

**Interview with Koreen Phelps**

**Interviewed by Scott Paulsen  
University of Minnesota**

**Interviewed on November 5, 1993  
at Ms. Phelps's home  
Minneapolis, Minnesota**

**SP:** This is an interview with Koreen Phelps. We are talking about the gay community.

Koreen, I want to ask you first where you grew up.

**KP:** I grew up in South Minneapolis where I went to grade school. Then we moved to Golden Valley where I went to Robbinsdale High School.

**SP:** That was with both your parents?

**KP:** Yes, I lived with both my parents and my brother. He was four years younger than I, and he teased me a lot so we weren't so close. I think we are closer now. Really, life wasn't too bad early on, but when I got into a huge high school in Robbinsdale. I left my old neighborhood and I didn't know anyone, and that was an alienating experience. I think there were 4,000 in the school, something like that. There was nothing for gay people.

I knew I was gay when I was about 15. I heard from my father, who was in the military, he was in the Navy. His job in the Navy was to arrest gay men, officers. He used to hide underneath their beds with tape recorders and then arrest them and take them in. He was very prejudiced and extremely prejudiced against gay people. I picked that up right away because, I heard his comments and the things he'd say, "queer" this and "queer" that, and so on. So, I was afraid to say anything and, of course, I didn't get much more of a sex education than anyone else at that time; it was pretty much zero for everybody.

I ended up, thankfully, meeting a friend in high school whose mother was enlightened. During high school I just spent more and more time with her. She was a teacher and politically radical, or at least very left. She had a lot of friends in the Communist Party. She was very understanding and accepting of me.

Even so, high school was terribly traumatic for me. What happened was that I developed manic depression and started having these manic episodes, and I ended up hospitalized several times; Golden Valley and St. Mary's, I think it was, or Fairview. Then, I had this doctor who I told, "I think I'm gay, but I don't want you to tell my parents about it"; and he did. Not only did he tell them, but he suggested that they lock me up in Anoka State

Hospital, to "teach me a lesson". I ended up there for about three months. That was really just awful. I was locked in a cell and tied to a bed. I'm not sure if they gave me drugs. At that time, manic depression wasn't understood and lithium was experimental. Eventually the doctor, who was the doctor over this huge ward of twenty or thirty women, was arrested and he wasn't allowed to practice anymore because of the real atrocities in that place. I was glad to find that out. For me it was pretty traumatic and I thought I'd never get out; I finally did.

**SP:** This is an interesting story of what it was like to be gay at that time, although not for everyone. After this experience, did you feel like you could confront this again, talk to someone?

**KP:** You mean after I was in that hospital could I talk about my being gay?

Well, by the time I got out, I think, it was about that time I just ran away. I just stole my mother's car and then stole their credit card and I left for San Francisco, and then started using drugs and almost died shooting speed in an old hotel. When I came back, I think I tried to go back to college. I fell in love with somebody there. I was always in love with somebody, I can't remember not being in love. Even in grade school, I think I was in love with other little girls or my teacher.

**SP:** Can you give me some times? You graduated in?..

**KP:** 1966.

**SP:** Was it after school or before you got out of school that you went to San Francisco, when did all this start to happen?

**KP:** I'd say when I was about fifteen, that's when I started to have problems, that's when I talked to this friend's mother about thinking I was gay. At the time, I tried to be involved with males, but usually just on a date basis, and I was molested several times by several different guys. I think they were older, maybe in their twenties when I was only sixteen.

I was only nineteen when I started FREE. It was a short period of time when all this turmoil and misery really set me up to start something or be angry enough probably to take that big a risk. I don't know, that's not to say in order to do something political you have to be locked in a cell. Being locked in a cell really taught me something about being free and not being free. I was very angry about that.

**SP:** How did you end up at the University of Minnesota starting this organization called FREE? FREE stands for Freedom of Repression of Erotic Expression?

**KP:** Right.

**SP:** How did you end up there and who did you meet?

**KP:** I ended up there because I spent a lot of time on the West Bank. That's where the Coffeehouse [Extempore] was and where you could be a hippie and get high. I don't think that my drug use was really a lot at the time. It was experimental at that point, although dangerous. I was functioning well enough to do things. I just liked the coffeehouses. I did a little singing with this Jewish guy with a twelve string guitar. We were going to be famous and go to Florida and go to the nightclubs or something.

I was just around the Extempore, the name of the coffeehouse. That's where I met Stephen Ihrig, who was another hippie. He was really far-out. He would find his jewelry on the street. He'd pick up little pieces of tin or metal things or what ever and he'd string and wear this stuff. He'd walk around and wear this big black cape with a red silk lining and he was flamboyant and very creative. He always thought that we shouldn't have street lights because it interfered with nature, and you couldn't see the stars. [laughs] That was his opinion. He was really a free spirit guy, long hair and the whole thing.

When we met at the coffeehouse, we just started talking and I don't know how we came out, I don't know the exact way we knew who we [each other] were. I don't know if there was any way to tell if we were both gay. We just seemed to like each other. We just sat and talked to each other and things seemed to come out then, we started talking about how would a person meet someone else like ourselves.

From there we went down to this after-hours place downtown called Sutton's. That's where people went after the bars closed, that's where we had to go because I was under age. We went there, it was just this dark doorway with a number on it, I think. They had a disk-jockey, records, coffee. It was fun, everybody came there and danced. Sometimes they tried to bust the place. They had agents come up there, and they were pretty funny because, they looked like agents. They wore suit coats or trench coats. We'd pick them out. We did that but, we also felt the need to have something more educational, or something.

I don't know how we thought we could teach people about being gay because we didn't know hardly anybody else who was. We really didn't know very much and, we were really sort of educating ourselves by starting this class. We just called it the Homosexual and Society. At the time, like I say, we really didn't know very much. I don't know what we expected to say to the people when they came. I don't know even if we had anything in mind but a lot of people came.

**SP:** Was this one of the first things you did in FREE?

**KP:** It was the first thing. We weren't even FREE then, we were just two people who

wanted to teach a class on the Homosexual and Society and we wanted to see what would happen if people showed up. At that first meeting I think is where we met Bob Halfhill and some other folks who knew more than we did.

**SP:** Any names that stuck around for awhile?

**KP:** I can't think of anybody's name except Bob, Stephen and myself. Vick Campbell, I think he was there.

**SP:** What kind of people showed up and what was your impression? You told me that there were a lot of people who showed up, something you weren't expecting.

**KP:** Yes, over a hundred people I believe showed up. Some were just the coffeehouse regulars and others had obviously read the ad in the free U paper. It was just a real mixture of people; some we used to call counter-culture people, some of them involved in Y.E.S. (Youth Emergency Services), which still exists. There was also an underground railroad because, a lot of people were running away. That was a big thing, too, so people involved in those kind of things and of course gays and lesbians. There weren't very many lesbians, we didn't use the word "lesbian" at the time. There just weren't very many women in that group. There was a lot of debate, excitement and discussion. There were people there who thought it was the wrong thing to do, to be there in the first place, that we shouldn't even have...

**SP:** That element showed up also?

**KP:** Yes, that's why we had a big fight, and I had to stand up on a table and yell for people to be quiet. It didn't get violent but, it was pretty wild and lots of craziness, lots of yelling.

**SP:** What issues did you speak about, do you remember?

**KP:** I don't know that I did speak. I think I tried to moderate, I said very little at the first one. The primary thing for all of us was that we saw ourselves as an oppressed minority. We saw that pretty clearly, but it hadn't really been put into words anywhere. It seemed obvious to us since we had to be so underground and growing up in fear and growing up not being able to talk to anyone, you knew that. It developed into a major theme.

At first I don't think we knew what we were doing, until we got the response. I got some idea of what was political from this friend of mine who I met when I was in high school who was in the civil rights movement. I was very sensitive to that and aware of it and also now all the political movements coming up and looking at what they were doing; the Anti-war Movement and the Feminist were coming along too. There was a lot of picketing a lot of demonstrating, rights things and causes around us. It just sort of surrounded us, it just

seemed to be the right thing to do. Like the other people oppressed, we needed to organize. Really, I was more political than most of the people around me, I think.

Many of the guys who responded initially to that class and started FREE, wanted a social situation, they wanted a chance to meet each other and feel comfortable and outside of the bars, but they weren't very political.

**SP:** From there what happened after that?

**KP:** Factions started to develop. One of the motives was, "Let's have social activities" and the other was, "Let's go picket and raise hell and demonstrate." It always seemed to be a tug-of-war. I remember Bob was very political. That was the initial division, the social vs. the political. Then after that there was the, "ok, if we are going to do political things how are we going to do them and what political party are we going to be interested in. Should we be affiliated with a political party or should we be a movement in itself and not take up other issues." Because what happened when we got organized we started to feel this and be asked if we would support other minorities in other struggles like the women's liberation movement and the Anti-War things, abortion and so on. It was difficult, because some of those things divided us. There are gay people who are Republican, gay people who do not agree with abortion. It was an incredible mixture of people, all of us trying to go in some direction, so the debate and discussion was really interesting and important too. Some people just wanted to stick with gay rights issues and that was it just stay with our stuff. We did end up endorsing a lot of other groups and causes, at least while I was around.

**SP:** What caused division? What were some of the big issues?

**KP:** One of the big ones very early on was how we were going to present ourselves to the public. Are we going to be like all heterosexual people? Are we going to look straight or should we just not pay attention to that?

That's why the first television appearance was with me and Jack [Baker] because, Jack looked the straightest. Not only was I the only woman, but I also looked very feminine too. It wasn't so much an issue with me, but there was debate with Jack. Actually, Stephen would have been my choice to be on that program. It was called the Forum on channel four or five on Sunday. We did have quite a debate on whether to have Stephen or Jack. It all came down to how we wanted to appear, and it was Jack because he had a crew-cut at the time. Looking back at it now that seems unfortunate that we made a decision in that way. Now, people would say... What would you say?

**SP:** ...that it was like a sell-out?

**KP:** Sort of like a sell-out, right.

**SP:** Was that odd at the time?

**KP:** At the time we wanted to look, in appearance, as non-threatening as we could. We were so desperate. This seems really odd, but I really thought at the time that if we went public and said who we were and people met us and found out that we were good people and not unlike other people, the prejudice would go away. That was really naive I know. But, we didn't know if that was true or not. It just seemed that there was so much prejudice already if we just eliminated that part and we could actually just talk to these people without them running away from us then we'd have a better chance. That's why we did it, it seemed to make sense at the time.

**SP:** After doing the show on WCCO with Dave Moore, what kind of responses did you find?

**KP:** We did a lot of radio shows. We did an interview on WCCO Radio and almost every radio station in town.

**SP:** How did these radio stations get a hold of you? How did they say they heard of you?

**KP:** The first time was an interview on WCCO a talkline in the evening. That's how I came out to my father. I said, "Yes, I would do that" and then I realized that he listened to that show every night, so I had to call him and tell him.

**SP:** Beforehand?

**KP:** Yes. And that's pretty much how I came out to him.

**SP:** You mentioned he had heard this before from your doctor.

**KP:** Yes, but I don't know if they really wanted to believe it at the time. I don't think they wanted to, so they just discounted it.

**SP:** I would imagine talking to you father at that point--Did you get any response that you didn't expect?

**KP:** From my dad?

**SP:** Yes.

**KP:** Actually, he was pretty kind in a sense; he didn't get angry or anything. I think at one point my mother said that it would be better that I didn't have such a public profile, because my father owned his own business and he was in business. In that sense they did feel threatened, I think, that it may effect their livelihood. But, they didn't disown me and they

never did. They always said they loved me even though I don't think they ever understood what being gay was all about. I guess I'm fortunate because, a lot of people lost their families, lots and lots of people were disowned during those times, and I'm sure it still happens.

Some other things which divided the early Gay Rights Movement was--I think I mentioned this before--Do you endorse and support these other movements, get involved in other political issues? The other one was, do you endorse and support a political party? That was the real big one.

**SP:** How did you pick a political party, and did you pick one?

**KP:** I did, early on. I picked the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] at the time. The reason I did was that they were the only political party that even said they supported gay rights. Not only did they say it, but to me they really meant it. I was taking classes--I was in and out of school at this time at the University of Minnesota. I forget now what classes there were, but I joined the Women's Liberation group. This was during the height of the Anti-War Movement, there were all kinds of political people on campus and all kinds of parties.

I met a woman in the Women's Liberation group who had come from England to be in the SWP, who I thought was fascinating. She talked to me about this party she belonged to, and then finally took me to a meeting. It all sounded very mysterious, but actually the SWP was quite open. So, I did get involved with them.

Now, the Democratic party was not for gay rights at the time, neither were of course the Republicans or in the Communist party. It was deadly to be a gay person in the Communist party. Not only were they underground as a party, but their gay people were really underground within their party. So, it just seemed to be the right thing to do. I was supported in what I was doing. I remember giving a speech, they set up a forum at the hall. They asked Karen Clark to speak, this was before Karen Clark was well known, it was about the gay movement and rights. I remember the two of us talking and that was really exciting to me, because it was the first speech I gave where after every sentence people cheered and jumped up and clapped. It was just great. It wasn't just the party members. It drew quite a few people, 200 or more, we had to put them in the basement. Karen gave a fine speech too.

That was one instance, another was when there was some gay activity and I gave some leaflets to my friend Gilian and she was spit on by students and people on campus. That didn't stop her and she just said, "Boy, I really know what it's like now, I had no idea." Then again at a gay pride demonstration, one of the earliest ones, when I went to speak and it seemed as though there would be danger, the people from the party surrounded me and stayed close to protect me in case there was any trouble. They were sincere, even though later on that party fell apart.

In some sense the people in the Gay Movement may not have been receptive to me because I was a socialist. It was a small party and there were still fears about that, especially when we found out what was happening in Cuba with its gay people; and Russia wasn't treating its gay people very well either...

I remember meeting Bernadette Devlin, I don't know if you know who she is, a famous Irish revolutionary, who came. She was a heroine to me.

Anyway, there was bit of nervousness in the Gay Movement [about the SWP.] People were much more comfortable with the Democratic party. Once the Democratic party started to move in our direction and become supportive, the majority of people went along with that and with supporting legislators like Karen Clark and Allen Spear. They accomplished a lot legislatively.

**SP:** I want to ask some questions about the SWP. They openly acknowledged gay people. Do you know where other people came from before that?

**KP:** People who made up the SWP?

**SP:** The people who came to it. Did they come from being Democrats, Communist and Republicans.

**KP:** People in the party have come out of a lot of different political parties. It seemed to me they mostly came out of the movement that the party supported. The SWP didn't just say, "vote for us, we'll do it for you", which is what the Democratic party always does. The SWP was for building these movements, and they put their time, talent and people into that. The people who joined the SWP were disillusioned probably, mostly Democrats who were disillusioned by that party and saw they really wanted to be in a party that supported these movements. They might have come out of the Abortion Movement, Women's Liberation Movement or the Anti-War Movement. A lot of the leadership of the Anti-War Movement were people in the SWP, a lot of the leadership of a lot of the movements were in that party.

**SP:** Could you say that the SWP...

**KP:** The difference was that [unclear] we would always promote a demonstration or public activity: picketing, demonstrating, public action, public activities, bringing in the most people. The Democratic party would always say, go to the convention, support the candidate and vote for me; that was a big difference.

**SP:** Would you say it was much more grassroots?

**KP:** Yes, definitely.

**SP:** How did that change or what happened to the SWP? Was what happened somehow connected to the Democratic party [when it] started to pick up gay rights as an issue for their platform or, were there separate reasons for its decline?

**KP:** Yes, I think so. The decline of that party was due to the infiltration of the FBI and the CIA. At least one out of four or five members were agents. Being a little party, they just went after us. They busted just about every hall where we had headquarters, they followed our people, they harassed people and they really set out to destroy the party; and I think they did, because it just fell apart.

**SP:** Were there many Communists who came from the Communist party to the Socialist?

**KP:** No, I don't think so. I think the Communist party stayed really separate. In fact, there was a time when the Communist party and Socialist Workers were in big competition. They were the two biggest left parties in the country, but the Communist party by and large still stayed underground. The competition would be at a Honeywell demonstration, and there would be certain Communists who would try and move it in a certain direction, and then the SWP people would come in and then there would be these fights. Usually the Communist party people would not acknowledge themselves as being in the CP, as far as I know. I don't remember them ever stating it, although they'd run a candidate and they'd tell you he was a Communist. The SWP was real open and ran candidates openly.

We have a truckload of information and cartons of papers on different individuals in the party. Whole books were written about SWP candidates and leadership. It's incredible, and it must have cost the government a fortune to go after them. Anyway, at the time, I felt the local people were really good and sincere; they were for you on a personal level and politically I agreed with them. There was a time when it was really good.

**SP:** Where did you go from there? How did you end up leaving the SWP, was it gradual or is there something you can point to?

**KP:** I think I just burnt out from politics.

**SP:** That was about what time?

**KP:** I was in the party for seven or eight years.

**SP:** We're talking mid, late seventies?

**KP:** Yes, I was probably in until 1978, 1979--1978 maybe.

**SP:** The Democratic party started to have the platform which included gays. Did that attract you ever?

**KP:** Well no, Democrats never attracted me because, for one thing they aren't honest. It's not a very honest party in one sense. The way I look at it is that there are a lot of real reactionary Democrats. This is just basic political system stuff; they operate to elect their candidates, they don't operate to build a movement and they'll tell you anything to get elected. There's nothing in their party that says they absolutely have to do what they say they will do.

The thing that attracted me to the SWP in the first place was that they made a commitment. Once the platform was decided upon, they were committed to act on it until the next convention. It's called democratic centralism. We'd focus all our efforts on doing those things which were democratically decided. That's a big difference. Just one good example, enough to make you cry, was the Equal Rights Amendment in Springfield. When we demonstrated there we, the Women's Movement, had worked very hard for a number of years. It was the Democrats who had a critical say in passing it or not, and they didn't. That was the biggest betrayal I think I've ever seen, and I don't think the Democrats should get off for that, I think it's just criminal. There were many other betrayals. The problem is that our system is wrong. We should have more than two parties. Two parties is crazy.

**SP:** I wanted to find out what was happening in the life of FREE. You were involved in the beginning, and did you go till the end?

**KP:** I don't even remember when that was. I know it ended and then we started another group called Minnesota Gay Activists (MGA).

**SP:** First, I'd like to go back to FREE. It evolved. Like you said, you didn't know exactly what you were going to do in the beginning. You said that it wasn't intended to be a homosexual group.

**KP:** It wasn't meant to be exclusively just a gay group. We wanted to include everyone. We did believe in erotic expression or being free to love people and be physical with people, and not feel guilty and shameful like we were taught to feel. It was in the 1960's. The 1960's really opened up and made room for new ideas about sexuality, generally. It was just during that time so, we were just caught up in all of that. I think that's why the name FREE. It didn't take long before we realized this was really political and we needed to have a focus. It didn't take long before it became a political rights movement.

**SP:** What caused it to change? What caused it to take on a political slant?

**KP:** At the time we were in touch with a man named Leo Lawrence in California. He had been doing some political activity out there, some very aggressive picketing and demonstrating. In fact, his group started picketing in churches on Sunday. They would bring their picket signs and walk into church services and picket against the church's attitude about gay people. The way we got in touch with him was by reading the *Berkeley Barb*. At the time that was a popular underground newspaper. I think we got more of a focus from being in touch with him. We even went out to see him. We took a trip out to San Francisco and met him in the park, not Golden Gate Park but...

**SP:** There is a Golden Gate Park.

**KP:** Yes, that's the one. That's where we met him.

Actually, a lot of people think that the Movement started in Stonewall out east and exploded from there. In reality it moved from west throughout the Mid-West and then to the East Coast. Stonewall was the big major explosion but, there were so many things leading up to that. It was like a pressure cooker. There were all these pockets of activists all over in the Mid-West with us in FREE, then there was another group at Columbia University, and then there was Leo in San Francisco who was really out there in the streets. That's how it went. Then, in 1969, Stonewall happened. That was an inspiration to all of us, really strengthening and helping us focus on what we needed to do.

**SP:** It was a big event... It became a referred to event in later years. Did you, at the time, think of it as extra-ordinary, which would make an impact? Did you think that it would be referred to over and over again and become the theme of parades?

**KP:** It did almost become a legend immediately the way that it happened. I remember reading in a book at one of the Socialist conventions called The Gay Militant, which I'd love to have since I'm mentioned in it just briefly. There is a reference to Stonewall in that book. [It tells] I think the nature of how it happened, how dramatic it was, and the fact that lesbians and transvestites led the attack and got into it with the police. It was really a colorful thing. It just seemed to become a symbol immediately. Of course, up until that time they were pretty freely busting people in the bars, harassing people, dragging them off to jail with little protest. That was true here too. They routinely raided the Gay 90's downtown. You could never be sure at a gay bar if you were going to be arrested.

**SP:** What kinds of things would people get arrested for, do you know?

**KP:** It seemed to me that it was touching, dancing together. There was entrapment too, where men were approached by the undercover officer and they would have sex with them and bust them that way. I don't know the actual law they used. But, it did happen often, and people were ready to see something like Stonewall. They could really relate to it, because

most of us have been in bars where we've had that fear and may look around to see if somebody might be an undercover cop.

**SP:** What impact did it [Stonewall] have on you in FREE? It is often referred to as the birth of gay liberation. Would you agree with that?

**KP:** Technically it is not. The birth of gay liberation, goes back to the 18th century or something. I think you could claim it's like the second wave. In terms of a massive political movement, this has to be one of the biggest movements in history.

So, no Stonewall wasn't the beginning of it. You'd really have to look at Leo Lawrence as the first then, I'd say FREE, and this Columbia group, although I've never been sure about the timing on that. Stonewall would be next thing to happen after. All of it is significant and we all took some courage from each other. If we were inspired from what was going on with Leo Lawrence, the people in New York must have known something about it. I bet if you interviewed some of the people involved in that big fight some of them knew that Leo Lawrence was out on the streets in California. We were much more conservative here. We started an organization, but we did get in the streets and picket.

**SP:** That was after starting FREE?

**KP:** Yes. The first picketing was the Society for the Blind with Thom Higgins. He was fired for being gay, he was a reader for the blind in St. Paul. That was probably the first picket line. Steve had this picket sign which said, "homos are human". That was my favorite. We all looked like drown rats out there in the wintertime. It was very cold. Integrating those dances was a big thing too. Myself, Steve and a few people like Bob always pushed for the most visible and public things.

We didn't think we should be in a little social underground club, which is what some people wanted and, I don't blame them. It was risky to come out, it was scary, politically and publicly. This wasn't just coming out to your mom and dad and brother, this was coming out to the city, everybody. We had fears of being hurt. Like I said, at that one Gay Pride, people felt they had to be close by to guard me. I never got any kind of threats. I remember only one problem when the police came and busted down the door of our apartment. They were looking for a way to arrest us, and they wanted to find drugs so they could put us away. That was the worst of the harassment I felt. We didn't have anything and they just left. We concluded that it had to be an attempt to discredit us so people wouldn't listen to us, etc.

I didn't get a threatening letter until 1989 gay rights celebration commemorating 20 years. I got a letter which was pasted up newspapers print. It was real threatening; it had a swastika. A lot of people were scared, but I don't think I was as scared as I should have been. I was pretty young and not in touch with the fact that I could be hurt. It was all very exciting to

me and I just didn't have a whole lot of fear.

**SP:** You said you had experience being in mental hospitals. When you received resounding approval from some of your speeches and the Homosexual course in the FREE U, what did that mean to you? Did you think that you walked over a mountain, that you were living in a new age or, that you had some message?

**KP:** To me, when I think of being locked up in a cell, due to what I think was prejudice because I just wouldn't conform to what I was supposed to be like, there was a lot of motivation, an awareness of injustice. It wasn't just something I read in the paper or saw on television or watched the civil rights people marching, it happened to me. I thought it was outrageous that I could be locked up like that. I had been taught that this was a free country so, it's very disillusioning.

It took a lot of anger and rage to do what I did and, maybe not caring enough for myself. In those days most of us, radicals, didn't take care for ourselves or we thought that cause was everything, we were very romantic about that. The people I hung out with really didn't take care of themselves. It felt good to be approved of. It helped me to be in a political party that did seem to care about me, the individuals seemed to care about me and that felt good. But, I wasn't treated like a big star. I was treated like another comrade that was there to do the work. Sure, there was a little ego in it. I enjoy giving a speech and having people clap. It's fun.

**SP:** Can you tell me of any other people who came out of the SWP and went into the gay community or politics later? You were one of the only ones. Robert Halfhill, was he one?

**KP:** No. You mean that was in that party?

**SP:** Right.

**KP:** I was the token lesbian in the SWP.

**SP:** There was someone who had a lot of press nationally, that's Jack Baker. Can you tell me something about his involvement and what you thought of him and his role in FREE and the gay community? Let's just start with FREE.

**KP:** Yes, I can tell you what I remember with FREE. When he [Baker] came into town, FREE had only met maybe three times or so as an official campus student group. We got our certification from Molferd Q. Sibley who was a famous Socialist professor on campus. He gave us the approval that we needed on campus then. We met three or four times. What I remember happening that is when Jack came to a meeting, he seemed very excited and interested and wanted to go out to coffee with us. We did that.

It wasn't too long after that we got an invitation to speak on the Forum show on television. That was a big deal for us. Jack was chosen to be the spokesperson because he looked like the boy next door. It would be him and me. It was funny. When we went to the show, the producer or whoever talks to you before the show starts said, "Keep this to a ninth grade level or what a nine year old would understand" something like that, just really insulting. They asked us questions and I don't know what I said anymore. I was real excited about the whole thing.

After that Jack seemed to be developing his own agenda. He wanted to be a lawyer so he was working on that. I think it took him three or four times maybe to pass the boards because he had so many things going. I thought he took a real paternalistic attitude about the Movement. The more I got to know him the more I realized that he wasn't just a grassroots guy who came to be a part of it and to help build it. He wanted to be a leader, and that's where he was going. I know this because once I spoke at a teachers recertification class and had not known that Jack had also been asked to speak. He went on first and when someone asked what he thought about the Gay Rights Movement, he felt there was no need to worry about any movement. People could just listen to him and do what he thought was the right thing and he would do it for us.

**KP:** [I was] really upset with Jack. I don't know if I ever actually had a confrontation with him personally. By then he had pretty much taken over FREE. He was also doing this [marriage] with Mike McConnell. He was just establishing his publicity trip. At the time I thought that given the fact that we didn't basic rights to anything: work/jobs, housing, or anything; the right to get married was just a publicity stunt. I was really angry about that and felt that Jack was an opportunist and really in it for himself. After that I didn't have much to do with him.

**SP:** Were you both in FREE at the same time?

**KP:** Initially, yes.

**SP:** And then after you started to see that he was opportunist?

**KP:** I don't think I was around after he took over, I was doing other things. I was active in the women's liberation group and we were working for the women's studies program on campus and doing Anti-War activities and the SWP. It's hard to say how many meetings I went to after he took over. Maybe, I was in and out, it's hard to say. I remember Steve Endean coming in and Tim Campbell and a lot of arguments. I think one of the reasons I didn't hang in there is because the group was moving. After the initial public political things we did, I think the group was moving in a direction of being more just a social organization and moving more toward the Democratic party, with Jack being this sort of benevolent dictator. The whole thing was just not what I liked to be a part of. That's why

later on we decided to start MGA (Minnesota Gay Association), but it didn't really go very far.

**SP:** What happened to FREE at that point? Had it just fizzled?

**KP:** It must have because why would we have started MGA. I really don't. I think part of it was with Tim Campbell. There was a Vick Campbell and a Tim Campbell. Vick Campbell was the guy who did the wonderful little play we worked up with the music.

**SP:** Is this what you called guerilla theater?

**KP:** Yes, guerilla theater, that's what we did. It was real fun, we wore paper bags on our heads and did a dance routine. Vick was doing lights, music, etc. It was great fun, but there also was a message. Then there was Tim Campbell. Vick was a great guy and I just loved him, and there was Vick and Bob and Steve and a few others.

I think once you had Jack Baker, a total egoist, and Steven Endean, playing for the Democrats for all he's worth, with a whole different agenda than Steve and myself who tended to be Socialists and were movement types. Then, Tim Campbell was a total provocateur who just wanted to wreck everything. It felt like that. Once you got those people together in meetings, they tore it apart. Stephen and I didn't want to fight and take it anymore, I think that's really how it happened. Stephen Ihrig was really discouraged before he left for New York; he just couldn't do it anymore. He wasn't a hardcore political type anyway, probably neither of us were at that time. He felt there was such dissension and arguing that he didn't want any part of it.

**SP:** Then, you came back to start MGA with...

**KP:** Bill oh, what's his last name, and I just ran into him too. I can't think of his last name.

**SP:** O.k. If you remember it later let me know. So, you started MGA with this one...

**KP:** With Bill. I know there was a Jim Crabtree involved too. I always seem to be with the guys, even though I was a feminist at heart; at least I was becoming one. My experience is real different than a lot of lesbians in the sense that a lot of women who came out, came out within the context of the Feminist Movement. They were political lesbians in a sense. They felt that it was politically correct to be a lesbian and they felt you could choose your sexual preference, so why not choose women, because obviously that was the best choice; they would be more compatible. A lot of those women didn't stay or continue to be lesbians. Some may have, but that was a whole other trip or layer. These were very political, educated, intellectual types. With their hearts, they wanted to be in the Women's Liberation Movement and everything, but they thought it was politically correct to be a

lesbian...for awhile.

Then there were other women who were lesbians all along and just come out within the context of this Feminist Movement. Then there were also the Bar Dykes, the older generation who came out during the 1950's or out in the bars, who weren't feminists; they were just lesbians with no political background necessarily.

My experience was that I came out first, got together with gay men and then became a feminist. That's real different I think than most lesbians I know. Their experience seems to be different in that sense.

What was I trying to say?

**SP:** We were talking about the beginning of MGA.

**KP:** I was just thinking about Bill, Stephen, Jim. It was like having a partner, I worked in a team with a gay male, usually in MGA and FREE. With MGA, I only went to three or four meetings. I don't know what happened, it just fizzled out. There was another group that came out of that like University Gay and Lesbian da da da group. That tended to become primarily social. MGA was our last effort to be political in the sense of building a movement. Of course, by then we had a gay legislator in.

**SP:** Why would it? What was different about MGA rather than FREE? Why was FREE successful?

**KP:** Neither were successful in the sense of longevity. It was just that MGA was part of the process that helped keep it alive a little longer than some of the people came and put together another group. No, it didn't really take off, probably because the Gay Movement had been pretty well incorporated into the Democratic party by then. Whenever they get close to a movement they just suck it up, that's how the Democratic party operates.

**SP:** You said you operated with men well. What situations did you find yourself in with other women working in another cause?

**KP:** There were some women coming into FREE. I can't think of their names off-hand. One of them later on became a lawyer, one was a nun and wanted to come out and talk to me about it. I was very young and this woman came up to my place and said, "I've been a nun, I want to come out and be a lesbian and I want advice." I don't know what I said to her; I am sure I was positive. It turned out that her brother was also gay and a priest. I ran into her at one point. Anyway, there were women but they weren't as excited about the political thing. There were not enough lesbians who were politically conscious at the time to come in and be a force in FREE. I thought that's the way it was. I would say at the beginning of almost every meeting, "Where are the women?" and everybody would laugh.

But, I didn't feel too terribly isolated in the group. I did have lovers: how many I don't know. I was usually involved with somebody during that time.

[I] was actually quite inexperienced personally with having relationships when I started FREE. As I started FREE, I did meet an older woman who was neat and supportive. I was really nuts about her. That kind of helped. I remember when we were on the channel four television program she and her husband, who was also gay and knew a bunch of young gay men, partied together. They invited me over to celebrate and we had lasagna. She was like a dream come true. So, socially I was with women but politically there were not so many in FREE. Part of that was because the gay men were so aggressive; they were so strong willed.

**SP:** Did you ever find aggressive men a problem?

**KP:** Yes, with Vick and Jack and others, they were very high-powered people. [Laughs] I think there was a lot of support for Stephen and myself, but I don't think we were up to fighting it out with those people.

**SP:** Do you see FREE as something you wanted to start to get voices heard and people talking or, did you have an agenda other than that?

**KP:** Initially, it was an inspiration and we had no agenda in terms that we had no long term thing. When we started the class we had no idea what would happen. The fact that a lot of people showed up was inspiring. We thought, "Oh well, if this many people showed up maybe should do something with this." Stephen and I had many talks. We would sit up night after night just talking all around everything that happened at the meeting or at the class or struggling with the concepts of how to organize, we didn't know how because we hadn't done this before. We'd talk about the difference personalities and what they brought to the group. It was like having a baby without ever having one.

It wasn't until a little later on--My politics were developing and I had some good instincts I guess. That's what Gilian always said, "You really have good political instincts," (no real knowledge about anything, but good instincts). So we made it up as we went but again, within in the context of all these strong movements all around us and the issues of the day and the activity and demonstrations, etc. It wasn't hard to take a cue, "Hey, this is the way we need to go." Then when I got around the socialists I learned the real concrete stuff; this is how you do a press conference, organize a meeting. I became real sophisticated after I got around the Socialists, but until then I really didn't know what I was doing.

**SP:** Can you tell me what some of the people from FREE went on to do? I can think of a few names of people, but maybe there are some we were overlooking.

**KP:** What?

**SP:** Of course, Vick and Tim and Jack Baker. Was Mike McConnell involved in it or just associated?

**KP:** ...with FREE?

**SP:** Yes.

**KP:** I don't ever remember being with Mike, but I do remember he was fired from his job at the U as a librarian. We had big pickets and demonstrations to get his job back. All the gay people around and FREE, if it was in existence, had big demonstrations, and the socialists were primary supporters of Mike McConnell and helped build that demonstration. I remember working on it even though I didn't agree with their desire to get married. I thought that was fine, but I didn't agree that it should be a focus of the movement. I still supported Mike's right to work which seemed to be pretty important. I remember a guy spoke, Balacord, it was Balfour...

**SP:** Clyde?

**KP:** No, that was an Indian guy, Clyde Bellecourt.

[He] worked at the U as a teacher or somebody and he made this big speech and said, "Sure, it's illegal to commit sodomy and sure Mike probably has done that, but I'm a straight person and I did it too." [Laughs] It was really good. I think I was crying after that speech.

**SP:** That was to protest the U's rejection of McConnell's employment?

**KP:** Yes, Mike McConnell. I think he applied for a job and was turned down. Or, was it that he was actually fired, I can't remember?

**SP:** From what I heard, he applied and because of the marriage license publicity he was denied the position. Does that sound accurate to you?

**KP:** Yes, it does. I always liked Mike for some reason; he seemed like a gentle, nice guy. He's still a librarian and Jack is a lawyer. Jean said Tim Campbell is going blind. He sold his paper. Thom Higgins has Hepatitis B and is dying of it. I can't believe that. Bob is still around. We're all getting old, that's for sure. [Laughs] There are very few of us left who are leaders in the community. Jean Tretter probably more than anybody. That's really important too.

**SP:** What is his early activity, do you remember? When did you first meet him, what do you remember doing?

**KP:** I think I remember him at a meeting.

**SP:** Did he have a function within the FREE organization?

**KP:** I don't know if he had any particular position as a secretary or treasurer, etc.

**SP:** Did you speak?

**KP:** No, I just remember seeing him, but I don't remember exactly what he did. [Pause] This is over twenty years ago. It's amazing I can remember any of this. [Laughs]

**SP:** Yes, I know. And, you'll probably remember it later.

**KP:** Maybe.

**SP:** With all of the other movements going on, do you remember any others coming to FREE, any other minorities especially ethnic minorities and maybe transgender people?

**KP:** I remember it was a debate at every Gay Pride demonstration from the very beginning about who we included in the Movement and who was legitimately in the Gay Movement. I was always more on the side of including everybody. [Pause] There weren't any racial minorities in FREE that I can remember.

**SP:** No racial or ethnic minorities. What about transgender people?

**KP:** No, not early on. Maybe not so much minority groups, I know we were asked to support Women's Liberation issues like the ERA, abortion rights and the IRA, and the Palestinians. We had no members, but we were asked to give our support. Also, we were asked if we would support various union activity.

**SP:** What kinds of opinions on that?

**KP:** Some people wanted to keep us focused totally on gay rights and they thought other issues would be distracting and it would be divisive, because not everybody would agree on these other things. Others felt they were all legitimate. The transsexual or transvestite debate was always big in the Gay Pride committee, especially when they wanted to be represented, etc. There were people who didn't want them to be so visible.

**SP:** ...within the Gay Movement?

**KP:** Yes.

**SP:** Those would be who?

**KP:** I couldn't name any individuals.

**SP:** As far as groups, were they men, women?

**KP:** I just know in FREE, MGA and in the Gay Pride committee early on there was debate early on whether to allow transsexuals and transvestites to be involved or have a high profile in the activities. This was for the reasons that we were concerned early on about appearing to be straight or look like normal people, not too bizarre or too far out. Now, I think it is wrong to exclude everybody. The Movement is big enough and powerful enough to defend itself. There is no problem with it. At every Gay Pride celebration we've had they've had a big and real open profile and they talk and entertain. I guess it's no longer an issue, but it was. Or, maybe it is an issue; I'm not on the Gay Pride committee, so I don't know if it is still an issue.

**SP:** I want to ask you whether you agree with this; Gay Pride had its roots in some of the activities FREE had, like picnics in the park. Do you think that there is any link there or, you see them as two separate things...

**KP:** You mean Gay Pride?

**SP:** Yes, Gay Pride and the march.

**KP:** Most definitely it is a creation FREE and the people in FREE. The picnics in the park were just one thing that we did. I don't think I even went to a picnic. It might have happened once. Did you think it might have happened more than once.

**SP:** I'm not sure how many times it happened.

**KP:** It might have been something that happened. The real inspiration for those early marches came out of FREE.

**SP:** What was the first march you were involved in, do you remember what happened?

**KP:** No, I think it was small, but I don't remember much about it.

**SP:** Do you remember if it was a picnic or...

**KP:** I remember drawing the leaflets.

**SP:** So, it wasn't a spontaneous thing a few people did by congregating for a march, but there was organization? What was the purpose of the leaflets?

**KP:** I should have it to look at. There was a list of activities, but basically it said to meet at the park and we'll walk. It had a drawing and one may have had a photograph in it.

**SP:** Did anyone have banners?

**KP:** Yes, picket signs. Maybe the first time we didn't or maybe we had a few picket signs.

**SP:** This is about the end of our discussion. Is there anything you would like to bring up that I didn't bring up.

**KP:** Yes. The thing I noticed when talking with Jean, something he said that I think is really important. It is important to have some history, to be aware that we aren't doing everything for the first time and everything has been done before. It's important to keep a record of all it, so in future people will have a sense of their history. Particularly it is important for gay people. Like Jean said, the one library that had a lot of historical things was burned down. When you think about it, very little our history is listed right now. The reason, like Jean said, is because things don't always stay good and open and free. We could go back to the days of shock treatments and psychiatric hospitals. Having a recorded history would give us more power as a tool to get back.

**SP:** Strength comes from having a past, something to refer to.

**KP:** It has personally for me, because the things I did with the Gay Rights Movement have been really the most important thing I have done in my life. When I look at the value of my life, that's a very big part of it, so even personally having a history is important.

**SP:** In what you have done, you can in turn say that for people who will look at the past and what you have done that what they do doesn't have to necessarily have to be the first time, but they can build on it.

**KP:** Yes, each person is unique and has a unique contribution whatever it is. You don't have to be the first to do something. Sometimes I wonder if I was the first. I was the first somehow. I don't know if there weren't other lesbians who were public and open and doing things in that same period of time in another part of the country. I don't know that, but I was glad to be a part of it.

**SP:** And a local first, too.

**KP:** It helped me as a kid or coming out, to overcome feeling bad about myself and I did

feel bad about myself. It's reinforcing to be able to fight for yourself. It is a self-esteem builder. I'd like to say thanks to my family for loving me through it all.

**SP:** Thank you, Ms. Phelps.

Twin Cities Gay and Lesbian Community  
Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society