# Oral History Interview with Ellen Rifkin

Interview conducted on September 5, 2019

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

*Ellen Rifkin, September 5, 2019*

Recorded in the University of Oregon Libraries

## 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 on September 5, 2019. Ellen was born in 1947 in Brooklyn, New York City. She grew up in Danbury, Connecticut. Being Jewish was a big part of her childhood. Ellen dated boys in high school but had crushes on girls, which she only recognized later in life. She enjoyed college. She married a man, and moved with him to Santa Cruz, California, where she became a graduate student studying literature. She fell in love with a woman and, in 1978, left her marriage. She came out in 1983. Before moving to Eugene, Ellen had lived on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. Ellen discusses the move to Oregon, and her courage in coming out as a lesbian in her mid-thirties. She discusses the lesbian Jewish group, Baleboostehs, and the leadership of that group. She discusses Mother Kali's Bookstore, the death of Izzie Harbaugh, and the decline of the store. She talks about foster-parenting a teenager. Ellen ends her interview by discussing retirement and her desire to help undocumented people.

**Additional subjects:** Abortion; Coming out (sexual orientation); Foster mothers; Ironplow, Lorraine; Judaism; Lefton, Enid; Lesbian mothers – United States; Parenting; Self disclosure; Sheklow, Sally.

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**Narrator**: Ellen Rifkin

**Location**: University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon

**Interviewers**: Linda Long and Judith Raiskin

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Long: This oral history interview is part of the Eugene Lesbian Oral History Project. The recordings will be made available through the University of Oregon Special Collections and University Archives. This is an oral history interview with Ellen Rifkin on Thursday, September 5, 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. Ellen, 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.

Rifkin: Mm-hmm [affirmative], I do.

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

Rifkin: I was born in 1947 in New York City in the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital, which my mother insisted that my father drive to in a snow storm because she had only recently moved into Connecticut, which to her was— it might as well have been Uzbekistan from New York. And so she didn't trust the doctors in Danbury. Anyway, by the time my sister was born, my sister was born on the Danbury Hospital. So that's the answer to—

Raiskin: How far a drive is that?

Rifkin: Oh, a good hour.

Long: Funny.

Raiskin: And so you had one sister?

Rifkin: Yes, and she's still my sister and we're extremely close. And she actually was kind of aware of my whole, very long drawn out, coming out process. And she was supportive through all of it. I didn't talk to her a lot, I just knew that she was supportive, and that mattered.

Raiskin: What were your parents like?

Rifkin: As people?

Raiskin: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Rifkin: I don't think we want to get— it would take a long time. I cannot put it in twenty-five words or less. They both loved me and my sister very much. They have flaws.

Raiskin: And so what was your early childhood like? What kind of school did you go to?

Rifkin: Well, I went to a public school all the way through high school. There was never any thought that we wouldn't. And I guess I've already made this clear, this is my first answer, being Jewish was a big part of my childhood. So there were only a small number of Jewish kids in the public schools. Also a very small number of African American kids. The town was mostly Irish Catholic, and Italian Catholic, and Lebanese, and Syrian Catholic, also was a working class town. Although, my father was a dentist, we weren't working class, but it was good to grow up in that situation.

Raiskin: What was your temperament as a child?

Rifkin: I was really angry a lot. My mother was very critical. We screamed at each other a lot. I really had quite a temper but the world thought I was the nicest person in the world. And my mother used to say that she was happy to absorb all my hate so that other people would like me. Okay. Let's move on [laughs].

Raiskin: What was school like for you? Socially, academically?

Rifkin: I got good grades. I was kind of a "goody goody." I was the president of this and the editor of that in high school. I had friends,

I was liked. I didn't have the best friend in high school. But also, I didn't have a sense of— I didn't get excited about learning, and ideas, and thinking until I went to college. And in fact there was a subculture in my high school of kids who were intellectuals, and I didn't get them, I didn't recognize who they were.

Even though I totally loved reading and writing but I didn't really discover that part of myself— there's a big intellectual part of myself. So, when I went to college, it was thrilling. I don't know what else is important to say about Danbury. Probably, there's tons to say, but this probably isn't. Let's move on.

Raiskin: Did you date—

Rifkin: But I was straight.

Raiskin: Okay.

Long: Did you date in high school?

Rifkin: I dated, met boys. Not a lot though. I didn't get a lot of dates, and that was okay. Definitely had crushes on boys, and in retrospect, I realized that I had crushes on girls, but I didn't recognize them at the time that that was there. I didn't recognize it at all. I guess I could just— I don't know how you want to proceed here. I could just plunge into coming out.

Raiskin: Sure.

Rifkin: Which didn't happen until I was married to a man. And, let's see, I don't know. So, do you want the story or?

Raiskin: Whatever you want it, however you want to tell it?

Rifkin: Let's see. I'm not sure where to start. Okay. I was married, and we were very politically active. We were part of the activist community in Santa Cruz, California. And we were in a radio collective, and we put on a show every week. We might have done it twice a week at the community radio station. And anyway, my best friend was in the collective, and I realized that I was in love with her. And it happened— oh, this is strange, because I've written about this experience quite a bit and at length.

It's kind of odd to be saying it to some audience of unknown people. Let's see. So, I want to tell a short version of it. Anyway, the point is, that I was so shocked to realize— this is the point— I was so shocked that I went into, have you heard that phrase "homosexual panic," I think that's what it was. But it was so extreme that, I'm not exaggerating, I was alternately manic and catatonic for about a week. So, I was in an altered state and—

Raiskin: So you recognized that you were in love with—

Rifkin: —that I was a lesbian.

Raiskin: How did you come to recognize that?

Rifkin: Oh, because my friend— Sharman, if you ever hear this, "Hi". But Sharman is not a dyke. I recognized it because we had a very

conflictual relationship. And I was driving home one day after a fight that we had had, and it was a long ride home, because we lived out in the country. And I just kept thinking there was something strange about that fight. There's something strange about what just happened. And I realized I was in love with her, and I had to stop at this little market before driving up the hill to go home. And I probably stood in front of the cabbage at the market, for almost a half hour, not moving. I was stunned to realize that this was true, but it fit.

Raiskin: Were you frightened?

Rifkin: Not consciously, but I think that might've been part of that mania and catatonia [laughs]. I wasn't frightened, I just was stunned. I wasn't conscious of being frightened, but I was— I don't know what the word is. So, the theme that kept coming up, like a metaphor, during that week of being— you know, I don't think I want to tell this story in this anonymous kind of setting.

Raiskin: That's fine.

Rifkin: Okay, so I'll jump to the chase. I felt internally compelled to— the metaphor was to move, to make a change in my life. Oh, I called Sharman in the middle of it, to tell her. Basically she let me know, she is not interested in that, and she did not share that feeling. I hid that information from her, but I still felt like I had to make a major change in my life. And I didn't do it. At the end of that week, when I finally did go to sleep and woke up, and I looked at myself in the

mirror. And I knew I wasn't going to have the courage to leave my marriage, and to change my life at that point.

And I had lesbian friends. Actually, my husband and I, our closest friends or neighbors was a lesbian couple. I was involved in the women's prison project. I was around lesbians, but I didn't feel the ability to change at that point. And I ended up not coming out. There's a personal painful stuff here, that I'm sort of realizing, I don't want to tell this whole story.

Raiskin: That's fine.

Rifkin: I finally ended up leaving the marriage in 1978; it took that long. And it took the painfulness of an abortion and then finally, my husband just got so fed up with my constant "Am I going to leave or not?" He finally got attracted to somebody else, and that gave me an excuse to leave. So I did.

Raiskin: So I'm thinking about when you're in high school, and you didn't have a clue about that. And then we skipped college there.

Rifkin: Yes.

Raiskin: Where did you go to college?

Rifkin: Cornell University.

Raiskin: And I suppose there you—

Rifkin: It was a fantastic time to be at that place at that time. It was in the '60s. It was in the middle of— there was a huge struggle to establish

a black studies department on the campus. When I was there, there was an occupation of the student union. There were all kinds of decisions to make about, where do I want place myself in all of this. And it was fantastic. It was during the anti-war years. I was really lucky to be there.

Raiskin: How did you get out to California?

Rifkin: Oh, because the guy I married was in graduate school at Berkeley.

Raiskin: And you were living in Santa Cruz?

Rifkin: Well, we ended up going to Santa Cruz. Yeah.

Raiskin: Okay. So now you're on the West coast—

Rifkin: Yes.

Raiskin: What year is it? Are you—

Rifkin: I moved out in 1970 or '71.

Raiskin: Okay, and then you got divorced in '78.

Rifkin: Actually, I didn't send away the papers for the divorce until 1980.

Raiskin: And so what was your circle like and what did you know about the lesbian community in Santa Cruz, perhaps?

Rifkin: Okay, so like I said, when I was in graduate school and—

Raiskin: In what field?

Rifkin: Literature. It was the years of the women's movement. We had a support group. This was all before I was coming out. There was a women's support group among the graduate students. The women's studies program was just getting off its feet in Santa Cruz— I could talk a lot about Santa Cruz, but we're here to talk about Eugene. Do you want me to?

Raiskin: Well, just context of what you knew about the community and then how you got to Eugene? So—

Rifkin: Oh, okay. Well, how I got to Eugene. So, I finally came out in ‘83 and I had been bi during those intervening years. I had had relationships with men and with women, after I left my husband, but not a lot of relationships. So, I lived on the Navajo Reservation for between 19— that's where I went after I— that's what I was doing when I put the divorce paper in the mailbox. I was driving away from Santa Cruz, after having finished my thesis, and I was on my way to Arizona to the reservation there. Because I had figured out that I wanted to at least visit there.

When I came back to Santa Cruz in ‘82, that's when I met Janice. We got together and that was it, that, "Oh yeah, you're a lesbian." That was in the summer of ‘83. And it was because of our relationship, that I moved to Oregon, to Eugene because she wanted to live somewhere with the land, to have some land. And that was like unthinkable, economically, at that time in Santa Cruz or lots of places in California.

We both quit our jobs, and I bought a truck with a canopy. And we traveled around the country, and tried to look for a place of where should we settle, checking out different lesbian communities. And we did that for quite a few months. And then, we ended up deciding to come to Eugene.

Raiskin: Why Eugene? —the other ones you looked at.

Rifkin: Well, it was a compromise. It was neither of our first choice. My first choice was the Southwest, but she can't deal with heat.

Raiskin: And what community were you interested in in Southwest?

Rifkin: I just loved the Southwest, because I had lived down the reservation there. I loved the desert. I guess I wanted to have some proximity to the Native American cultures there. There was a lesbian community in New Mexico. Just the desert makes me instantly happy. So—

Raiskin: And what was her first choice?

Rifkin: Janice's first choice was this very remote, beautiful place on the northern California coast called Elk. And actually I found out later, but I didn't realize at the time— So, I didn't want to move there, because I felt like I needed a good university library close by, and a Jewish community. I think there was a Jewish community, not so far away, that I didn't know about. But anyway, I felt it was too remote in that sense, although I love remote.

Raiskin: So you weren't choosing for a lesbian community, you were choosing geographically where you wanted to live?

Rifkin: Well, we were choosing among places that we knew had lesbian communities. Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And we knew Eugene had a lesbian community, and we knew that it was near the mountains, and the ocean. And we loved camping and backpacking. And I knew that there was a Jewish synagogue whose rabbi was supportive of gay and lesbian rights, and he also was supportive of Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation, which was hugely important to me. Those were draws. So we picked Eugene. But anyway, so when we were sitting here at the beginning of this interview, and you started talking about— you'll ask like, "How did I come to Eugene?" And it was making me realize, it took a lot of courage for me to come out.

And I remember during those years, walking down the street with Janice in Santa Cruz— she'd been out forever. She was always a dyke but it was new for me. And I remember being conscious walking down the street, holding hands, that it took some courage to do that. It wasn't hard to do, I knew that's what I wanted to do. I was happy.

But there was a piece of my brain that sort of knew this feels good. And part of it is because it takes a little bit of courage to do this. So I was remembering that in the context of, that we moved together up to Oregon. Actually, I'm having a lot of personal thoughts now, that I don't really want to say out loud, but they're good. This is

very affirming for me. Okay. We're not together anymore, but we're very close friends.

Raiskin: Without getting into details, can you explain why it's affirming to think about this history right now?

Rifkin: Yeah, because by the time we moved here, I was already, how old was I? I was born in '47— I was over forty. I was well over forty. And I had a community in Santa Cruz. I got very involved in Jewish anti occupation politics after I came back from the reservation. I had a community there. We had close friends. I didn't realize what it meant to move to a totally new place at that time of my life. And it took a long time to feel a part of the community, really, a very long time. And then after Janice and I split up, I sometimes wondered to myself, Should I have moved here? Was that the right decision?

Raiskin: When you say was—

Rifkin: Sitting here now telling the story, and realizing that I have good feelings about the move, who we were at the time of the move, where my life is now. It's good to realize that.

Raiskin: You say it's hard to start in a new community. What was your impression of the lesbian communities in Eugene when you came? And what year was that when you came?

Rifkin: We moved here in 1989.

Raiskin: Okay. So what was your impression of the lesbian communities in Eugene?

Rifkin: Well, to tell you the truth, I wasn't really— what was my impression? I don't know how to answer that.

Raiskin: You said it was a little hard to— you said when you came it was hard to—

Rifkin: That was over time. There wasn't an initial immediate impression, one way or the other. But over time, I just realized how long it was taking to— I don't have any trouble making friends. I made friends. But that's different from the community. I felt in some ways people were more coupled up here than where I come from.

And what else? I became part of the Baleboostehs, the Jewish lesbians group, and that was wonderful. Oh, because Janice and I actually broke up for a year, and then we got back together, before we later on broke up. But our happiest years were during that second half of our relationship. But anyway, during that, I can't remember when I got involved with Baleboostehs, but they were—

Raiskin: Can you tell us something about what Baleboostehs means, and what the group was like?

Rifkin: I guess I'm assuming other people have talked about it.

Raiskin: A little bit, but your story's different.

Rifkin: Oh, okay. Yeah. Well, that's important. Actually, I'm sure other people have talked about it. The word Baleboostehs refers to— I don't know— something's going on about the context of the interview and an anonymous audience. Let's see. The point of the Baleboostehs for me was, it was a great community. And we got together once a month on the Jewish Rosh Chodesh, the New Moon, which is a traditional thing that Jewish women have done over centuries.

And we had so much fun, and there was so much warmth. And I'm sure people have spoken about the leadership of Sally and Enid in that group. It was a place where you could come and find a home as a Jewish lesbian. And it also was in the period before all these Jewish lesbians ended up flocking to TBI.

Raiskin: TBI is Temple Beth Israel—

Rifkin: Temple Beth Israel, right. And so at that point, people weren't interested in going to services and praying to God. But we were interested in affirming and growing our Jewish identity, and our connection with each other. And we would usually spend the first part of the gathering— so we honored the— there's a Jewish calendar, and then there's an astrology calendar. We talked about what was going on and— were you ever in Baleboostehs?

Raiskin: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Rifkin: Okay. So we talked about what was going on in the Jewish calendar, what holiday might be coming up or what the season

was, what that meant emotionally. And then we did the same thing and for astrology. And then we went around and everybody said something about our personal lives related to whatever that theme was. And then we would make up a ritual, right on the spot, that would tie together all the different themes that we had been talking about, that would in some way nurture each of us individually, and build our bond with each other. And it was such a fantastic combination of lightheartedness and seriousness.

It was wonderful. And I had been, and still am very involved with Yiddishkeit and the history of Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities. And also, I identified as a secular Jew. And it was nice to have a rich affirming context for Jewish identity that didn't have to do with the synagogue and with a male God. I will say that even then, the TBI, the temple here, was already using a prayer book that didn't say “He,” but still, it's “God.” Well, I don't want to tell Sally's story, but it's part of everyone's story, and probably people have told it.

After Sally's mother died, she wanted to say Kaddish for her mom. So she started going to services, and she found a very welcoming setting there. And because of who Sally is in the community, other Jewish dykes thought, "Well, maybe I'll check it out too." So now it's like a thriving center for Jewish lesbians in our community, which is great. Ultimately, we didn't have a need for Baleboostehs. And also, a lot of the leadership, and labor, and time that went into Baleboostehs, which came from Sally and Enid. Other people could

have picked up the ball, and done the work that they had been doing. But that's what's the wave of how things went. So that's—

Raiskin: What other lesbian institutions in Eugene were important to you?

Rifkin: Well, ultimately, much later, Mother Kali's became important to me—

Raiskin: The bookstore?

Rifkin: Actually, it was important to me always as somebody who reads a lot, and cares about ideas and movements. Yeah, it was very important. I hung out there a lot, and I got to be friends socially with Izzie and with her partner, Lorraine.

Raiskin: Can you say who Izzie was?

Rifkin: Izzie Harbaugh was the person who was the manager of the store. I don't know, I wasn't here during the years when the store was first founded. I know that there's decades of lesbian history that all came before I got here. I'm not really sure how long Izzie had been the manager.

Raiskin: Where was Mother Kali's Bookstore when you came? What was its location?

Rifkin: When we got here, it still was over on Franklin, but it wasn't in one of its original places. And I think Izzie made the decision to move to the university district pretty soon after I had arrived. I was going

to say something, but when you asked me that question about institutions that I was involved with—

Raiskin: Or that were important to you?

Rifkin: Yeah.

Raiskin: Things that you did?

Rifkin: Yeah, okay. I don't— Let me think. I can't think of it.

Raiskin: So the bookstore was really important to you. Baleboostehs was really important to you.

Rifkin: I wish I could remember what year that was, because I'm thinking about other things that I was involved in.

Raiskin: Where were you working at this time?

Rifkin: I had a whole series of different positions or jobs after we moved here, and I don't remember where I was during the years that I was on the board of Mother Kali's. I probably was, let's see— it was before Janice and I split up. And it was before Rochelle lived with me. I was probably teaching at LCC.

Raiskin: Lane Community College.

Rifkin: Yeah. I was either teaching at LCC or working as a counselor. I can't remember when I made that transition in the middle of this—

Raiskin: I care less about the exact dates as to what you were doing. What were your interests? What was your community? So you taught at Lane and you taught at—

Rifkin: Oh, we're moving away from the institutions question now.

Long: Well, I did want to ask, what was the purpose of the Mother Kali's board. What did you do?

Rifkin: Oh, okay. Well before Izzie— I just remembered being in the hospital room with Izzie when she died. And—

Long: You can talk about that, too.

Rifkin: Her partner, Lorraine, was there, and Janice and I were there. I think there was one other person there.

Raiskin: She died in Mother Kali's, though, correct?

Rifkin: Yes, because Izzie— Lorraine figured out that we could smuggle her out of the hospital so that she could die— so that she could be at Mother Kali's.

Raiskin: How did you get her out of the hospital?

Rifkin: Because it was right across the street.

Raiskin: Right. And how did you get her out of the hospital—

Rifkin: I have a terrible memory.

Raiskin: Okay.

Rifkin: Are you going to interview Lorraine? I forget how. But I think we like rolled her out on the bed. Lorraine must have engaged a nurse to do this with us. I'm pretty sure that's what happened. But until that point, the board of Mother Kali's didn't really have to function. The board was Izzie [Lorraine] and Joyce Thomas, who was in the Eugene community. She wasn't a lesbian, but she was a huge supporter of the store, and of Izzie and Lorraine, they were the board. But after Izzie died, I immediately felt like, Oh, I want to join the board. I want to help. I want to help make sure the bookstore keeps going. Because I knew they needed another person on the board—

Raiskin: What was the—

Rifkin: —I hadn't until that point the lesbian— except for being super active during the times of the hate campaigns—

Raiskin: Measure 9?

Rifkin: There were several, there were three, at least. I was very involved in fighting those measures. But except for that, the institutions of the lesbian community weren't really my focus in life. My friendships were mostly with lesbians, not entirely. And I hung out at the store a lot. But as far as being an activist of any kind, that wasn't mostly where I put my energies, except for all those hate campaigns.

Raiskin: Can you say why Mother Kali's bookstore was so important to you that you wanted to commit yourself to helping it thrive?

Rifkin: I think because I'm a reader and a writer. And I was always writing a lot about politics, and women's stuff as well as Jewish stuff—

Raiskin: And so what—

Rifkin: —social movements, social change. Izzie had a good inventory. I guess that's important to say. She had a good—

Long: What was the character of the inventory?

Rifkin: You could find trashy, juicy lesbian novels, and you could find intellectual treatises by lesbian thinkers about every issue that matters. Fiction, all kinds of fiction, poetry. It was an excellent store—

Long: Spirituality?

Rifkin: —besides being a community place. Yes, there was lots of spirituality, but the kind of spirituality isn't really my thing. But I knew actually, and I knew this from talking to the subsequent manager, that those books had a lot to do with keeping the store afloat financially, as well as self-help type of books.

Long: It attracted a broader customer base?

Rifkin: Yes. I'm pretty "woo-woo." I'm very "woo-woo." I'm very "woo-woo," but I don't read books about it. Let's just put it that way. I don't know why I'm laughing. Anyway, I did want to say for this interview that it was very painful when the store folded, and it was painful for everyone. And the lesbian community, by and large,

saw there was a conflict. You know what, I wrote this down. Is that okay?

Raiskin: Yeah.

Rifkin: Because this was one of my motivations for coming here and I thought maybe it could come out more organically, but it doesn't seem to be, right now. I wanted to put my experience with the store on the record for our history as a community. The story was important to so many people as a community hub, not only as a place to read books. So, it had both of those really important functions. There was a new manager after Izzie died, and then a staff of younger people, who worked with the manager. It ensued that there were disagreements about how to run the store, and also about who has authority to make decisions about how to run the store.

And there ended up being disagreements between the new manager and Lorraine, who had been Izzie's spouse, and had been on the board of the store, and had worked in all kinds of ways right along with Izzie to keep the store alive during all those years. Lorraine was— what did I say? Lorraine totally believed that she was preserving Izzie's legacy, but she couldn't trust other people to care about the store as much as she did.

Raiskin: What did she see as Izzie's legacy that needed to be maintained?

Rifkin: Well, keeping the store alive. This is important. This is an economic context where independent bookstores all over the country were going into extinction.

Raiskin: And women's bookstores, too.

Rifkin: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely, women's bookstores. And so Tova, who was the new manager— the store was doing well. Tova was keeping it going. And she had a staff of younger women who were devoted to the store, and devoted to Tova. She mentored them and— she was an excellent supervisor, and she had an eye for what they needed to do financially, to keep the store going. But this conflict developed between Tova and Lorraine. Lorraine couldn't really trust somebody else.

There's something called "Founder's Syndrome," which I discovered later that— what happened, apparently it wasn't all that unusual, that someone who is the founder of an institution, like a nonprofit or an activist group also that if they— When the time comes for them to let go of the authority, it's very hard for them to do it. And so it ends up causing difficulties. Lorraine didn't necessarily have to let go of her authority, but she and Tova saw things differently. And besides the structure of this founder's syndrome going on, there were aspects of Lorraine's personality that— the staff and the manager felt disrespected. Not just as distrusted but disrespected.

Of course, that made them disrespect Lorraine. It got very ugly and painful. And what I was observing as— I was also talking to Lorraine, lots, for quite a long period of time. We were both board members. And I was observing that Lorraine could not recognize and value the level of skill and caring that the new manager and the staff were bringing to the store. She couldn't see it. All she could see was that they wanted to do things differently than what she thought was best. And we never found a way to work through all that, in a way that was mutually respectful or healing.

And Lorraine was the person who had the power, so people lost their jobs. And ultimately, I'm sure she and the people who supported her have their narrative. And I considered looking back— there were like 100s of pages of emails and documents that happened during this conflict and disagreement. And because I have a bad memory, I thought I should look. But I did not want to look at those. But what I remember is this horrible loss of the store because the store did eventually fold. And we lost the store. And I do feel that if Lorraine had been able to see that these people who are keeping the store going, they can be trusted. It's okay.

Long: What year was that, that the store folded?

Rifkin: I don't remember.

Raiskin: Can you identify different visions for what the store should be, what books would be carried? Was there any kind of— that you

could see a difference in, not just personality but in vision of what the store would do?

Rifkin: I couldn't say that. I think that would have to do with— It was a control issue. It ended up being a control issue.

Raiskin: What has the absence of Mother Kali's bookstore meant to you? What's that loss for you over the years?

Rifkin: I was just looking at these notes and I realized that one reason that I wanted to come to this interview was that Tova, the manager, was vilified by people in the community at the time. And the community largely felt loyalty to Lorraine because she had been Izzie's spouse, because she had contributed so much to the community over many years. Tova was newer to Eugene, much newer. And so the people didn't want to— oh, and then it turned into a labor issue, and people didn't want to support because— turned into a labor issue because things reached such a heat, that at one point, the manager and I think, three out of the four workers walked out because they couldn't come to agreement with Lorraine about how to run things.

And the only reason the fourth person didn't walk out also was because she was a single mom raising a kid. She couldn't really risk it to the same degree. Even given that, the women's community here still felt that Lorraine was being unfairly treated by the people at the store. And I think, because of people's loyalty to Lorraine, the community itself was unable to see how precarious the existence of

the store was. They couldn't see our larger need. And so it was really painful to me, extremely painful to the people at the store that they lost their connection to the store. What did you ask me when I—

Raiskin: What is the loss of that store meant to you? What is the gap in your life?

Rifkin: It was a long time ago. By now, I'm used to it. Now, I use the public library, I use the university library. I can usually, eventually, find what I want, but it doesn't really matter so much what it meant for me personally. But it's us because it was a place of books, and ideas, and where social change was implicit in its very existence. Izzie had been out forever and she herself was such an individual, so unique. She was like an original and she appreciated ideas as well as fun. She told you what she thought if she didn't agree. But she knew how to make connections with people.

That was harder for Lorraine. I don't want to trash this— I don't want this to be trashing Lorraine. Although, at the time I was really, really, really angry at her and I remained angry for a long time. But anyway, so the store was all of that, and it was a community place. People would get— we've had people like Joy Harjo spoke at the public library recently.

But nowadays, you have to go to the university, to hear the kind of people who spoke regularly at Mother Kali's. And so they were speaking in a context that wasn't academic and that situated all of

us in— this is our grass roots community, this is who we are. And we're trying to think through feminism, and liberation, and people— Just the difference between grassroots and academic. I'm not saying this very—

Raiskin: Well. You've—

Rifkin: Very eloquently.

Raiskin: —you've lived both. You've taught at college—

Rifkin: Oh, me personally? Yeah.

Raiskin: You have. You've lived both. And so you recognize the value of both and the tension between the two. That was a place that had both.

Rifkin: Yes, that's right. And also being on the board, I got to know Tova well, and I got to know the younger women who were working at the store. I wasn't friends with them beforehand. I wasn't even a close friend of Tova's before that. I'm realizing that now. I saw what they were doing as a board member and it was fantastic. They were so smart and they were so devoted to the store, and Lorraine could not see that. Oh, okay. And we lost the store. We lost a fantastic institution. Maybe, who knows, maybe it would have been unable to weather the financial challenges.

Raiskin: A lot of the lesbian institutions in town that were collectively run are gone, a lot of them closed. And—

Rifkin: I don't think Lorraine would say that Mother Kali's was collectively run. That was part of the—

Raiskin: Okay. All right. But, in any case, many of the institutions aren't here anymore. And because part of that was a historic moment. It was at the time when people were engaged politically in these businesses. Things have changed and I'm wondering how you feel about the change and how people are thinking about feminism or change, and how it is to live in Eugene? Or you've been here a long time now—

Rifkin: Yeah.

Raiskin: —what would you say about how things have changed while you've lived here?

Rifkin: I think I live in my own little bubble. It doesn't feel like a bubble. It feels like a, ongoing earthquake. But that's an exaggeration. Well, let's see. I mentioned the shift among Jewish lesbians. I mentioned the shift to TBI away from our own independent circles, which I think is good in a lot of ways, and it's also a loss. For me personally, that's something I'm personally very conscious of.

Raiskin: We've thought a lot when people are talking about— as lesbians became more accepted in community, society, that there's been more assimilation, therefore the loss of some of the very vibrant lesbian community organizations. And I see what you're saying about Baleboostehs, people are moving to Temple Beth Israel.

There's an assimilationist and more conservative institutions have changed also—

Rifkin: Right. It might not be entirely accurate or sufficiently respectful to say that that's assimilationist because TBI also changed. It's not only the Jewish lesbians assimilated into an existing mainstream culture.

Raiskin: Exactly.

Rifkin: But nonetheless, that was starting as soon as— in Santa Cruz, I had a close friend who— she actually wasn't a close friend, I was closer with her partner, but she actually was tearful one day. I was visiting them and I was in the kitchen with this woman who was deaf and I think she had identified as lesbian her whole life.

And we were starting to be more and more out. And she saw it coming that probably gay marriage might be accepted. And I remember she was mourning that day when we were still struggling as a community, but she was seeing that we would have some degree of safety and acceptance. And I remember her telling me, "We're going to lose our culture."

She said, "We're going to lose our rich, juicy culture." I feel like that is true to a large degree. And it's also true that a lot of the richness and juiciness of that culture came from, we were needing to survive and we were under attack. And so our lives depended on each other and more clearly and more intensely.

Raiskin: The conflict was all the more painful?

Rifkin: Oh, at the bookstore?

Raiskin: Everywhere.

Rifkin: Yes. That's right. I think maybe it's part of the reason why people don't seem to miss a women's bookstore that much anymore.

Raiskin: Because you can find the books easily on Amazon.

Rifkin: Yeah, that's right. It's like about assimilation. Exactly. Yes. Thank you for making that important connection.

Raiskin: Come closer a little more.

Rifkin: Okay.

Raiskin: Other changes that you've noticed in over the time that you've lived here?

Rifkin: You're asking me questions about how I observe Eugene and—

Raiskin: Or your life here.

Rifkin: Oh, my life. Yeah. Well, I don't know. Yes, of course, there's many changes. I'm older, my body creaks when I get out of bed, but I know that's not what you're—

Raiskin: No, it is what I'm asking. People are— it's interesting to think about what it means to age as a lesbian.

Rifkin: Yeah, that's true.

Raiskin: Do you have thoughts about that?

Rifkin: I don't have important thoughts about that.

Raiskin: Are you retired?

Rifkin: Yes, I am retired now.

Raiskin: And what is that like for you?

Rifkin: I don't think it's that related to lesbian history. I'm getting to write more, and I am getting to do more activism. Anyway, but it's—

Raiskin: What we didn't touch on I don't know—

Rifkin: Well, I'm a single lesbian. I've been single for a long time, sometimes it doesn't matter at all. I don't think that would be affected either, one way or another, if I was in Eugene. It's just awkward. There's so much to say. I'm so conscious of all these memories coming up like I'm remembering going on a three-boat canoe trip with six lesbians— no, one of them wasn't a lesbian.

We went all the way up to the Northwest Territories. And I remember in my own life, I used to go backpacking even when I was still married. But then I remembered starting to go backpacking with women and what that felt like and to realize, "Yeah, we can do this." We take it all for granted now. But at the time it was like, "Wow, we're out here in the mountains, and we can totally take care of ourselves." All of that.

Raiskin: We didn't touch on, I don't know if you want to talk about, about parenting as a single lesbian.

Rifkin: Oh, yeah. That's interesting. So, I became a foster parent. After Janice and I split up, one thing that I had wanted to do, that I couldn't do when we were together because she didn't want to do it, was to foster parent. So I did that. When I was filling out the forms— they ask you, "Well, who do you want? What kind of a kid do you think would be a good match for you?" And so I'm filling them all out and I had a vision of a five or six year old kid, and maybe a girl, maybe her sibling. But at the end of the application, I wrote as an afterthought because I knew about how LGBT kids, what happens to them often in the foster system.

I wrote as an afterthought that I would consider a teenager who identified as gay or lesbian. I don't think we were using the word queer so much then. And so of course they matched me with a lesbian, but did I think she's still going to be a teenager. No, I didn't think about that part of it. Rochelle came to live with me. And actually, that's probably what I think is the best part of my life. The best that I've given from being alive is from being her mom. I feel wonderful about that and we have a close relationship, not without conflict, but we do pretty well dealing with the conflict—

Raiskin: Did you—

Rifkin: And she identified as a lesbian already. Oh, this is a good story. How much time do we have?

Raiskin: You can keep going.

Rifkin: Okay. Shortly after she came to live with me, pretty soon after, one of the people who worked at the store, one of the young women that worked at the store, she was also a grad student at the [U of O. And she was seeing a woman at that time, who was in the creative writing program at the U of O. They were giving a reading at Mother Kali's. It might not have been at Mother Kali's because it was through the creative writing program at the U of O. I think it was the Tsunami. So there were several lesbians who— So Rochelle came with me. My friend was Leslie Frye, who was an amazing, wonderful person. And she was one of the people who had been on the staff, a really brilliant, dedicated person.

Raiskin: Now a professor?

Rifkin: Yeah, and an activist. These are people who were not valued. Anyway, so we were going to hear Leslie's girlfriend. She was only dating her then. So here's the story. Almost every woman in the department who read that night, had like a super short haircut. So Rochelle and I are driving home and so she had beautiful, thick hair below her shoulders. And she says, "I want to get my hair cut off like that." Like a buzz cut. And telling the story now, I'm sort of appalled at myself. But I didn't want her to do it. She had this gorgeous hair and we argued about it for a couple of weeks.

She knew that she wanted to do that. I held her back. Finally she said, "Ellen, it's only hair, it'll grow back." I felt shamed, and I said,

"Okay, you're right." I'm telling about Rochelle now in this public—I think she would think it was okay. Well, I'm not giving her last name. As soon as she cut off her hair, she flowered.

The first thing she wanted to do was go to Fred Meyer and buy all this product and tools. And she started spending hours in front of the mirror, and it was fascinating. And she just felt good, she felt great. And it was really something to observe. Anyway, that's an interesting story.

Raiskin: And so you have a relationship with her now that she's grown up and—

Rifkin: Yeah, we do. We kept our relationship. She asked me, about a year or two ago, if she could actually call me mom. And yeah, it's definitely—

Long: And how old is she now?

Rifkin: Thirty. Yeah.

Raiskin: The foster system didn't have a problem with placing a child with a lesbian?

Rifkin: No, they didn't. It could have been partially because I was a counselor by then. And Rochelle did have a lot of special needs, emotionally. And I think they thought, Oh, this woman's a counselor. She'll know what to do. That wasn't true. But that might've made a difference. I don't know. We've talked about

transgender stuff a little bit, too. But she's pretty comfortable in her lesbian identity.

Raiskin: Do you feel that as a younger person, she's kept you up to date with another generation of queer identified people?

Rifkin: Yeah, I do.

Raiskin: I mean she's thirty, she's not twenty, but—

Rifkin: Right. I do. Well, yeah. Also, the other day my sister told me that her grandson, who's about three or four, was at his preschool, and they were talking about seeds, and they were having a lesson about growing things and plants. And the teacher was saying how these little seeds are going to grow up into being larger plants. And one of the other kids said, "Oh, is it going to be a boy or a girl?" And my sister's grandson piped up and said, "Oh." And the teacher answered, "Well, it's not like that. We don't really know." And so Xavi said, "Oh, well when you don't know or you're not sure, then you say 'they.'" So things are changing.

Raiskin: What do you see as what you want to do in your future?

Rifkin: I think I am not so interested in talking about that. Because, I guess, I'm confused about with the oral history. You see, my vision is that it's about our community and—

Raiskin: A lot of people are thinking about what it means to be a lesbian, older. So whether everyone wants to get a couple of floors in the Eugene Hotel together, whether they want to live in community,

whether people want to live alone in the country. What you want to do after retirement—

Rifkin: Well, I do think about that. In the immediate future, I'm more thinking about sharing my home with people, who are undocumented or thinking about how to contribute to the asylum network here, but in the longer term, yeah. I have a close friend that we have fantasized about getting some couple of floors together and a building somewhere, but it hasn't moved forward in any real way. So I'm not thinking about that.

Raiskin: Is there a piece of your history or the history of living in Eugene that we haven't touched on that you want to—

Rifkin: Yeah, I guess I want to talk about the No on 9 campaign.

Raiskin: Okay, please.

Rifkin: Because I was teaching in Cottage Grove at the time, which is a rural community and it has a timber economy, which had been gutted. And the people, my students, I was teaching in the GED program. I remember that I think I met you during that period of time. Lane had a contract with the Welfare Department to provide GED classes for people who are receiving public assistance.

I was teaching in the GED program to people who hadn't finished high school, mostly were single parents, and whose families had very— either they had lost their livelihood or they were sketchy because of the timber economy. And they tended to blame this on

the environmentalists, rather than on the fact that the timber companies had actually logged away almost all of the woods by now, anyhow.

So they were conservative in that way of viewing the world. When the Measure 9 was in the news, people were talking about it. I would hear homophobic remarks. I hadn't come out in that class until then. And I felt like, I need to come out because I had a great rapport that— we had a blast. We had so much fun together.

It was a wonderful job. It was a great place to teach and it was really rewarding, and it was fun. There was a good relationship. I realized I needed to come out and I did. I planned how I would do it and nobody really said anything. There wasn't any, "Oh, we're so glad you told us that." And there also wasn't, "Oh God, why did you tell—" I couldn't really tell where it would go.

But one student in the class immediately came to me the next day after everybody left and came out and talked about how relieved and happy she was that I had come out and that we could have a connection. We became friends, so that that mattered to her. But another student told the people at the Welfare Department in Cottage Grove, this was maybe a week or so later, that I had come on to her.

And I don't really know exactly what she said, and I don't remember now how I found this out. I think one of the other students told me, or maybe someone from the Welfare Department

called me. And luckily they— someone said to her, "We don't believe that Ellen Rifkin would do that."

Raiskin: What do you think the motivation was?

Rifkin: I don't think we weren't getting along. I think she had her own stuff going on in her life that was hard. And I think she stopped coming to the class.

Raiskin: So you were never able to ask her, "Why did you say that?"

Rifkin: Yeah. I think she stopped coming to the class. So it could have been that it was really upsetting to her to learn that this person was a lesbian. And that was part of how she was processing it. I don't know. You would think I would have asked myself that question at the time, but I don't remember what the answer is, but I do remember— were you here then?

Raiskin: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Rifkin: The letters to the editor, the ugliness of the names they were calling us. It seems like we're past that, but it's like racism. We're past— that people will say that so publicly, but people are still losing their lives.

Raiskin: So that was an important moment for you to come out as a teacher and educator because of Measure 9. A lot of people came out because of Measure 9 and many people have said that Measure 9 was the best thing that happened to the community in people

claiming their space, and defeating the measure, and educating a lot of straight people, creating awareness.

Rifkin: Yeah. That makes sense. And really anything else you would want to know about? There's all this silence now—

Raiskin: Well, I would say if there's anything else that you wanted to make sure we touched on?

Rifkin: Let's see. Well, I don't know, have you gotten a lot of stories about Izzie?

Raiskin: Not a lot.

Rifkin: But some?

Raiskin: Few.

Rifkin: Did people talk about Dirty Wing?

Raiskin: No.

Rifkin: Oh, so Izzie raised chickens. One time we were over there visiting her and Lorraine— not only among the chickens themselves, but in conversation Izzie would often mention Dirty Wing. It was her favorite chicken. And she had a great story about it, which I can't remember, unfortunately. But I remember that and I remember meeting her chickens.

Raiskin: Well, what was significant or different about Dirty Wing?

Rifkin: Well, Izzie recognized that Dirty Wing had an outstanding personality, I think Judy would— Lorraine, probably I'm sure, knows the story better than I do. I don't want to make something up. But I think Dirty Wing was feisty and stubborn, and wouldn't let you— I'm remembering Izzie's memorial service right now.

Raiskin: Where was it?

Rifkin: I think Lorraine found the venue.

Raiskin: Was it at the Wheeler Pavilion?

Rifkin: Possibly. It was a very large space and it was a circular space, so it could have been there. And we brought in little trees to put all around the building. I'm going to probably go home and think of a lot of things that I wish I had said but—

Raiskin: Everybody.

Rifkin: Yeah. That's it.

Raiskin: All right. I really want to thank you—

Long: Yeah, thank you.

Raiskin: It was nice to hear your perspective.

Rifkin: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]