

## Women! OBVIOUSLY!!

<https://rhodetour.org/items/show/432>

Interview with Berry-Jean Murray, Recorded: August 7, 2024, Digital Recorder  
Summary Written by Mev Miller / Edited by Staff at Rhode Island Humanities

We have a show that hopefully gets out every woman's opinion. Well, we can't do every woman's opinion, but as many types of views on the topic that we would like to display.

With this, Berry-Jean Murray, Production Assistant and Interviewer, summarized the thinking behind the name of the 1990s public-access television show Obviously Women. As a March 1991 article by Mary Ann T. Rossoni in The Third Wave newspaper reported, Berry-Jean and her collaborators Toni Salisbury, Carol Dunbar Skoglund, and Nancy Harrison saw as their charge "to show women in a positive light everywhere doing everything," as well as "being a forum to bring out issues of the day, not just issues that normally people would think would be a headliner." Obviously!

The show had its beginnings in another format: Berry-Jean, along with Nancy and Carol, had been hosting a radio show, Airwave Women, on the University of Rhode Island's WRIU station. The show primarily featured women's music and news, and continues today as Voices of Women. Rhode Island has always had the base of a women's community, in which Lesbians have always played a critical part, and for Berry-Jean, feminism and Lesbianism always went together. Lesbians have always been a part of the "gay community," as well, though differences existed between gay men and Lesbian women, especially around women's issues. So Lesbian participation in parades, for example, was tenuous, and Lesbians were present but not always prominent.

Thirty minutes long and commercial-free, the Obviously Women public access television show emerged because Berry-Jean and friends decided the community needed something more. They were so prideful of themselves as women and wanted to share that pride with anyone who would watch. As Berry-Jean remembers the feeling: "We exist. We're here. Watch us!"

The Airwave Women group took production classes right here at the PEG - Public Access TV, and created a show for women with a feminist slant. Berry-Jean, a Black Lesbian, was the hostess of the show – making a statement that women of color were involved in the community. In news, entertainment, interview, and special feature segments, Obviously Women featured everyday women doing interesting things (for example, fixing a lamp) or in "non-typical women roles... Women soldiers, women carpenters, women welders." Stories centered on resources for local women, including the Women's Resource Center talking about violence against women; therapists talking about adult children of alcoholics; and speakers addressing the community issues of homelessness, religion and oppression. The women behind Obviously Women strove to create a public service to let community members know about the resources available to them.

This collective effort lasted approximately two-to-three years in the early 1990s. While the show may no longer be on the air, the bonds that created it remain. In a recent interview, Berry-Jean giggled as she looked at the 1991 article: "I'll show this to Carol and Nancy and Beth. They're still around and we all laugh when we're together."

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## Brooklyn Tea and Coffeehouse

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In May of 2018, Berry-Jean Murray started a new business with the vision of creating an intentional community gathering space. This business was an opportunity to create a sense of community that had been lost—as a Lesbian, she still longed for and sought the comradery of Lesbian gatherings (bars, concerts, meetings, activism, etc.) of the past.

Berry-Jean had a history of creating such spaces; after arriving in Providence in 1976, she had found it difficult to connect with other women and Lesbians of color in Rhode Island. As a young feminist, an African-American man (whom she admired) once challenged her to decide if she was going to be Black or a woman. For a few minutes she thought she had to prioritize, only to finally claim, “I’m both of those – AND a Lesbian!” With her best friend Carol Montiero, Berry-Jean founded the Providence Gay Women’s Group, which started as a consciousness-raising group (an important community organizing tool at the time).

With this new business, Berry-Jean wanted to create a comfortable space with interesting happenings where individuals could find each other and feel a sense of connection and community. Groups could offer meetings, or musicians could perform, or artists could show their work – a place for everybody, but run by Lesbians, who know how to make that space.

Berry-Jean had attended art shows, poetry readings, and other events at “The Brooklyn,” a community space in the Hennessey-McHale Block at 209 Douglas Avenue in Providence’s Smith Hill neighborhood. Anthony Deming, an artist who liked to create paintings of the Brooklyn Bridge, owned the building, but it was at risk of sale and demolition. Built in 1873, 209 Douglas Avenue had previously served the Irish community as a grocery store, then operated for 57 years as the Armenian American Civic Club and the home of the first Armenian newspaper in the US.

To preserve the building’s history and realize her vision, Berry-Jean decided to buy The Brooklyn, renaming it The Brooklyn Tea and Coffeehouse to honor its most recent life. She created the tea and coffeehouse of her vision, and also moved her office to the building and offered some short-term living spaces.

And then...Covid hit. Fortunately, Berry Jean didn’t have a mortgage to support – but she did have to try to keep the place operating. She used the time to expand the kitchen and add an outdoor dining space. But eventually, due to renovations, licensing, and other challenges, she realized the space she wanted to create was not going to happen. Berry-Jean sold the building in Spring 2024.

The new owners have renamed the space as The Brooklyn House, and have retained a similar mission: bringing community together through art, music, entertainment and events. Berry-Jean also continues the work of community-building, and is proud to have been a Lesbian Feminist all these years. In the end, Berry-Jean likes all of herself – and is surviving and thriving. As she says, “I’m a political statement just by living!”