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Allison Hershey Oral History Interview

Allison Hershey

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[Transcriber's note: The following changes have been made at the request of the Interviewer: pseudonyms are used throughout the Interview, the use of ellipses indicates that material has been removed, names of persons not directly connected with the Interview have been replaced with pseudonyms, some identifying geographical details have been removed.]

[Note: There is no formal start to this interview.]

Allison Hershey: It was January the seventh, and there was thirty-two inches of snow.

Jessica Merrick: Okay.

AH: So, my daughter said, "I hope you call people and cancel the party." I said, "No, I live back a lane half a mile up a hill and everyone knows where I live. If they want to come visit me in this weather, they're certainly welcome." Fortunately, it was a potluck.

The next year, I came to St. Pete Beach, Florida, for a lesbian celebration called Silver Threads¹. And it was sixty-eight degrees in January. January the fifteenth, it was sixty-eight degrees. The sun was shining, I could swim, and I could sit in the sun. It was just beautiful. And I thought, "Oh, I really like this weather."

Then I came to visit two gals that I had met in Provincetown [Massachusetts] at Golden Threads.² They lived in Florida, and we'd been talking through the years, a couple times a year. And I had called the year previous to visit with them, and one of them was going to school and didn't have time. My thought was, as I'm in Florida on St. Pete Beach, I should give them a call, but I didn't bring an address book with me for phone numbers.

¹ The Silver Threads Celebration is an annual event targeted at older lesbians.

² Golden Threads is an international network for older lesbians.

The next morning I got on the elevator, and (...) and (...) were there.

JM: Hmm, lucky.

AH: And I said, “Oh! I was going to call you and come visit you!” And we talked about it. So, nine days later, I stopped in to visit them here at [the community] on my way to [nearby location].

JM: Do they still live here?

AH: No. They lived at the end home down there. They relocated simply because of the business. She finished school and was able to purchase a business somewhere else.

JM: Okay.

AH: So that’s how I learned [about the community]. I came to visit them. I was here an hour, and (...) was putting blinds up in their house. He took me around on a golf cart and showed me the community. And so I thought, “Gee, this is really nice.”

I went home to the bank to see if I could borrow money. I owned a home in New Jersey, and I thought, It would be nice to have a place here in Florida, and they [the bank] said I could borrow money, so I sent a deposit down for a villa. At that time, all of the properties had been purchased here, all the ground, and when I sent the deposit down I wrote a note to (...) asking him that if for some reason the gal who owned this last piece of ground that hadn’t been built on—if she decided not to build, would they let me know? And I got a phone call telling me that he was sorry but someone else, you know, was—he had several people wanting to buy this piece of ground if she decided not to. So, he couldn’t do that, and I said, “Well, that’s fine. Just put my name at the bottom of the list.”

So, I was on a waiting list for the villas. And they hadn’t started to build them yet. I had no idea what they would look like. There were supposedly four units, and it was a quad; when they finally built them, they built triplexes. So I’m very happy that I got a phone call telling me that I could have the ground here to build a home if I wanted. It was the last house in Phase I that was built.

JM: Great.

AH: I drove down to Florida, because I didn’t look at this piece of ground when I was here. And in order to spend all that money on a piece of ground—

JM: You wanted to make sure.

AH: I needed to make sure it was a place that, you know, was fine. And so, I decided it would be okay, and was able to change some of the plans of the house to make it more—

JM: What you needed.

AH: What I wanted. I also have a spiritual teacher from India, and so I've learned that there's *feng shui*³ and there's *vastu* [shastra]⁴, and *vastu* is the Indian version of *feng shui*. So, I wanted things laid out in the right—

JM: I noticed you have some Hindu pictures up.

AH: Yeah, I went to—I've been to India a couple of times. So that, you know, that's what I tried to do. So I made changes, and I think when I met (...) he was putting blinds up in (...) and (...)’s house, and that was kind of nice. “Gee, wouldn't it be nice to have a neighbor do things for you like that?” So that's part of community, I think, which you need. You know? You ask, and someone helps. That's how I found [the community], by visiting with them, and here I am. So, I've been here eight years, and I absolutely love it.

Now, I told you I have three children and seven grandchildren. I was born in Chester, Pennsylvania, which is a little city about a half hour from Philadelphia. And we moved to Eddystone [Pennsylvania] when I was little, and Eddystone was a small town. And the high school—the school had kindergarten through high school and a swimming pool, so that I was able to learn to swim there. My grandfather was a very important person in my life, and he had a cabin in Delaware, and a tent. And we would go there every weekend in the summer, and so I carried water in a bucket from the farm, probably half a mile. And we had an outhouse and no electricity, so it was really a different way of life. And you know, I'm in the city in one aspect, but in the country in another.

So, I went through nurses' training in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Hospital. The high school that I graduated from had 532 in the graduating class, and a classmate and I went up to Pennsylvania Hospital to apply—you know, we had to take a test to get in, and so forth and so on. So that's how I got to do that. She was going up—we were going up to get a scholarship for nursing, and so we took the test and all.

What else can I tell you about?

JM: Were there any major turning points in your life?

AH: Major turning points in my life?

JM: That you want to talk about. You don't have to if you don't want to.

AH: (laughs) It doesn't matter. My mother died when I was fifteen, so when I said to you my grandfather was an important person in my life, he came over and took over my mother's apartment. My grandmother and he had been separated, but they were still friendly. So, my

³ *Feng shui* is an ancient Chinese system of design and philosophy, concerned with the relationships between nature and humanity.

⁴ *Vastu shastra* is a traditional Hindu system of design based on directional alignments.

grandmother lived across the foyer in one apartment, and my grandfather and I lived in another with my sister, (...), who's four years younger than I. And the doors were kind of open.

When I went through nurses' training, my classmate was getting married and I was asked to be a bridesmaid. So, I was a bridesmaid, and met my husband at her wedding. He was the usher that I walked with. I was married for twenty-three years or so.

And I went to a nurses' reunion—Pennsylvania Hospital reunion—and there was either a social worker or psychologist talking, and she gave us five by eight cards and we numbered them one to ten, or one to twelve. And she would make a statement and we were supposed to write who our support person was next to that. My classmate from nurses' training, who had lived in New Jersey, (...), was sitting next to me; she had flown up from Florida. And on her card, when it was all done, her husband's name was from one to ten. And on my card, my husband's name never appeared. It was mostly my friends. So, that was kind of a red flag—or a shock, I mean—to actually see that. I guess I felt it, but I didn't really have something concrete.

Then I took a course called Psychology of Human Relations. And in doing the work for that course, the same information came out, that my relationship with my husband was not supportive. And that was it.

I had a friend, (...), and her daughter and my daughter were close friends. We did things together. She invited me—she asked if she could take the girls to see their 4-H⁵ leader, who had moved from New Jersey to Maryland, and I said yes, the girls could go. And she wanted to know if I wanted to go with her, and I said sure. And that was the first time, I guess, we really got to spend some time together. We'd seen each other at ball games with the kids, soccer games and so forth. So (...) and I were friends for about three years, and then we became more than friends.

And it was interesting, because we had gone out to dinner with two friends. She asked me if I would go with her friends from college, and that they were homosexual. And I really didn't know what that meant at that time. I mean, I just didn't pay attention to all of that.

And one time I called and invited (...) to go to an evening—there was this speaker and they were going to talk on homosexuality. And I figured since I taught health I really should know more about it, and did she want to go with me? Well, I think that was probably funny for her, because she already had been a lesbian, but I didn't know that at that time.

JM: Okay.

AH: So, we went to the meeting and I learned whatever. And initially it was hard for me, because my thought was this was against what I had been taught, through church or God or whatever. And so, we didn't get into a relationship immediately. I mean, it took me some time to decide was this something I wanted to do. My thought was I would never have any friends, other than (...). I didn't know of anyone else, other than her two friends that were gay. And it was

⁵ 4-H is a youth organization that focuses on citizenship, healthy living, science, agriculture, engineering, and technology programs.

surprising to me to learn that there's a lot of us out there. It was really—and I was working at a college at the time. So, after a while, I was able to identify many professors that were also gay.

JM: Do you have a word that you prefer when you talk about yourself?

AH: Do I have what?

JM: A word that you prefer to say, when you talk about yourself? Do you prefer—

AH: As a lesbian?

JM: Mm-hm.

AH: A lesbian.

JM: Okay. Some people say “gay,” some people say “lesbian,” some people don't like the word “lesbian.” I wondered if you had a preference.

AH: Well, I think with all the words, you know, until you get used to them, they're a little strange. But if you use them—the same with “dyke.” It was not a word that I was comfortable with initially, but it's fine now.

JM: So, it becomes about familiarity, maybe?

AH: I think so.

JM: Okay.

AH: So, I have something called a Lesbian Spirituality Circle Potluck once a month. And so, it's a word that I use, and have used. I probably use all of them, but that's, I believe, the main one.

JM: How would you describe the neighborhood as a whole, the kind of people who live here?

AH: Probably just like anywhere else. They're different. When I say “different,” I mean personality-wise, they're different. And the majority of them are caring, kind, interesting, intelligent, friendly. And if I was out walking a dog or bicycling or whatever, I would see more of my neighbors than I do. I don't get out a lot, although I do scooter out some.

I think when (...) started the community, he tried to identify the characteristics of the people so that they would be what he wanted. That was initially a really important thing. I think he fouled up in a couple of areas, but that's okay.

My neighbor next door is very quiet. You don't see him. You might wave to him, or say hi to him, but not often. If things are not to his liking, I could get a phone call telling me that somebody's parked in front of his house and they need to move.

JM: I pulled into your driveway, so that should be okay. (laughs)

AH: (laughs) That's good. Or my air conditioner is making a terrible noise and I need to do something about it!

JM: Oh, jeez.

AH: I'm thinking, "Well, my air conditioner is not on. The heat is not on. I don't know why it's making a noise, but that's something I'll investigate." That was my phone call today.

JM: Oh, no.

AH: My other neighbors on the other side—you know, it's surprising. I lived on three acres of ground in New Jersey, so I didn't have close neighbors, and I wasn't sure that I could live so close to someone—

JM: Where you had to worry about your air conditioner and stuff like that.

AH: Well, no, because I just figured they would be in my face all the time, I guess, or I would be in theirs, or whatever. And my neighbors on the other side are there, but I don't see them very often. I mean, I guess I see them at least once a week, and probably somewhat more. We share newspapers, or they share newspapers with me, and they deliver some of the papers. If you want to pick up a *Watermark* note⁶—it gets delivered somewhere, and they'll pick one up for me and bring it to me, and they do that. If I need help getting up, I can just call them. I needed a can opener one day cause mine broke, and they brought it over. So, they're very nice. Yet, it's just like I'm still living on three acres. It's not intrusion. Okay? They don't intrude. But they're there, and they're friendly.

And the whole community—there's two Phases, which makes it less—I'm going to say accessible for me. I don't get to see Phase I residents as often as maybe I see—no, Phase II residents as often as I see Phase I residents, because they live right here, and if I scooted up that way, or walked a dog, then I would see them more often, probably. But we have different community events; there are social activities and both groups are together, which makes it nice. So, there's—Phase I has a social committee, Phase II has a social committee, and sometimes we do it together, so it makes it nice. And each of the functions, both—maybe not all of them, but many of them, you know—both Phase I and Phase II are invited to them. There's activities; different people plan things. Rebecca [Heart] has movie night once a week, and we go to movie night, so I get to see some of the gals in Phase I at that, which is nice.

JM: Is it all women at that?

AH: Mm-hm.

JM: Are there many events where it's mostly men or mostly women, sort of separated?

⁶ *Watermark* is an LGBT-oriented publication in Florida.

AH: I would say it depends on whose home it's in and the reason for it. The fellas get together for dinner at different times, and you know that because they verbalize that they're going out to dinner with each other, or they go to each other's homes for dinner, and you can see them walking. And the women do the same. And yet, there are other times that we do it both male and female together.

JM: Do you like it being co-ed here? Do you like that there's men and women?

AH: Mm-hm. Very much.

JM: So, what about if you had the opportunity to live somewhere that was all lesbians? Would you rather live in a place like that?

AH: Probably not.

JM: No?

AH: There is already an all-lesbian community south of here. The environment's not the same. I think I'm not uncomfortable with males, and I'm not uncomfortable with gay males. And I have a son, and I have grandchildren. So why would I put myself in a lesbian-only community that is a separatist place, so that males are not welcome, or maybe welcome in the swimming pool for an hour at a time? I mean, I don't need any of those kinds of restrictions on my life. I have many close friends, and they're male.

JM: Okay. How do you think that the community has changed since you moved in?

AH: It's changed considerably, because of the difference in home ownership. All right, there were probably—mmm, hard to say. I was going to tell you there were more women originally, but that may not be true. It may be that they were closer to me, and that they lived at the house on the street, rather than the other. The fact that there are empty homes right now, and there wasn't such a thing when I moved in. You know, all of the homes were occupied. And—I don't know specifically what I would say to you.

JM: Okay.

AH: How it's different—it's nice that there's Phase II now, so that there's more women. I think there's more women in Phase II than there are in Phase I. So, we're able to do things, you know, together, which makes it nice. When you're doing both male and female, it's more of an equal number.

JM: Yeah.

AH: But it depends; different parties have different people.

JM: What do you think are the really important things about living here, for you?

AH: It's community; it's family. As a single female, I'm not really alone here. I'm really independent, but there are times when I do need help. And all I need to do is pick up a phone or mention it, you know, when I'm somewhere, and someone comes and helps or volunteers to do that.

JM: What do you think it is about the people who live here that makes them like that—be like a family in some ways? Do you think—I guess what I'm asking is, some people might say, "Well, you know, I'm at a time in my life—everybody's at a time in their lives now where we're not working, so we have more time to do that, and it's probably mostly about age," and other people might say something, like, "Well, no, I think it's something different, and I think it has to do with the fact that we're all gay and lesbian, and so maybe there's more community because of that." So, I was wondering, maybe, if you thought one way or the other, or maybe something different? I didn't know how you felt about it.

AH: I think it's personality.

JM: Really?

AH: I think it depends on the person. Because there are—there is someone here that I know is not that way, okay? It's just his personality, probably. Some people are still working. Not a lot, but some. So that—I'm not sure that it has to do with not working, because we're retired.

I had a thought and I lost it!

JM: It's okay. If it comes back, just interrupt me.

AH: That's what you call a senior moment! (laughs)

JM: Are there any negatives to living here? Is there anything that if you could change it, you would?

AH: Well, I wanted to hang my clothes outside. I wanted a clothesline, and that was something that I couldn't have. However, I live in an area where I just hang them right out there on the lanai.

JM: Okay.

AH: So, I was able to—

JM: Sort of adapt.

AH: (laughs) That's right. Okay. I can't think of anything that I would change.

JM: Did you look at any other gay and lesbian communities before you moved here?

AH: No. Never crossed my mind that I would be moving into a gay and lesbian community, or that I was looking for that. The universe provided it for me, by my meeting my friends at Silver Threads and them living here and my visiting here. It was just—it's a beautiful environment; it's peaceful environment. It's as social as you want it to be. If you want to do things more often, you just plan them.

JM: Can you tell me a little about the night that you planned, the lesbian spirituality night?

AH: I have—when I lived in New Jersey, I went to something called CCL, which is Conference of Catholic Lesbians. And I'm not Catholic, but it was (inaudible) and their friends, so I got to do that. I lived in a large home in New Jersey and I had an outdoor swimming pool, so that I was able to use my home for some of their meetings, or volunteered my home for some of their meetings. And I found it a very positive group, the women, you know, that were there; it was a nice way of meeting people, and a nice way of spending time.

So, when I moved to Florida, I left that up in New Jersey, and at one of the Silver Threads meetings—I guess the second year I was here—I invited a gal who had started CCL in New Jersey to visit with me, and we had our first meeting at Silver Threads. And it really—it's a potluck, so that there's a social time, you know, where you're eating, and then after that, there's a—I'm kind of not sure what the right word is at all; a sharing, a meeting. Each month, different things are planned. It's probably more metaphysical than it is religious.

JM: Do you do readings before you come, or is it more about—

AH: No.

JM: Do you sit? Do you pray together, or what kind of things?

AH: There's probably an initial prayer that I probably do. And there are times we pray together and that I've given them a copy of another prayer, or a prayer that goes together with whatever we talk about. This last month, we did something out of *Fresh Bread*, which is a book by Joyce Rupp; she was probably a Catholic nun. And for March it was related to Lent, and it was called *Hidden Treasures*. So, the prayer at the end of that book was appropriate for all of us to say together, and we used that. We also have a period of meditation that everyone participates in, in quiet.

JM: So, it sounds like you can be any religion and come to the spirituality night.

AH: Very definitely. Very definitely. And they are, and the women come from a variety of places, probably an hour, an hour and fifteen minutes away, to right here.

JM: Oh, I thought it was just people in the neighborhood, but it's all around. Okay.

AH: So, it's on something called ProSuzy. Do you know about ProSuzy⁸?

⁸ ProSuzy is a lesbian-oriented website and mailing list.

JM: PerSuzy?

AH: ProSuzy.

JM: Yeah, that's like a—is it like a yellow pages [telephone directory] for lesbians or something? Yeah, okay.

AH: Yeah, so that there's announcements on ProSuzy about the meeting here. And there was a gal from [nearby location] this time. The month before there was someone from [nearby location], and the month before was February so we dealt with the heart and friendship. So, it—sometimes it's in other people's homes depending if they if they volunteer, or if I'm not going to be here and—

JM: But you're sort of the main organizer?

AH: Yeah. I started it with Marge [Kirchner], okay, to replace what I was missing in my life. It's a nice way for other women—other lesbians—to meet other lesbians, whether they're couples or single, and we have both that come. Someone came from [nearby location], someone comes up from [nearby location], so it's, you know—

JM: That's fun.

AH: —interesting. Marge has a Bible, a women's Bible, and she used that one, chose something from that. So, it's a variety of things.

JM: Okay. How do you keep this neighborhood a gay and lesbian neighborhood, especially considering you can't make a law that says, you know, "Nobody else is allowed to live here." And how do you feel about if other people live here, and they're not?

AH: They have, and they do right now. There was a couple that lived four houses over. They had a gay son, but they were straight. They were—you know, it's fine. I think the way you do it is if someone's uncomfortable in this environment, they're not going to move here. When there's houses for sale, the first thing that the realtor needs to do is to tell them that they would be moving into a gay and lesbian community. So, if they're comfortable with it, it's fine. If not—

JM: And you're comfortable with it, it sounds like?

AH: Well, it's life. I mean, I don't—I've been to—there is a straight couple that presently lives in Phase II. And they've been—I've been up to some of their social things and they both have been there, or one of them, and it's fine. Yeah, I don't have any—I'm not a separatist, or I'm not someone that's—as long as I'm living here and I can be comfortable here, is the most important thing. And I think if I was a couple, I would still do the same things I would do normally anywhere. I think that was one of the nicest things about going to Provincetown is that you could be yourself. You could hold hands, sit together with arms around each other, whatever. And you can do that here, because it's a gay and lesbian community.

JM: So, you were already in a place where you felt comfortable being out. So, not—was it not too big of a transition, then, moving here in terms of how you felt comfortable being?

AH: I guess it wasn't a big difference. My three children are not comfortable with me being so out, so vocal, whatever. But I'm thrilled. I tell everybody, "I live in the first gay and lesbian retirement community! It is just wonderful!" [My daughter] says, "Mom, do you have to tell everybody?" Just—quietly. And so, you know, it's not—I'm not uncomfortable, was never uncomfortable here. When I first moved here, I came down with a card table and a couple of folding chairs and a few things, like a pot or pan or something, a dish or two.

JM: Now you've got five tables. (laughs)

AH: The house wasn't built yet, okay?

JM: Okay.

AH: They were in the process of building it. And (...) and (...) invited me to stay in their home while they went on a cruise, so I stayed there for a couple of weeks. And then I stayed in (...) and (...)’s trailer for a few days. But what I learned was that it was important for me to be here, because there's all kinds of questions. There are all kinds of decisions to be made about building the house. And so, it was good that I was here.

JM: What kinds of questions did you have?

AH: Well, what I learned was that I didn't have questions as much as maybe the fellas, but I learned that if you're going to have a fan and a light in the same unit, it's important to have two switches, one switch for the fan and one switch for the light. And if I hadn't been here—

JM: You wouldn't have thought of it.

AH: —the electrician would not have told me, you know? But he says, "You know, while you are going out to buy these switches, you might want to get yourself a double switch, so that it turns off the fan or turns off the light," which was nice.

JM: This is a nice (inaudible)—a good preview to how the neighbors acted to see if, you know, they were nice all the time or just sometimes; that kind of thing, right?

AH: I never thought about that.

JM: Oh, okay.

AH: Okay. I believe that you get back out of life what you give to it, and if I'm nice to you, you'll be nice to me. And if you choose not to be, that's your choice. It's okay. But I believe—I don't have any hesitation about going places or doing things. I just believe it'll all work out. I believe that—

JM: You're just a positive spirit. It's nice.

AH: Well, yeah. I said something to someone last night on the phone, something about "Interesting," and his comment was, "No one else would call what we we're going through interesting." (both laugh) Well, how about interesting and challenging? As you get older things change. So, it makes it more interesting

JM: If this place didn't exist, where might you be living instead?

AH: In New Jersey, where it's cold. (laughs)

JM: So, you're happy, I bet? (laughs)

AH: I'm very happy here. I don't think I would have moved here. The reason that I was able to leave my family was because it was community; it was a place. They were going to have an assisted living facility and a swimming pool. So, I could leave the swimming pool in New Jersey that was in my backyard and come here. When I was here for maybe four months, (...) wanted to know when I was moving down permanently, and I said, "When you build a swimming pool." Okay, and I've been here eight years, so obviously that was not true. That was maybe how I felt at the time, but what I've learned is there's lots of heated swimming pools around. And now we joined [a nearby country club] and go there, and it's only—I don't know, [a short distance] away, if that, [a short distance] away. I'm not sure how many, but not far.

JM: What are your plans for the future? Do you think you'll stay here, or do you think might move somewhere else?

AH: No. This is it. This my last move. (laughs) I enjoy it here. There's no reason to move.

JM: Well, we buzzed through because I didn't want to take up your whole afternoon after coming late, but is there anything I haven't asked or mentioned that you want to talk about?

AH: One of the things I wanted to tell you is when I moved here, I told you the little bit of things I brought with me. Then a friend brought a truck down with things in it from my house; it was more. And the fellas, they were like—probably like seven fellas that lived in this neighborhood came over and unloaded the truck and put everything in for me. And then the next time, I had a moving company bring the rest of the things down. But, you know, I think that's part of community, that everybody pitches in and helps everyone else.

We had a coffee on Tuesday at (...) and (...)’s home, and they had so much food, but different people bring different things. That's part of the way we've done it. You know, I had a coffee here last year and (...) had one in his place but if everyone pitches in, it makes it a lot less work for the person doing it, and it's much more interesting food-wise.

JM: Oh, yeah. Do you have any questions for me?

AH: Good luck. (laughs)

JM: Thanks. All right, (inaudible).

Pause in recording

AH: I got my doctorate from Nova [Southeastern] University here in Florida—

JM: Oh, okay. Yeah.

AH: —and I had no idea that I would move to Florida because Fort Lauderdale was an area that we had spent some time in. One of my—I had a week that we had to spend here, and it was over in Fort Lauderdale. And it's a city. And I didn't want to live in the city!

JM: It's very different.

AH: I married a South Jersey farmer, so that I was used to being in the country with acres of ground. And so at this community it's just perfect, because it's rural, yet it's not far from wherever. I can drive to [several cities in the Tampa Bay area]—whatever. It makes it really nice.

So, I wish you lots of luck.

JM: Thank you.

end of interview