

Interview Transcripts

Bloodroot Feminist Vegetarian Restaurant & Bookstore - Reflections

Details

- Name of Interviewee(s): Barbara Gill, Donna Stimpson, Kathy Lewis, Linda Bray
- Date & How Recorded: June 29, 2024 via Digital Recorder
- Interviewer: Mev Miller
- Transcript edited by: Transcribed from original recording by Juli Anna Herndon
- Last date edited: October 14, 2024

Interview with Barbara Gill

Summary: Barbara Gill reminisces about feeling safe to be herself at Bloodroot in the 1980s.

Barbara: Oh, Barbara Gill. Years ago, when Bloodroot first was established, I was significantly younger and alone, and just looking for a place to go where I can just be—period—you know. And on Wednesdays, especially, this was a safe place to go, and I chose to sit, isolated, in the corner, by myself, and that was fine, and just to get the energy and the reinforcement of who I was—...

—and who I still am. And the energy continues to this day to be the same welcoming, safe place—

M: For Lesbians.

B: Yes, and I think that's a tribute to the women [who founded Bloodroot]. I knew Selma briefly prior to her establishing the restaurant and—I just have fond memories of those times of being safe and welcomed. Here I still am, feeling those same things.

M: So, did you come on Wednesday nights into the '80's?

B: I can't put dates to it. I don't remember.

M: Okay. I just wondered because I worked here on Wednesday nights in the 1980s, and so I wondered if I might have met you at some point along the way, that's all.

B: You might have seen me; I didn't put myself out to anybody.

M: I was working in the kitchen. I was probably washing dishes or something.

B: Yeah, yeah. Well, I'm sure if you were here that we saw each other.

B: That's it.

Interview with Donna Stimpson

Summary: Donna Stimpson, former president of Connecticut NOW, recalls meetings at Bloodroot.

Donna: I'm Donna Stimpson from Meriden, Connecticut, and I was involved with the Connecticut National Organization for Women for 25 years, and I am a past president of Connecticut NOW. I'm also a former member of the National Organization for Women's Lesbian Committee. We had chapters then, back in the day, there were over 9,000 women who were members of Connecticut NOW, and we would have regional meetings, and so Bridgeport was one of the places—*Bloodroot* was one of the places that we would gather and have discussions and discuss laws that we wanted passed or demonstrations that we were gonna have, um, in the area and also in Hartford.

Mev: So, Bloodroot was very supportive of your work at that time.

D: Yes. Indeed. Indeed, it was.

M: So, how often did you meet here, do you think?

D: I don't really remember, but at least three or four times. And since I was in Meriden, it's about a 45-minute drive down here, so I didn't always attend the regional meetings that were from the greater Bridgeport area, so they might have met—1978 into the '80s would probably be...

M: Alright, thanks!

D: You're welcome.

Interview with Kathy Lewis

Summary: Kathy Lewis recounts Bloodroot memories, including a performance by Maxine Feldman, family photos on the walls, and the Goody Knapp Herstorical Society.

Kathy: Where did I start?

Mev: You started with how it saved your life.

K: Oh. Yes. The first time we came to Bloodroot, it felt like a place where we could be free. My partner at the time, Kim Kimber, and I could come and hold hands, hug, kiss, do whatever we want. We were free in here, we could be ourselves and that didn't happen anywhere else. So, um...

M: You were talking about Maxine.

K: Maxine Feldman was a singer-songwriter friend of ours and she came here one night to entertain. She's a big woman with a very powerful voice; she didn't need a PA system but they had one for her and, um [indistinct].... When [Bloodroot] first opened up, I was wondering every time I came here: are these neighbors accepting the fact that Lesbians are coming here? So here's Maxine with this wonderful song that she had written, it starts off very low and [indistinct], and ends up with the very last word as loud as she could sing it: "LESBIAN!" And I thought, well, if the neighborhood didn't know yet, they know now. [Chuckles.]

M: And you were talking about the pictures on the wall.

K: Oh, the pictures on the wall, yes. I knew Noel and everyone before they opened and they were looking for pictures, so I found pictures of [my] Mom and the woman I'm named after, and two of my aunts. They are all up on the wall. [Clears throat.] One of them is a Lesbian, Mom we think was Lesbian. [Chuckles.]

M: [Laughs.]

K: She loved my dad, but she and the woman I'm named after were always "pretty good friends!"

[Laughs.] So anyway, I've been very proud of the fact that I've got family up on the wall. [Laughs.]

K: And was there one more thing we were talking [about]...?

M: Goody Knapp. You were talking about Goody Knapp.

K: Oh, Goody Knapp, yes! [Clears throat.] In order to have a women-only space, we had to have an organization. In order to say Wednesday nights would be women-only, we had to have an organization [that met on that night]. We named it after a woman who was hung as a witch back in 17-something-or-other: we named it after her, the Goody Knapp Herstorical Society.

M: 'Cause she was hung in this area, the Black Rock area.

K: Yes, yes, [indistinct]. Kim—my partner, Kim Kimber—[who was] only four-foot-five inches tall, would sit on an end table chair so she had a good view right out the window. [Clears throat.] If she saw a man coming, she would say "Noel!" And Noel would get the message and drop whatever she was doing and run and get a menu [that] said: "Wednesday: Goody Knapp Hers[torical Society]"—or, "private meeting only," or something like that, and she would run out the door with the menu and give it to the guy, so [indistinct]... But I could, I could still hear Kim shouting, "Noel!" [Laughs.]

K: It was—it's been a wonderful place! Thank you, thank you, Bloodroot, thank you, thank you! It's like coming home. [Chuckles.]

M: Yes, yes. I think this is the first place I met you, too.

K: Probably.

M: I think I met you here. Originally, yeah.

K: You were, you were working here, yeah.

M: Yep, I was working Wednesday nights, so that's probably when I first met you.

K: Yeah, I—I didn't do an awful lot. I did sharpen the knives here. They called—
They called me "Queen of Swords."

M: That's right, 'cause you were sharpening our knives.

K: And I think I came and washed dishes one weekend, 'cause they were behind or something, and... I came and filled in, but...

M: I do remember you sharpening the knives and I remember standing clear. [Both laugh.]

K: Yes, it was a danger zone, yep, yeah,

Interview with Linda Bray

Summary: Linda Bray recounts feeling welcomed to Bloodroot as an evolving Lesbian and mother, as well as her involvement with vegetarianism and vegetarian restaurants and softball.

Linda: Linda Bray. And coming here on Wednesday nights, it was just a—a safe place, you know. Actually, as an evolving Lesbian, um... the first time I came here was with a guy.

L: [He was] someone who, when I think back, you know, was quite androgynous, but it was a great education... for him, that we came here together. And then, of course it was only right that I came back after having really come out.... You know, in some ways, knowing that it was a pretty open place for everyone... [that] may be partly why it's continued, [why] it still exists is that.... It was open to people who wanted good vegetarian food—and was known for that—and then to be able to come back for women-only nights as someone who had been married to a man, had a daughter.... Actually at that time, coming out in New Haven, it was pretty radically Feminist and not super friendly, at *that* time, to women with children that they had had with a man. Barbara Harvey and I, you know, bonded on that: that we had had kids that we wanted to bring to places and to events and her having a son was even trickier. Um, so... I'm not sure how that's connected, but, um... I've got to ask my daughter about coming here and what her memories are, because I brought her here. There were Lesbian places that didn't feel welcome to those of us that had kids from former marriages, etc., and I did bring her here. So, during that transitional time, it was—it was great to come here as a tolerant place, and then later as a

safe space, and then of course it was, a couple years later, it was coming her with my to-be spouse.

Mev: [Chuckles.]

L: And so, specific memories? No, but just, you know, just a place that was for us and, actually, being a Lesbian doesn't mean that you're necessarily a vegetarian. [Laughs.]

L: And for Carolee [*Carolee Arnold is current wife*], you know, part of the adjusting and learning to live together and meld our lives together was that—it was a real adjustment for her—'cause I was a vegetarian when we moved in together. And bringing her here was more of a change for her too. And maybe she—I wonder if she'll be willing to speak to that.

M: Is she a vegetarian now?

L: No. And I'm not. And what happened is at that time, so Rebecca [*Linda's daughter*] was just going into public school, and I'd been, well, a vegetarian and, like, no-sugar. I was part owner of Down to Earth Restaurant, and so [I was] pretty purist and getting together—moving in with Carole—she was quite mainstream in a lot of ways, so I did all the cooking and it was all vegetarian. And then she got really sick [giggles] and she maintains that that was her missing meat and, of course, I say it's a—it was a cleansing thing.

L: So, coming here was really—in terms of the food—was really comfortable to me, and it continues to be, you know, just a process. But I remember when she would say, “wow, there was like, no meat in that meal!” And, I mean, it was just such a new thing for her. And now it's—you know, we probably eat more vegetarian than not, but...

M: Good, good.

L: But anyway, just for this place to have been through all those... those stages in my life, and that it's still here is—is a wonderful thing for me.

M: Yeah, yeah. So, that was, like the late '70s, early '80s, when you were in that transition period.

L: Late seventies, yep, yep.

M: 'Cause I remember meeting both of you, probably through Barb [*mutual friend*], but also through the softball team, and that would have been mid-eighties, I think.

L: Yeah, you were catcher!

M: That's right. Catcher and then a pitcher.

L: Yeah, oh! Well, I just, maybe we weren't—I wasn't coming in at that point, but yeah, yeah! Well, and for Carole that was—that was a big part of her coming out.

M: Oh, yeah. She was—

L: Oh she “just came to play softball.”
And then she was looking around and going, “ohhhh....”

M: [Laughs.]

L: “I think I kind of relate to these women in a different, other way, too!” [Laughs.]

M: Huh. See, I didn't realize! I thought she was always out. [indistinct]

L: Oh, my gosh, she was quite the professional Girl Scout.

M: I knew that! That I knew.

L: And when she—I mean, she had another girlfriend briefly before me, but really I was her first serious relationship. First relationship, really....

And of course when she did come out, of course all of her friends at Girl Scouts... They said [scoffs] “Yeah! It's about time!”

M: “Well, duh!” [Laughs.]

L: You know Deedy Breed—...

was a really good friend of hers and so Deedy knew her as a straight Girl Scout. And Deedy was on the board of the Girls Scouts and that's how they became friends and Carole would, like, just hang out with Deedy and her girlfriend at the time, and she just knew it *felt good*, you know, but...

M: [Giggles.] That's really interesting. I had no idea!

L: She was—she was just so woman-identified, you know—
and that was enough for her, you know: to be so woman-identified, and just having a good ol' time, swimming and hiking and, you know, building stuff, and that was enough. So....