired on the first try.

So, I started my career with Eugene police in 1994. There were other out lesbians in the police department in 1994. There was a— I think she was a lieutenant or maybe a captain at the time, whose girlfriend, partner, now wife was also an agent who then became a sergeant. There were a lot of out women at the Eugene police department. Which was really nice. I think I was the most out of all of them just because of my activist stuff that I'd done in Eugene. There'd been a front page, *Register Guard*, big section story about my partner—(language is always so blurred, partner, because you couldn't get married)—and I were having a child and the *Register*

Guard did a big splash in the paper about this baby and two moms. So, I was out and no going back in that closet. And people were kind of okay. The rule for new recruits is heads down, mouths shut and that's standard for everybody. It wasn't unique to me. But I remember being pulled aside by a colleague as a new officer. And so I had a brand new baby son. He was maybe six months old at this time. And she said, "You need to be more quiet. You're being too loud and pushy about being a lesbian." And I said, "What am I doing?" And she said, "Well, you keep talking about your son." "Okay, well, thanks for the feedback."

Suffice to say she's not in law enforcement anymore and I am. Her world was probably not as good as it should have been either. But she was upset that I was talking about my kid. I'm a new mom. I'll show you photos till I'm blue in the face. That was pretty ridiculous. But, you know, I was lucky. Eugene police had a lot of out, strong, amazing, capable trailblazers and I just got to add my footprints to theirs.

Raiskin: It's interesting because talking to people, lesbians who were here in the seventies, they talk about police rates on the Riv room. And was there an element in that your department held over from that time of police who are not sympathetic?

Bills: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. There were troglodytes for sure. They were folks that actually would not get hired now as police officers, which is pretty amazing when you look back. It was the post-Vietnam war, no college education, just got out of the military ,narrow

worldview kind of folks. They hired them because they were big and thick. They couldn't probably put a report together very well. And yeah, they were there. And I remember looking at them and thinking, "You're a jerk." But I don't know what it was, I think for me it was two women in particular I thought were the most homophobic out of the crew that I had to deal with. The guys were just guys, I mean I think being a woman was just as bad as being a lesbian, being female. And sometimes in law enforcement it's hard to differentiate what the issue is—is it because I'm a lesbian or because I'm a woman. And I'd say most of the time it's because I'm a woman. They didn't like that because I'm five-two on a tall day. We pretty scrappy and can hold my own, but I'm still only five-two and female. And I think that ended up itself was a barrier.

We weren't doing raids in '94 anymore. We weren't doing bar checks anymore and that'd be just bar checks for age. And on that I did get kicked out of Perry's eventually when they figured out I was a minor. So I just want so you know, that did happen. It was very sad day. But Eugene Police at that time was evolving. I started in '94. My son was born in '95 and there wasn't leave for parents of same sex couples. So, the Eugene police union actually fought for me to get time off. And at the time we were working six days on, three days off. I was on graveyard. My union fought to give me compassionate leave, which is what you get when someone dies. And they fought and I got it. I got three days off. Now, it doesn't sound like much, but again, it's 1995 and so I got to have six days off with a new son as opposed to three days off. And you know, it's

laughable now because now I could take as much time as I have in the bank off. But that was pretty good for then. You know, I was happy with that and they fought for it and there was not a blinking of the eye that it was bad.

The Eugene police union was also the same, the first union in the city to offer benefits, insurance benefits and benefits for same sex couples. And it was the police department wasn't Rec, wasn't the city manager's office, wasn't the fire department, it was the cops. I think that pendulum was swinging at that time. But yeah, there's still homophobia, there are still troglodytes, there were still terrible people who every time you'd have these ballot measures come up, you'd get to see where the writing was on the wall with where people stood. Because even though public employees, we can't have our opinions shown, opinions were talked about. Then when the marriage equality stuff came back up, again, you got to see some of the older generation and their thoughts on the matter. Then with Trump you know, it's amazing how smart, intelligent, capable people can be so blinded by a buffoon.

Raiskin: Can you tell us something about your work on the SWAT team?

Bills: Sure. Yeah, so I was the SWAT team commander for a total of eight years. I had been a Lieutenant, I promoted to Lieutenant in 2006 and I had been a crisis negotiator and then the supervisor of the crisis negotiation team for ten years. I worked really closely with SWAT as a negotiator. The guy who was in charge of the team was going to be deploying militarily to Afghanistan or Iraq. They

needed someone to take over the team in 2008 and I got asked if I would do it. Now, what's unique about that is that there'd only been one female ever before on the SWAT team and she ended up resigning from law enforcement, so she didn't last very long, but she was very capable, very talented woman. And there were no female SWAT commanders that I knew of anywhere in the United States. SWAT is a Special Weapons and Tactics. It is the body, it's the group of people that police officers call when they need help. So you call the police, police call SWAT. And so it's high risk. It's highlight ability. It's very dangerous, very intense training, very physical training. And again, I'm five two on a tall day and I'm female. And I was asked if I would do it and I said yes. I thought, "Oh my God." I approached it with as much humility as I possibly could because I knew that I had never been a SWAT cop and there had never been a commander who wasn't a SWAT cop or had military experience to lead that team. So, went in the first day, and I said, "These are the things that you can expect of me. Honor, courage, respect, integrity and humility. These are my core values. I will treat you this way. You treat me this way. I'm new, I'm going to be in your pockets learning as much as I possibly can and I'm going to ask a lot of questions. And I know that I don't know everything, so you know, you've got to teach." I think that approach worked really well coming in. And I also cared very deeply for them. I think you can't work and put people into dangerous situations and not care about them. I asked them to put their lives at risk to do things for me. You have to really value who

they are. The challenges were, of course, they don't make gear as small as I am, but because of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, unfortunately they start, they do have it now. I got geared up little vests, little everything. On the obstacle course, which is mandatory — everybody else can jump up to grab the monkey bar to go across it. I can't, I'd have to shimmy up the pole, which expends a lot of energy and taps you out. The guys were great. They actually stacked sandbags for me, so I wouldn't have to shimmy up the pole. You know, things like that. They made some sweet little accommodations. I would walk into the locker room where we all change just because my space and their space and we're going to get used to each other pretty quickly. And that was good. It was an amazing experience. I am the longest SWAT commander of that team ever in the history of our department. I hit that milestone at six years and then I've been asked to come back two more times for coverage for one year stints. And I love it. On call 24/7. I've missed a lot of holidays and a lot of events.

The training's intense. I did SWAT basic as a forty-one year old woman with a bunch of twenty year olds and we did a lot of pushups. Unfortunately, we did pushups on my account once. We were at the range and you had to shoot — there's targets at one, two, three, and four. And so they would yell "fourteen." So you'd shoot one, four. Or they'd yell "twenty-four." They'd shoot two and four and then they yell "five." So I shot one and four and I got yelled at and the range instructor said, "Who shot?" I'm like, "I shot." He says, "Well, why did you shoot?" I said, "You said five."

So I shot one in four. He goes, "Only a Lieutenant would think that way." And then I learned the benefits of four count pushups. So as did everybody else, because you do it as a team to improve morale and suffer equally. That was great. I miss it. I miss that level of work. I don't miss the pager.

Raiskin: Were you a negotiator on those when you went over the SWAT call?

Bills: No, I was the team leader. So my role was, I'm the commander, so I oversee the entire operation. With SWAT, I would be the Sergeant for negotiations and then two to three SWAT sergeants and then all the SWAT negotiators under them. I oversee and direct the operations, direct the tactics. Negotiators feed me info. I make decisions on whether to push, whether to hold, whether to, you know, where we put the sniper positions to deploy people, what assets do we have, what more assets do we need? I've sent my folks off to chase someone in an active shooter situation that we've killed. My very first SWAT experience, very first SWAT call out, we actually shot a man. I learned quickly he had killed somebody and we found him and ended up shooting him. Because he came out with knives and it was a rewarding but also very stressful time. I also oversaw the weapons of mass destruction team. Dignitary protection. Did dignitary protection detail for a former governor, Sarah Palin. Very interesting experience. She was actually very nice. Very, very nice. Nice family. Did canine traffic enforcement bomb team. I oversaw all the high risk specialty teams. And as part of that I lost an officer.

I lost a negotiator and a traffic team member who was killed line of duty, which was probably the hardest thing I've had to do as a commander for a team.

Long: Can you describe a little bit more the kinds of incidents that you would have to be called to?

Bills: Yeah, so SWAT is called to hostage and barricaded subject calls and it's an armed barricaded subject. Someone who's been inside their house probably cranking off rounds. Active shooter situations, area searches for active shooters, high risk incidents and warrant services. So if you've got someone who is let's say dealing drugs and they're known to be armed, we send in the SWAT team. The tactics have evolved greatly from when I started to now. When I started we used to kick down doors for every reason and do rapid entries. And now that's the last thing we do. So it's changed a lot. In terms of safety and practice. Couple incidents that I'll bring is we had a guy in a van threatening to blow up the post office. He was actually going to drive into it till he got there and realized there are stairs in there. It was at Fifth to Sixth and Willamette Street here in Eugene at the post office. There's a big hotel called the Hilton really close by. And at the end of Willamette Street there is the North-South railroad. And because of the size of the van and the potential blast radius, I shut down the North-South railroad lines for the West Coast for about seven hours. One of my favorite moments ever. But as part of that, I put a sniper, precision marksman in the Hilton looking into the vehicle and I said, if he starts the car, you

kill him. Because if he had a bomb in the car, we couldn't let him drive off. We had evacuated the area, of course, asking officers to physically put themselves in harm's way, to pull civilians out of that area. We did that and then I had to tell a Sergeant: If the shot misses and he continues to drive, your job and your car is to stop him. So, you think about those things where you're asking your people to do— We don't often ask snipers or tell snipers to do things. We let officers make their own use of force decisions. But in that instance, it was my job to say, Your direction is he doesn't leave. He starts the car and moves. You need to take a shot to stop him. Those are the sorts of things we did. Sat on houses, we put gas into houses to get people to come out. The main goal is always to negotiate and to get people to come out willingly. Most of the time, actually probably 80 percent of the time that's what happens is they just come out on their own through negotiations.

Raiskin: How did being a police officer affect your being a mother?

Bills: Looking back on that, hindsight's wonderful. I love it. I was a new cop, I was a classic new police officer. I wrote tickets for everything under the sun. I loved my job. I became a negotiator two years after getting hired. So in '96; did that for a long time, loved it. I loved working and going to call outs and I worked shift work. I'd worked nights so I could sleep during the day, then being be with my son on the afternoon see them in the morning, see them, put them to bed. And so that worked well as an infant and then would try to make my shift work so I wouldn't miss time. But we worked

rotating days for really long time, so you have to plan your schedule out. Then we started working a 4/10, so I knew what days I'd have off. I worked a lot of nights and a lot of a lot of weird hours to try to accommodate family life, but I was all about being a cop. It makes you more hypervigilant. So go to the public pool here, Amazon Pool, and you see someone's sitting, a man normally sitting outside the fence watching little kids swimming. I walked up to him and said, "Does your parole officer know where you're at?" And the guy bolted away. So I think you become aware of those things. It's that hypervigilance, I think we're more, you know, there's always a safe word you have with your family about if you see someone you've arrested or there's a dangerous situation, you give them a warning to have them leave. I do that now. But my son's now a Seattle police officer, so maybe I didn't do too poorly.

Long: Yeah. Can you tell us about the process to get your son?

Bills: Yeah. When my partner and I decided to have a child there was a local doctor who did this work. We were sort of that first batch, that first Gayby boom batch that came out. And tons since, but there's sort of a, there was a little pod and then that second little pod and we're part of that second little wave of babies. Went there, there was what I call the Costco option. And then the Neiman Marcus option. The Costco option was you got to basic information about the donor. We opted for unknown donor just because of the risks. At the time Oregon did allow same sex adoption. As a second parent then non-birthing parent I could adopt the baby. We went

for the Costco option because it was cheaper. You get basic info, allergies, genetics, looks. Then the Neiman Marcus, which is where you get a photo, you figure out, know their favorite color, their favorite kind of cookie. All those sorts of things. We didn't do that. We were poor. Cop and brand new public service worker. So we went to Costco. Put on my Amex. It was about 499 a pop. Took three tries.

Long: Sorry? Could you —

Bills: It was about 400 bucks, \$500 a try. And it only took us three tries.

Long: For the vial of semen.

Bills: For the vial of semen. Right. I tried to get the doctor to let me do it and he wouldn't, but once he let me actually push the little stopper, which is fun. It was expensive then. I understand now from friends that's way more than that, but you know, we put in genetics for my match. My ex, his other mom, his bio mom is red hair, blue eyes, and I'm of course black, gray hair, but black hair and brown eyes. And so we put in for Eastern European Jew. Black and brown, and ended up with a sort of shade of red, blue eyed six foot boy. So it changed. It was not what we expected. The funny thing though is he actually kind of looks like me and he acts like me, so it's okay. But it was hard. I had no idea what it'd be like to be a parent. And we never struggled about adding men to his life because there's good men around that were friends and didn't—and there are a lot of single moms who raise fabulous men. So that was never really a

consideration. We really wanted sort of a sensitive new age guy. So we bought him U of O cheerleader Barbie so he could have a Barbie doll. He promptly ran over her with his truck and would scoop her up and dump her out. And we'd take him to women's basketball games and he'd sit there slack-jawed watching cheerleaders. So he ended up just fine. Much to our attempts to make this sort of new age guy. We've got a sensitive, smart, capable man who— very heterosexual, and jokes that he knows what women want because he of course was raised by moms.

Raiskin: What kind of support did you have from the lesbian community in raising him?

Bills: It definitely takes a tribe. It takes a family, big, extended family. We had tremendous support from dear friends and it was, it was wonderful. We had neighbors that were a couple that helped us out and you're a new parent, you're frazzled, doesn't matter your sexual orientation or anything. You're just going to be crispy and tired. And so we had friends that would help us out and give us time to go have a date occasionally. We didn't have a lot of gay and lesbian friends with kids at the time. They were all great aunts people, but I think that was the advantage is that they have more time. Our son was raised around really amazing, talented women. Who will joke, you know, one of them went to his football game when he was in high school and someone was questioning her about who she was and she just looked at him and said, "I'm part of

Greg's tribe." And you know, so he's got a lot of folks that adore him, certainly.

Raiskin: Did you participate in any of the lesbian parenting groups?

Bills: No. I think, no, we never did. We took them to Michigan to the Michigan Women's Music Festival until we couldn't anymore. Which was nice, you know.

Long: How old was he when he had to stop?

Bills: That was the magic age. It think he was four or five or I think maybe three or four. It was when we had to stop. We'd been gone— I think I went for a total of ten summers to the festival working there. And his other mom I think did eight or nine. But you know, Greg hit that magic age. So when Karen, his mom, was pregnant we were at the festival and of course then you have a newborn baby at the festival and childcare and he was a big, happy baby. So that went well. But it was interesting having a boy child there at Michigan. It was remarkable that someone so tiny could be a trigger for some people. You know, I'll respect their journey, but my seven-month old should not be a trigger for anybody. It's just a big chubby baby. But it was good. I think it was a, it was a formative experience for him. He got to see a whole variety of women. He had a childcare provider who was deaf, so he got his name and sign. So he had a good growing up.

Raiskin: How involved were you in the schools and how did that, how did that feel being out as a parent in the schools?

Bills: Again, it's Eugene, so I think there's lesbians you could throw a rock and hit one. You shouldn't do that, but you could. They are everywhere and we had them in the French immersion program. And we were the only, at that time, I'm trying to think if he had, if there's any other gays or lesbians. In his class, we were the only gay and lesbian couple. We were active. My first language is French, so of course it was fun. My mom volunteered at his elementary school. I volunteered all throughout both elementary and then into middle school. When he went to Roosevelt Middle School. I didn't volunteer in high school because he asked me not to. He said, "Will you please not do this anymore?" So I said, "Okay." But we were active and we didn't have any problems. And I once asked my son, "Well how did he deal with having two moms?" And he said, well, if anybody ever said anything to him one, those weren't the people that he was going to be friends with. And two, he was always a big kid. And he had big kid friends. He had friends that were huge and they would just resolve their problems the way they needed to be resolved. So whatever grief he got, he managed pretty well. He's never been shy about introducing us, which is nice.

Long: Has he ever been curious about his sperm donor?

Bills: We always told him the story from an early age about how he came about. So, no. I mean certainly these days, I'm sure if you wanted to we could give him the number. He could pop it into some database and someone's going to say, "Hey, that's my number." He's never asked. We just told him the story that there's two women that

really, really wanted a baby and you know, he's made with love.

And that there's two people that love them very much and that then we would explain the mechanics of it and to which you'd see that face sort of zone out. "I don't want to hear any more details. Thank you for sharing." And he'd go on his way.

Long: You're relatively young still, but we're wondering about how, what you think about aging as a lesbian.

Bills: Oh, I think we should have lesbian nursing homes or retirement communities, I've decided. It's interesting as I hit closer to fifty, which is not so far off to, to think about retiring because I'm also eligible to retire shortly, as well, from law enforcement. I think that one, I'm hopeful because the younger folks, straight, gay, lesbian, bi, trans seem to be more with it than I think we were. And they're more open. I think about the police officers that we have and I think about the gender bias and yes, there's still gender bias and there's still issues with LGBTQ. We're always working and pushing that rock up a hill, but it's not rolling over us as much. It's just an upward push. I talked to these young folks that are out and it's not even a subject matter. There's not like this queer identity so much. With the people that I work with— with college students it could be different—but with the folks that I work with and they're in their twenties, they don't care. They don't care who you love. Their spectrum is so fluid. Man today, woman today, don't care to my heart wants to be with, I'm not going to spend a lot of time putting labels on it. It's really refreshing. It also makes me sad a little bit

because of the loss of that butch identity. The butch-fem thing that I kind of grew up with. I identify as butch. I'm comfortable with that. I don't need to be on some gender fluid spectrum. I know where I'm at. I honor and love all those who choose their different path, go for it. But I'm kind of sad about where did all the old butches go? And so as I get older, I'm kind of looking forward to maybe creating that same tribe that we've always been in our pod of people. Now how do we age together? How do we get to stick together and you know, be the rowdies in the wheelchairs, in the walkers and the nursing home and have the retirement community and my golf cart. I kind of want that. So, somewhere warm. I'm just going with that. I'm okay with somewhere warmer.

Raiskin: What haven't we asked you about your life that you should tell us?

Bills: I think the piece for me, coming out in rural Oregon— I think I was lucky in that I found a niche and a support system as quickly as I did. And I can't imagine what it's like for young LGBTQ kids now who are coming out in rural communities and struggling with their identity without having a support system. I worry that the Internet and all of those media forms don't provide the necessary connection for people to develop healthy relationships with the world around them. And so for me, I'm really grateful for my girlfriend's mom and her partner early on. I think that without them, probably would've struggled a lot more because they were so safe and they provided a role model for what it was like to be a same sex couple. And I'm lucky in that way. And so there's

certainly gratitude for that. And then trying to— now there's all these terms about living your authentic life and I love it. It's great. I feel that I've, I've done that. Every once in a while it's still a struggle. Every once in a while it's that question about should I be out? Should I hold my wife's hand? I'm married now and been married for thirteen years. And every once in a while it's like there's still that little inkling of, is it safe? Is it okay? What will happen if I do this? I hate that part. That part pisses me off still. It's like not as bad as being trapped in the car, but you're still trapped a little bit and I don't like that. I'm a police officer. I don't do well with being put back into the corner. I don't want to be there, but you know, you still have to be thoughtful about it. Mindful I guess is probably a term. But yeah, no regrets. It's never been a thing where I looked back and thought, "Damn, I shouldn't have come out." I can't imagine being in a closet. Don't want to ever be there.

Raiskin: What is something that you might want to say to young people as someone who's a little bit older and lived the life?

Bills: Yeah. One, find your passion. Whatever that passion is. Be open to new things. Two, I know there's that whole, it gets better media piece, but it really does get better. Life is rich and good and there are people out there who love and support you. I've certainly, as a police officer, been to suicides of young people who committed suicide because they're gay and lesbian and didn't have family support. And that's heartbreaking. But there is family, it's just not the family you're born into. And for me, I love the family that I've

chosen. I love my biological family but I don't get to choose them. But I got to choose this amazing rich family and you know, you just need to know that they're out there for you. And you know, get your nose out of your phone.

Long: Thank you very much.

Bills: Yeah, thank you.

Long: Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]