

**Pussy Palace Oral History Project**  
Oral History Interview with Lukas Blakk  
Conducted on July 8, 2021 via Zoom  
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges on behalf of the  
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)  
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Lukas Blakk is a 46-year-old, white, genderqueer person living in Oakland, California. At the time of the interview, Blakk was working in social media and technology for Snapchat. The interview concerns her experiences as a volunteer security member at the Pussy Palace on September 14, 2000. Blakk discusses her relocation to Toronto shortly before the Night of 2000 Pussies, the appeal of the Pussy Palace events as a somewhat novel attempt to create sex positive space for queer women and trans folks in Canada, her involvement as a volunteer security member at two consecutive Palace events, her sense memories of the Pussy Palace on the night of the raid, her interaction with the five invading, plainclothes police officers in the Polaroid room, and other topics. The interview concerns the time period between 2000 and 2001. Blakk mentions Montreal, Quebec; Victoria, British Columbia; Hamilton, Ontario; and Toronto, Ontario in Canada. She also mentions Michigan and California, USA.

Keywords: Genderqueer; Bathhouse; Michigan Womyn's Music Festival; Sex Positivity; Security; Volunteer; Organizing; Polaroid; Dyke; Police; Raid.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:01):

Okay. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Lukas Blakk on July 8? Yes, July 8, 2021. Lukas is in Oakland, California and is going to tell us about the experience of being a volunteer and a patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. So, Lukas, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Lukas Blakk (00:00:38):

Yes, you do.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:40):

Great. So, before we get into your experiences with the Pussy Palace, I just have a few questions that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity you hold or categories you occupy and how, at least, some of these may have shifted or evolved over the past 20 years. So, to start simply, can you tell me your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Lukas Blakk (00:01:09):

So, my name is Lukas Blakk, B-L-A-K-K. And it is a chosen name. It's not the name I was born with. I use she/her pronouns, and I'm 46 years old. So, I guess, if this was 20 years ago, I was 20... No, actually I think I was 25 at the time when it happened. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:29):

Yeah. And how would you describe your gender and sexual identity today, in 2021?

Lukas Blakk (00:01:36):

Yeah. I mean, definitely identify as a genderqueer person, somewhat non-binary. Although sometimes I feel too old to use that term. I do like to use she/her pronouns because I present in a mannish way and I have the name Lukas, and so people will assume that I'm male, and I don't want to get disappeared that way. So, I do identify as a woman in some cases, non-binary in some cases, and genderqueer pretty much all the time. For anybody who knows what that is, that would be my preferred identity.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:10):

And in the event that a listener doesn't know what that is, what does it mean for you, genderqueer?

Lukas Blakk (00:02:18):

Yeah. For me, I mean, I guess because of coming up in a heavily identity-politic generation, for me it was really about blurring and being able to claim little parts of all different genders. So, I don't have to really be seated firmly in any one particular binary, for example. Although I take issue with non-binary sometimes because there also seems to be a developing form of what non-binary is or isn't. So, to me genderqueer is just rejecting all of that all the time.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:47):

Yes. And what about back in 2000 when the Pussy Palace event that we're curious about was happening, would there be a different way that you described your gender and sexuality?

Lukas Blakk (00:02:59):

I think that I would still have been genderqueer then. I mean, pronouns weren't as much of a prominent aspect of identity then. So, I was using she/her pronouns, but it wasn't something that we were really talking about at that time. At this point you may be able to hear in the interview, but I have taken hormones, my voice has changed. I have had top surgery and things like that in my own gender journey. And it still doesn't, to me, make me any particular gender, but it's just about how I've worked with my body and my comfort. And at that time, 20 years ago, I hadn't done any of that. So, the gender pronoun thing, my voice was higher. I had a different name then. I hadn't legally, or even creatively changed my name yet. So, while those weren't part of my own personal identity, they certainly would have been, like, how I presented was a little different.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:50):

Right. And what about racial, ethnic, cultural identities? How do you express yourself through these categories?

Lukas Blakk (00:03:58):

Yeah, I'm white, definitely. I'm a white and able-bodied person with... I'm, like, larger. A bigger woman. So that is, to me, culturally interesting because I do look very mannish or male to people on sight. I can't pick cisgender, transgender. Again, those are binaries to me. So, I can't really say anything about that specific area in terms of identity. Again, I would just say genderqueer in there. And I'm also a second-generation queer. My mom is a lesbian. I was raised in queer community my whole life and then in my own queer community after leaving home and stuff, so that's also part of my cultural identity.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:51):

Right. And what can you tell me about your particular educational path?

Lukas Blakk (00:04:58):

Oh, like post-secondary or that sort of thing?

Alisha Stranges (00:05:03):

However you want to interpret the question.

Lukas Blakk (00:05:05):

Right. I mean, at the time, 20 years ago, I just had dropped out of about a year of university when I was a teenager. So, I was not much beyond secondary education, and now I have a bachelor's degree that I got in my 30s. And I guess also, I mean, I could identify class-wise as, at that time, pretty much working-class and minimum-wage jobs. And now I actually I'm in a much higher-class strata and have a lot of financial security and opportunities and stuff available to me because of that.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:46):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And what can you tell me about the kind of things that occupy your time these days, professionally?

Lukas Blakk (00:05:54):

Professionally?

Alisha Stranges (00:05:56):

Yeah.

Lukas Blakk (00:05:57):

Well, now I work in tech, specifically I work for Snapchat. Will be interesting to see how that ages with time, but I work in social media, and I work in technology in a very male environment and, actually, an unfortunately very straight environment. Whereas I used to work in queer community in menial labour and stuff like that, now I work in these white-collar, knowledge-working jobs. It's stimulating because I get to use a lot more aspects of my intellectual abilities, but I feel very, very far from queer community in my professional life, which used to be much more intermingled.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:38):

Right. You're in tech you say, does that come out of what you studied in your bachelor's?

Lukas Blakk (00:06:48):

Yeah. I mean, I had always liked computers and things, but when I was a kid people thought it was a waste of time. Nobody said there was jobs in that field. So, I didn't know to pursue my interest there. It wasn't until my Saturn return and turning 30 and wanting to get out of working in kitchens and jobs where, if I hurt myself, I lost all my income, to get a job where I could have some health benefits and some job security. I went into a program actually at Seneca College up at York [University] in Toronto and did a degree in software development and managed to turn that into a pretty interesting journey and passage to the United States in a legal manner instead of a scrappy, trying to live there illegally in the mid-90s. And was able to get visa, really great job, really great benefits. Most of what I do now I learned on the job. It wasn't specifically

taught to me in school, but going back to school in that field gave me the opportunity to get my foot in the door.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:52):

Right. And what role, if any, does religion or spirituality play in your life currently or at any point?

Lukas Blakk (00:08:03):

Currently, I'm more connected to a sense of a spirituality that things that are bigger than me are things I don't have control over. That's a very recent development. I would say in the last five years that I've been more willing to consider that or to incorporate that into my life actually in a way to recover from feeling the need to control everything myself. I'm in my 40s more able to be like, "Okay, I actually don't control everything." And I spent a lot of my life trying to, for safety and security and whatnot. And now I can hand things over much more to the idea of a larger power that is taking care of all of us. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:44):

What made that shift possible for you?

Lukas Blakk (00:08:48):

I mean, to be honest, going into a 12-step program and having that be part of the process of recovery is being willing to turn things over, being willing to trust that there's a higher power out there that cares about me, or that has my best interest at heart. So, sort of a nurturing, in support of recovering from various issues.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:15):

Is there any more you want to say about that?

Lukas Blakk (00:09:19):

No, I think that's it.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:23):

And is there anything more that you want to add, that you think it'd be important for me to know about how you understand the different identities you hold today versus back in 2000?

Lukas Blakk (00:09:36):

Yeah. I mean, I think the only other thing is that now I'm also a parent. I wasn't a parent then. Now I have a teenager and a six-year-old. So, my life and my social life especially has changed drastically, my connection to community. And also, I changed countries and geographic locations. And being part of the Toronto community, for the 10 years that I lived there, was a really, really huge part of my life and my identity. And it's actually something I still grieve sometimes here. It doesn't exist everywhere. Is very unique to Toronto. So, one of the reasons I'm interested in this project actually is because I do feel like there's just such great queer history and generations of activism and stuff in Toronto that I've never seen anywhere else.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:22):

What was the sort of years that you were in Toronto and when did you move? When did you make the move?

Lukas Blakk (00:10:29):

I moved to Toronto in 2000, in late August of 2000, I believe. And that was a very spontaneous decision. And then I left in, well, 10 years later, I guess 2010. I think I got here in 2010 or 2011... Maybe I got here in October of 2011. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:59):

Okay. So, I'll shift here now and invite you to travel back in time to the fall of 2000. It sounds like you were basically just getting into Toronto. And this was when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was, at the time, the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. How do you recall first learning about this event?

Lukas Blakk (00:11:23):

Yeah. So, when I got to Toronto, I literally landed in my friend Zoe [Whittall]'s closet. She had two rooms in her apartment. One was sort of a closet, and I took it over as a bedroom, so I could pay 250 dollars to live there while I was getting on my feet, having just driven across the country for five days from Victoria. And I think I had, like, a thousand dollars in my pocket and was just coming to Toronto to see if I could make it work there because I was dating somebody there. I can't tell you exactly which one I found out about first, but one of my roommates, Mariko [Tamaki], was working at Come As You Are, which I imagine was promoting the event. And then Zoe [Whittall] may or may not have been dating somebody who was involved in organizing the event.

Lukas Blakk (00:12:04):

And then I was dating someone who was going to be doing the Polaroid booth at the event. So, it was all like a perfect storm around me, of the people I was meeting as I had just arrived. I think I went to my first Vazaleen event and just being out and being social in Toronto in those first couple of months. Everybody I was meeting was involved in some way, and I got looped into volunteering, which is my preferred way of participating in events anyway. Like, I like to have a job. So, I got on the volunteer crew with a friend of Zoe [Whittall]'s, I think JP [Hornick] was probably leading that crew. So, that was one of the first people I knew in Toronto, other than people I'd already known from being friends in Montreal. So yeah, that's the basics of how I got looped into that.

Lukas Blakk (00:12:51):

Like you were mentioning, it was the fourth one. And so, there was a pattern of people volunteering and then taking over leadership, the next event and stuff like that. So, I think JP [Hornick] had volunteered the one before and was now coordinating the volunteers for this new one. And I actually went on to coordinate the security team that I was on. I went to coordinate the volunteers for the next one after this. Yeah. So, I started going to some trainings and just being involved that way.

Alisha Stranges (00:13:16):

Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the trainings? What did that involve?

Lukas Blakk (00:13:24):

So, a super fuzzy memory, but I do think that there was at least one training where we reviewed the space. We got to walk around the space and understand where everything was. And then, also, I have a feeling that we talked a bit about what was allowed and what wasn't, but also just trying to reinforce not shaming anybody and just being really ready for anything. And I wish I could remember more about it. It just struck me today

in preparing for this interview. I was like, “I know we talked about it. I know we did some kind of a run through.” And I hope that someone else who’s participated maybe gave better information on that, because I think there was a really important part about the whole event that was about letting people feel really free and comfortable and stuff. And so, I think that was reinforced through the volunteer training and that it was probably a mandatory training. So, that’s unfortunately all I can say about it.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:19):

Yeah. That’s wonderful. I’m curious, the trainings, was this something that would have... I don’t know if you recall, but would it be something that would have happened in advance of the event or on the night of the event?

Lukas Blakk (00:14:32):

I feel like there must’ve been something in advance of the event, but I also know that I got there early on the night of the event, too. So, perhaps it was a training in advance of the event and then I got there early to see the space for the first time on the night of. I remember being in the space when there was nobody in it yet.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:49):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lukas Blakk (00:14:51):

It also had really long hours, this event. I think it started pretty early and nobody was there, and then it was supposed to go to 3 or 4 in the morning or something.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:58):

Right. Right.

Lukas Blakk (00:14:59):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:01):

Well, aside from everyone that you knew being somehow connected to the event, what was it about the event itself that might’ve intrigued you, captivated your attention?

Lukas Blakk (00:15:12):

I literally just moved here from Victoria [British Columbia], which is one of the sleepiest towns in the entire world. So, I think there’s probably a good amount of like, “I’m 25 years old, and I’m in the big city now. And this is big city stuff. This is what we do here.” It’s not just the same 20 softball dykes in a basement in Victoria as I had been doing for the last three years. Which was a wonderful time when that’s what you have. And then this is the new level. So, arriving in Toronto for me certainly had just a lot more of everything. I also was a worker at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which is also a very sex-positive public sex, in some places, public sex space.

Lukas Blakk (00:15:57):

And so, I think I'm intrigued because in some ways, for me, at Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival], a lot of stuff happened that I felt like at home, especially in Canada, because Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival] is an American event and American lesbianism and politics and whatever and exhibitionism or whatever, I think sometimes can be a little less restrained than in Canada. I used to go to Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival] and come back to Canada and find people a little bit more uptight. And so, it was this interesting thing that like, "Oh, Toronto is about to do this thing that's pretty not uptight." And what does that even mean when we all still also live in the same city together? We're going to see each other tomorrow or next week. Because Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival]'s this thing where you go away and you do your thing and then you come back into your town. That was interesting to me too. I think at the time I was like, "Okay, we're going to see how that works."

Lukas Blakk (00:16:48):

I mean, I also should say I know for me I was dating someone who was going to be there. I was mostly going there as a date to that person. And I was going to be volunteering and working because I was not really interested in the event for my own personal sexual participation. So yeah, I like to be helpful and be present and stuff, but I wasn't looking to party myself.

Alisha Stranges (00:17:12):

Right. Right. Well, I do still have a couple of questions here about the time period between when a person decides that they're going to attend or volunteer at the event and when they actually become an official patron or volunteer. These questions may seem inconsequential, however, just go with me to the best of your memory. Where might you have been before you made your way to the club that night for your shift?

Lukas Blakk (00:17:42):

I imagine I was probably at home with my roommates getting ready. What we did before any event was just having people over, perhaps. I can't say for sure on that night, but also because I know I went there early to start my shift because I think my shift was maybe 7:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. or something like that. I don't remember exactly what time the raid happened at, but I basically had just gotten off my shift. So, it was the earlier side of things instead of the closing part of things. So, whatever we were doing ahead of time, I probably... And it's funny, I know you have a question here, but how did we get there? And honestly, I did own a car at the time, but I'm pretty sure I did not drive to that event.

Lukas Blakk (00:18:30):

So, I probably took the streetcar and walked. We lived in the east end at the time. Caroline [Avenue], Queen [Street East] and Caroline [Avenue]. So, everything we did, we were taking that Queen streetcar all the time to go west for whatever events were happening because everything was happening in the west end. And Club Toronto actually was kind of central. So yeah, I probably took public transit to get there and didn't go with anybody because I was the only one volunteering. I knew my roommates would be there later, but I didn't enter with people or pay a ticket or anything.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:59):

Yeah. Got you. And you said at some point you arrived and there weren't many people there yet. So, would that've been just before 7:00 p.m., if your shift started at 7:00 p.m., or off the top of the night before it even opened or...?

Lukas Blakk (00:19:15):

Well, so when I first got there... Oh, what was her name? She worked at Come As You Are. Starts with an M. I want to say, it's not Merrin, it's... Shoot. She was a tall woman with short dark hair. She was one of the key organizing committee folks, and I think she worked at Come As You Are. Anyway, I remember going through with her and seeing where the bars were set up, seeing where the towel... Because one of the things I was doing was picking up towels and just being around the space, moving around the space and helping out wherever needed and then also being down by the door.

Lukas Blakk (00:19:53):

I also can't remember if we had wristbands or not. If there was a way to tell... Man, I guess I won't go there because I can't remember it. But yeah, being there early enough that it was me and the other volunteers on our shift and then the community organizers, and still carrying in cases of beverages or setting up tables, getting things out, and just maybe reviewing exits or something like that. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:22):

And what were you feeling before the start of the event? What was the sort of general feeling?

Lukas Blakk (00:20:30):

I mean, I think probably excited and nervous. I was still new in town. Meeting new people is challenging, even... I think I was having this weird thing at that time, I was like, "Oh, I know all these people from outside or from before, from other places I've lived and whatever, but then this is a real test of social awkwardness for me because people are going to be partying really hard, and I don't do that." I tend to just stand on the sides and observe. So, I just mostly was very focused on wanting to do a good job as a volunteer and paying attention to the directions. I'm very rules-y. So, I was like, "What are the rules? And then I'm going to hold down the rules." Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:21:10):

Do you remember what some of the rules that, as a security member, you would have been trying to help enforce or encourage?

Lukas Blakk (00:21:20):

God, I can't remember. I want to make some up, but I can't remember any specific rules. I wish I had a handout or something like that. I want to make up ones like maybe there was no glass at the pool. I don't know, stuff like that. But honestly, I just remember picking up a ton of towels. I don't feel like I had to have any conversations with anybody. Oh, but now that I think about it, I do think that maybe some of the training was about being able to feel comfortable interacting with people if they needed help with something. That might've been part of it. I just moved around through the space. I just went from floor to floor and just peeking in and seeing if there was things I could pick up or get out of the way.

Alisha Stranges (00:22:00):

So, you were going around and collecting towels, where did these towels end up after you grabbed them?



Lukas Blakk (00:22:05):

Yeah, there was bins they could go into. Yeah. Yeah. The reason the towels keeps coming up is because I think that night, I just kept dreaming that I was picking up towels. I was like, "You got to just keep picking up towels until they're all gone."

Alisha Stranges (00:22:20):

Okay. So, I don't know how much this will apply to you because you were volunteering, but I am still curious what the look you were going for that night was like. What do you recall about what you would have worn to your shift?

Lukas Blakk (00:22:36):

Probably black. Yeah. I think probably a tank top and black shorts or something because it was hot. There was a pool in there. It was really hot and sweaty. And it was fall, but it was probably still pretty warm out. So yeah. Man, now I want to go and look through and see if I have any pictures from that time at all. All my stuff is in storage. I did not have a chance to look at that before because also we might have taken Polaroids that night. Would make sense if we had. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:11):

What were you trying to feel in this black tank top, black shorts, or to communicate to other people?

Lukas Blakk (00:23:19):

Probably security. Feeling myself as participating to a certain degree, but I'm not a very showy dresser or anything like that. So, just very simple and effective clothing for what I needed to be doing. Pockets, stuff like that.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:43):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). And once you're inside the club and it's starting to get going, there's patrons coming in, how would you describe the space itself?

Lukas Blakk (00:23:54):

Yeah, I mean the space is fascinating. I'd never been in a bathhouse before that, I don't think. So, it was a really interesting space. It had so many nooks and crannies. I think it was three stories high, possibly. There was a pool area, an outdoor area that had a pool that people were sitting around. I feel like there was a bar on each floor, maybe a table with drinks set up as a bar on each floor. I remember there was a whole area full of lockers. There was a room that I think was entirely tiled, group shower area. And also, I'm pretty sure that we pre-labelled some of those spaces for certain things. Because I remember that tiled shower area was the kink room or something. It had some stuff set up in it for certain activities, probably because it's an easy room to clean.

Lukas Blakk (00:24:43):

I mean, I do also remember going around that place and just being like, "This place is filled with man cum 364 days of the year, gross." I just didn't want to touch anything. The upper floors were more mirrored hallways and then the tiny little rooms with the plastic-covered beds, plastic-covered single mattress type thing. And the doors did not... They weren't floor to ceiling doors. They had room on the top and maybe on the bottom. What else? Was there actually an official bar downstairs, a real bar? I don't know that there was.

The entrance at the bottom I felt more like dark and dungeon-y, a dark hallway and stuff. Actually, everything about it felt dark. I just remember that. It was not a very well-lit place, obviously intentionally, but just lots of staircases.

Lukas Blakk (00:25:35):

I think staircase was carpeted. I think there was carpet in this place, in some places, which again, gross. So yeah. So, there's pool, kink room, locker room. People would store their stuff in the lockers. It was near the pool because people could come and go from the pool and have their stuff in the lockers. And then, group sex room. Oh, and there was a room that was showing movies somewhere. One of the rooms had just film, like porn, being projected and stuff. It was a chill out, watch porn room maybe, get inspired.

Lukas Blakk (00:26:08):

I remember that it was, at first anyway, and I'm going to say this... Because I went to the second one after this, where there was no liquor for obvious reasons because of what had happened. The difference between a liquored-up bathhouse and a not liquored up bathhouse is extreme. So, the liquored-up bathhouse version, the first one that I went to, obviously it was like a bar night. It was like you have the first people coming in, people kind of staking out some space, getting a locker or doing whatever. And then probably 10, 11 o'clock we started to have more bodies and stuff, and people have started to have some drinks. So, by the midnight range, that's when it's, like, full. Full going. And people taking probably more liberties. The one that we did without alcohol, I feel like it never even reached that.

Lukas Blakk (00:27:00):

First of all, not as many people came because I think also scared off by what had happened the previous time and because no alcohol. So, not as many people came to the second one so the space had this much more gap-y feel to it. You couldn't really get that bar vibe of bodies crushed together, so anything goes. And it was more careful. So, I think that the second one without alcohol was more people who specifically wanted to come for reasons of, "I like to be in a bathhouse, and I want to have sex with folks." Whereas the one we're talking about, the Pussy Palace that we're talking about, some people were just coming like it was a bar night. Like, "Yeah, I'm here, I'm dancing by the pool. I'm keeping my clothes on. I might not have sex with anybody, but this is fun. Oh, yeah, and there's people having sex with people over there."

Lukas Blakk (00:27:43):

So, I think it was more of a mix of people's reasons for being there and what they were planning to do that night or not going to do that night. At one point, I think I was upstairs and it was like both my roommates were in little rooms with the people they were dating, and I was waiting to spend time with the person I was dating because she was finishing up in the Polaroid room. And I was just like, "This is so strange that we come out to this thing just to hear my roommates having sex. We could all be doing this at home, really." But, no. It was good. There was good music. There was a DJ somewhere, I'm sure. But there was good music going throughout the place and it... Yeah, it was busy and fun and kind of exciting. I don't know, I should probably... Feel like I should wind down there.

Alisha Stranges (00:28:31):

That's brilliant. Brilliant. Thank you for that very full and rich description. I know it sounds like you were mostly concerned with your duties as a volunteer, but it sounds like at some point you were waiting for the person you were dating to be done their shift. So, were you planning to get up to any particular activities inside the Palace?

Lukas Blakk (00:28:55):

No. I mean, I wanted to make out with her or something, but when you're on a twin mattress covered in plastic and also the music that's playing isn't the music you would choose... I was a little bit like, "Mm, do you want to go? Let's go home and have our own space or whatever." I personally get very shy around public sex or... Not public sex, but observed or... What's the word? Exhibitionary type. So, I'm not exhibitionist interested at all. I like having sex in public with a person that I'm with, but not so that other people are watching. I think the plan was... And I'm pretty sure it was around 1:00 a.m. in the morning maybe where it was like, "Oh, you'll be done and I'll be done and maybe we can take this elsewhere, take ourselves elsewhere."

Lukas Blakk (00:29:44):

So, when she was finished, I think she was packing up her equipment, and we were hanging out in the room that she'd been doing the photos in and stuff. And then that's when the raid had started. We didn't know because I think the Polaroid room was on the second or third floor. So, we didn't know from the minute it started. We had just got the knock on the door and it was like... Felt like six of the tallest white men I had ever seen in my life. Yeah. I don't know if you want me to go into that part yet or not.

Alisha Stranges (00:30:13):

Yeah, we can go there now, for sure. Right. So, this is around 12:45 a.m., when the five plainclothes, male police officers entered the club and apparently stayed about 90 minutes. Sounds like you were inside the Pussy Palace. Do you recall what you were doing when you found out that there were police in the building?

Lukas Blakk (00:30:36):

Yeah. So, I was in the room with Chloë [Brushwood Rose] who had been taking Polaroids, and she was done for the night, and we were just hanging out in this room with the door closed. This is the same room as everybody else was using, just wooden door doesn't go all the way up, little plastic mattress. I think the room that she had for the Polaroids had a little extra space in it where she had room to give people space to pose and stuff. But yeah, there was a knock on the door, and when we opened the door it was like... I guess you're saying five. Literally six-foot-five tall, big dudes, plainclothes too. So, it wasn't clear who they were at first. But I think they then identified themselves, and then they wanted to look at Chloë [Brushwood Rose]'s equipment and everything, and they wanted to know what had happened in that room.

Lukas Blakk (00:31:20):

And they wanted to know if people had paid for, or there was money exchanged for the Polaroids or whatever, which there wasn't. Chloë [Brushwood Rose] was just doing it as a service. And I think she paid for the film herself even. Her intention was just to give people a chance to feel sexy and to capture that. And so, they looked through all of her bags and stuff of camera gear, and fortunately there were no Polaroids in the room. Everybody took theirs with them. So, there wasn't anything. There was nothing. Eventually they didn't find anything, and they left and that accelerated our "let's get out of here" momentum.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:57):

Do you recall how you yourself responded to the interaction with the police, or were they mostly engaging Chloë [Brushwood Rose]?

Lukas Blakk (00:32:06):

They were mostly engaging Chloë [Brushwood Rose], and I just tried to stay quiet and stay out of it because I didn't want to agitate anything or make it take any longer than they needed to. And also, I don't think I knew then what had led to them getting to her door, to the door of the room we were in. And I also honestly can't remember what they did after either. Because it's interesting you're saying they stayed 90 minutes, and I don't know where our interaction with them fit in that 90-minute window. But it's like, you know, it's literally like someone scraped the record needle off the record. Everybody's just like, "nyyyyoop." I don't know. I actually don't know what happened after. I can't even think of it now. It was just like, as soon as they were done talking to her, I think we just left. We just packed up and got out of there.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:55):

Yeah. Is there anything you remember viscerally or vividly about this interaction?

Lukas Blakk (00:33:05):

I just remember how tall they were, how big they were. And I wonder if there were people going around behind to go and try to let people know to get dressed. That's a vague notion that that might've been happening. As they were moving through the spaces, people were going ahead of them and knocking on doors and letting people know so that they could protect themselves from unwanted voyeurism from these officers. Yeah, I remember how big they were. I remember that they were wearing just schlub-y, straight-dude clothes. It took a little bit to sink in what was going on and also why they were there. It wasn't really clear why they were there, and the way they were talking when they were going through our stuff, it was like, "Is this the target?"

Lukas Blakk (00:33:53):

I didn't know at the time that it was the alcohol license that they'd used to get in, but it was like, "Do they think we're making pornography? What was the purpose of the visit?" Yeah, nothing like that ever happened before. And I know this has actually happened to gay clubs over history, but it was funny because it's just never happened at any gay club I'd ever been in, like a bar. So, the fact that this is a bathhouse, to me it was still like a bar until that moment, I think. And then it was like, "Oh, maybe they think that we're doing something wrong." But also, I'm just sitting there being like, "There's no evidence of it. And I know we didn't do anything wrong." I was probably appropriately quiet because I don't want to antagonize, but I think I probably felt still relatively confident that there wasn't anything bad that was going to happen because we didn't do anything wrong.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:46):

And how did the atmosphere change in the club? I mean, you touched on it already, but when folks realized that there was not just a police presence, but a very visibly male presence.

Lukas Blakk (00:35:00):

Yeah. I mean, all I can think is that then it was over, right? But I don't know. Did people stick around and wait for them to leave and then try to resume partying? I don't know. I do think that the music stopped, and I wonder if anybody can really confirm that. It feels to me like the music stopped. By the time we were talking about the pool, I don't think there was still pounding dance music while we were having that conversation. But I don't know. It's weird. I can't say for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:34):

Okay. So, I might be confused here. So, the conversation with the cops happened in the Polaroid room or...?

Lukas Blakk (00:35:40):

Yeah. In the Polaroid room.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:42):

Oh, okay. Okay.

Lukas Blakk (00:35:42):

Yeah. She had all her bags, like, her purse, her camera equipment, a tripod, stuff like that. They went through everything, asked her a bunch of questions, and then they left that room. And then we packed up our... And then left from that room.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:56):

I see. And it was later revealed that before the plainclothes police officers entered the club there were two women, undercover police officers attending the event. Is this the first that you knew about that?

Lukas Blakk (00:36:12):

Yeah. I read it in your questions, and I didn't realize that. I don't think I picked up on that part of the story.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:21):

Well, how does it feel to learn later, many years later that there were outsiders in the space surveilling folks?

Lukas Blakk (00:36:31):

I mean, it's interesting because I watched all the case of this go down and obviously, I was really happy when the case was successful, but I just can't even imagine what the planning leading up to this was on the police side. Did they really see a flyer for this event somehow and then be like, "Oh, yeah, let's send in some undercover women, and then let's go in and harass people"? It's unfathomable to me what they thought they would achieve there, I mean, other than making people feel uncomfortable, but I'm like, "Is that really..." They don't have anything else to do than come up with things to make people feel uncomfortable and to scare them and to shame them and whatever?

Lukas Blakk (00:37:10):

I am so curious now, if there were these two women undercover, what were they wearing? What were they doing? How much were they participating? And what do they think now, especially when the case was won? Do they think the work they did was useful, important, valid? God, and it's not like we don't know that women can betray women, but I mean, I wonder how they live with that.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:39):

Yeah. In the days and weeks following the raid, did you stay in touch with the community activism and the legal case, court proceedings?

Lukas Blakk (00:37:54):

I don't really remember because, somehow, I was still involved with the planning of the next one, and I actually don't remember when the next one happened. Like, how far apart were they? Were they every six months or something like that? I imagine there might've been a fundraiser event or something that... I think Zoe [Whittall] organized a fundraiser. If possible, I was helpful for that or I at least attended that and was engaged in that level. I don't know much about the legal side of it. That wasn't an area that I knew very much about or felt super connected to, sadly. I think I would probably pay more attention to it now, but in my 20s I would have been like, "Yeah, that's the boring part," sadly. I don't know anything about it, Canadian law or whatever.

Lukas Blakk (00:38:48):

Actually, I went to a courtroom thing because I'd never been in a Canadian courtroom before. So, I went to one thing because I remember them talking about Rex and Regina all the time and I was like, "What is going on?" The room, it was so archaic, this courtroom situation. Was it one of the early hearings or something? There was something where people could go to it. And yeah, I just had never seen Canadian lawyers wearing robes and stuff and the language they used. I think they said Regina actually. I thought that was funny. They just said it over and over again because it's part of the spiel that they do because Canada and the queen and stuff. But that must have been a pre-trial thing because all this stuff happened years later. But maybe it was just the arraignment or something? Yeah. Huh, that's the only time I've ever been in a Canadian courtroom.

Alisha Stranges (00:39:54):

So, just going out of curiosity perhaps?

Lukas Blakk (00:39:58):

Yeah. Or support or just that group. I mean, like I said at the very beginning, almost everybody I knew was deeply involved in this in some way. So, I think I just was swept along, and I'm happy to be a warm body sometimes to just take up that space and to show support.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:15):

Right. So, I just want to back up a little, I have a few more questions about the space, and in particular, the crowd. I'm just looking through my notes here, one second. Right. So, in the height of the night, how many people would you say were there?

Lukas Blakk (00:40:44):

Huh, I mean, I want to say somewhere around 400, maybe. I would say, yeah, maybe 4 [hundred], maybe a little more. It was pretty big. And especially for a women-only event, that's pretty decent size. It was definitely pretty packed downstairs in the big rooms, very packed. And then as you went upstairs it didn't feel as packed because everyone's in their tiny little rooms, but just getting through the hallways and stuff, it was busy. There were people everywhere.

Alisha Stranges (00:41:15):

Right. Yeah. What do you recall about the composition of the crowd along lines of gender, sexuality, race, culture?

Lukas Blakk (00:41:28):

Yeah. I mean, I'm going to hazard a guess, it was probably a primarily white crowd. I feel like a lot of events I went to in Toronto that would have been the case and this probably was no exception. And then I think there's a mix of people. I mean, again, I just moved to Toronto. So, I didn't know everybody there super well yet. But I would have probably been... [phone notification sounds] Oh, I'm sorry about that. I probably would've been on the younger side of the folks that were present there, then. I think 20- to 25-year-olds were probably in the minority. I think there's probably a good amount of folks more in the 30s and then some older folks are... Probably a handful of people with disabilities or differently-abled...

Lukas Blakk (00:42:21):

The accessibility to the space wasn't great. And so, I'm sure that must have limited some people's ability to even attend, but I can think of a couple of people that were probably there where they would have been able to attend and also would probably identify as having disabilities. Yeah. It seemed like there was the pre-existing, sex positive or kink community folks were there *en masse*, and then there was a whole bunch of folks that I would usually see at clubs there, because it's a club.

Lukas Blakk (00:42:57):

And I actually wonder if there were some people from out of town. That I don't really know for sure, like how many people maybe came in for this because it is such a unique space. Maybe your project will be capturing that from people who came in from Hamilton [Ontario] or whatever, smaller towns, because this is definitely not happening anywhere else. I mean, I think to be honest when I picture it in my head, I picture a pretty homogenous 25- to 45-year-old, largely white dyke scene in that space.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:37):

And thinking about your own positionality, how did it feel for you to exist in that space that night?

Lukas Blakk (00:43:44):

It was normal. That was status quo, unfortunately for a lot of spaces.

Alisha Stranges (00:43:51):

And we know that the space was quite publicly inclusive of lesbian women, queer cis women, and trans folks as well. What's your impression of what the relationship was like between these differently gendered groups at the Pussy Palace?

Lukas Blakk (00:44:12):

I think my sense was that inclusivity was not only said, but meant. I don't think it was lip service or that there was any group of folks who thought that wasn't okay. And if there was, maybe they stayed home. I can appreciate now that the folks that are involved in organizing that space I think really are inclusive of all variants of women and genders. To me I think the space was very much just not cis male. Which we never say that on posters or whatever, but often that's what we're trying to achieve with all these other, like, "It's this and this and this and this and this." And it's like it would be so much faster if we could just say just not cis male, but we don't say it that way.

Lukas Blakk (00:44:59):

But that's what the space was like. It was very queer. It was trying to be very, very body positive and sex positive. And I think that there was a lot of hurdles to overcome in creating a space like that, and that most of the organizers were very experienced, especially working at sex stores and stuff like that. Having good language around it, really like saying it and meaning it. Yeah. And again, I think I mentioned earlier that I'm just coming from being a worker at Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival], where there was a lot of constant battles around trans women being accepted there and stuff like that. And I mean, I'm on the side of trans women are women, obviously. So, it was nice to see that in Toronto, in the city, in an urban space, in an environment that could have potentially been negative for trans bodies. My understanding of the event was that it was very explicitly welcoming.

Lukas Blakk (00:45:53):

That being said, I mean, I have to qualify that my body was acceptable there. So, I don't know. Someone may have had different experience, and I was a security volunteer. And I think part of my role was to be approachable if someone was feeling uncomfortable or being made to feel uncomfortable. Nobody approached me or reached out or said they were having any issues with that. So those are the only two ways I can say that it seemed to me it was a comfortable and safer space for many genders.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:22):

You mentioned much earlier that part of the training was to sort of encourage volunteers to create or foster a space in which people felt somewhat free. And I was wondering if you could clarify what you mean by that. I know you were having trouble remembering what the training actually involved, but if there's anything you can qualify there.

Lukas Blakk (00:46:50):

Yeah. Man, I really wish I remembered more about that specific part. Because I don't know if there was a handout or if someone just spoke to us or what. I mean, again, it's related to the working at the sex shops part. I think there was a bit of reminders of just don't yuck someone else's yum kind of thing. I'm going to say, probably, not to approach somebody and try to police them in any way. As long as you're not breaking these, I think, fairly minimal rules... Again, I'm going to go out on a limb and say there's probably something about glass in this space. Other than dangerous things, that people get to be doing what they want to be doing. And that it's more about being available for someone's request for help than thinking you need to insert yourself.

Alisha Stranges (00:47:43):

Yeah. So, I am very curious about any lingering sense memories that you might have of the space. So, I've got a little exercise here that I'll do it with you as well. And just go with me to the best of your ability. So, if you can get comfortable in your chair, maybe relax your arms onto your lap, soften your gaze, or even close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do that and just take a couple breaths in and out. Allowing your rib cage to expand a little further with each inhale and exhale, relaxing your jaw. And in your mind's eye, try to re-inhabit some location within the Pussy Palace on that night. Don't worry too much about which space is coming to mind. The first one is the perfect one to work with. Looking around that space. And from this contemplative space look around and tell me what it is that you can see.

Lukas Blakk (00:49:16):

The space that comes to mind first is just being out by the pool. And so, seeing people in the pool, some friends of mine were actually in the pool. Saying hi to them as I was going around picking up towels and



people sitting in lounge chairs and stuff on the sides. And then also being able to then see into the back of the house towards the locker area and stuff. And just loud music and twilight lighting because it was night time, but city night time. So, there's still light coming from other sources. And lots of loud voices and music and sounds of people having fun.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:58):

If you could distil this area into a single colour, what's the predominant colour that's coming through for you?

Lukas Blakk (00:50:09):

Kind of like a blue, like a night blue.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:14):

And if you could reach out and touch some part of this space, what are you touching, what might you be touching and what are its textures?

Lukas Blakk (00:50:25):

Damp towel. White towels. There's just so many of them, but lots and lots and lots of very wet, white towels.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:34):

Are there any lingering odours or scents in the air?

Lukas Blakk (00:50:40):

Not a particular scent, but it's definitely a very humid atmosphere not only because of the pool, but body sweat inside the house and just the whole place is just really hot and humid.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:52):

And if somehow this space could express itself in sound, how would you describe the sound of this space?

Lukas Blakk (00:51:03):

Just a deep bass, a throbbing bass expanding the house and contracting it in time with people's enjoyment.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:14):

And if somehow, magically, you could taste this space, what would its flavour be?

Lukas Blakk (00:51:21):

Oh, dear. I guess I'm going to go with salty again because of all the sweat.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:33):

And I think we've touched on all of the senses there, so you can let that go, open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you for taking me there. So, last question about the event itself is when you were initially planning to volunteer at the event, what were you hoping to experience?

Lukas Blakk (00:51:58):

I think I touched on this before too. I think I was hoping to experience an opportunity for city queers to have some abandon, some sense of being in the moment and stepping away from our normal dyke bar nights or social events, the typical things that happen. I think I had a sense that this was supposed to be a pretty special event. Doesn't happen very often and that people come wanting to make the most of it. And I wanted to just be a part of that and appreciate other folks getting to do that, getting to do whatever they wanted, basically.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:44):

And then thinking about everything that transpired that night, how do you feel your expectations for the night compared with your lived experience?

Lukas Blakk (00:52:57):

Yeah. I don't know. It's just really sad. It's sad that so much time and effort went into organizing this thing. So much selflessness and thoughtfulness and sex positivity, which is hard for women, especially, just to get so dampened by this really useless police action. This really baseless concern about the supposed alcohol licensing or whatever, or special event license. Just felt really like smack down, like you're not allowed to have that.

Alisha Stranges (00:53:41):

We're coming to the end here. Just about a few more questions for you. Would be curious to hear what your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace is. What do you think its reason for being was?

Lukas Blakk (00:53:57):

I mean, I think that its reason for being was to create that space. Create a safe space for queer women to either practice exhibitionism they already knew about, or perhaps discover some that they didn't or try things they had never tried before, meet people in a new way. Just really celebrate their various sexualities and feel comfortable doing that. And I think also probably in comparison to gay male sexuality that has that place 364 days a year, or maybe 363 since we did do it twice. But that, that's such a common staple in male sexuality, is the idea of being able to just go and show up and hook up and go home and try to create a space like that for women and see if that's something we... Instead of assuming that women just wouldn't want that, of creating the space and being like, "Well, does anybody want this?" Because you could have it here, right?

Alisha Stranges (00:55:00):

Right. Well, one of the things that the event organizers would often cite as a goal was that they wanted to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. Prior to the first event, which happened in 1998, what do you think might've been contributing to this lack of visibility the organizers are referencing?

Lukas Blakk (00:55:29):

98. That's interesting. Yeah. I mean, I don't know if there's a way to pinpoint the exact origin of the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. I mean, you're coming out of the AIDS crisis and gay men's sexuality

is being tremendously policed and tamped down and killed. And queer women were very invisible during that even because they weren't the primary ones of falling to AIDS, right? And so queer women often are very visible as activists and as supporters of both gay men and the AIDS crisis and straight women with abortion. There's all sorts of stuff, they're very visible in that way, but... Sorry, I can't tell where to put this in the timeline.

Lukas Blakk (00:56:21):

I feel like queer women's sexuality is still pretty invisible. I mean, you have shows like *L Word* and stuff now that just have queer women having sex all the time, and it still doesn't feel really like queer sex that much. It's very hard to capture that. And I mean, we definitely have some better examples now than just *L Word*, but... And I'm trying to think of things like *On Our Backs* coming out, or a wave of more like dyke instead of lesbian and just queer coming in. There was a bit of a heading up to being more publicly sexual or it's okay to be sexualized.

Lukas Blakk (00:57:03):

I mean, I'm just going to say, for example, my mom as a 70s lesbian feminist, would have been much more in the camp of anti-porn. Porn is objectification of women, not even anti-porn, but just porn is objectification of women. So, even queer porn would be objectification of women. And I can't remember when the Little Sisters bookstore porn case was. Might've been in and around that, around the late-90s there. So, there's all this stuff coming out, these magazines coming out, women trying to be... And this was actually happening at Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival] too. The kinky women at Michigan [Womyn's Music Festival] were trying to be like, "No, we're here and we fuck. And we wear dildos and we do whatever." And they were bringing it into a more subdued and invisibilized queer women's sexuality. So, was it invisible in the public sphere? Absolutely.

Lukas Blakk (00:57:52):

So, if the question is, would I agree that queer women's sexuality was invisible in the public sphere? Yes. If we're saying public as in a queer public, then it was starting to not be as much. Right? So, there's the public-public, they don't care about us anyway. Then there was our own version, our own commons, and there was a bit of a sex positivity war happening. And so, I think that the first event probably was activated by that, and then was continuing and trying and keep that spirit alive. But probably as, I'm guessing in 2000, we probably were starting to see a little bit more representation in films and TV, and there was more books and magazines available and stuff, and maybe people wouldn't have thought they needed it as much. I don't know.

Alisha Stranges (00:58:42):

At some point the name of this series changed from the Pussy Palace to the Pleasure Palace. Were you aware of that shift?

Lukas Blakk (00:58:51):

No. I was not. The one I was at was the Pussy Palace.

Alisha Stranges (00:58:58):

Yeah.

Lukas Blakk (00:58:58):

Yeah. And so, did it change for the next one?

Alisha Stranges (00:59:02):

That's a very good question. And we're having a hard time learning about when it changed.

Lukas Blakk (00:59:08):

So, the only thing I'm wondering, because I did volunteer at the one right after, is did they change it so that it wasn't... Because I feel like maybe there was some fear about having anything be the same as the last one and triggering another police visit. And so, no alcohol license was one of the first things to shut off that avenue of they would have an excuse to be like, "We're here to check your permit." Right? But I wonder also, did a name change like that come from... Because I make two assumptions here. One, it came from a need to distance itself from the event, again, to avoid any additional persecution. But the other thing I can think of is that, was there any discussion about "pussy" being potentially alienating to some people for the event in terms of genders and bodies and that kind of thing. So, it could be either of those, but I can't speak to that with any expertise.

Alisha Stranges (00:59:58):

Yeah, no problem. I wanted to leave a little space here at the end for you to talk about the evolution of your involvement with the Pussy Palace. You said you moved into more of an organizing-the-volunteers position. Is that right, in the next one? You talked a bit about the difference between the two events, but was there anything more you want to say about your later involvement with the Pussy Palace?

Lukas Blakk (01:00:26):

Yeah. I mean, I think that the one after, it was interesting because, like I mentioned, there was no alcohol and it was lower attendance. And honestly, I feel like that one I did out of obligation because that was the deal. You got to go to the first one for free as a volunteer that did the small shift, but the deal was you're supposed to do a bigger shift at the next one. And then that way you keep rotating people through. And I wanted to keep my word, but that one I remember I stayed till whatever it was, 3:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m. in the morning. The thing went so late. And I just remember clearing out those last couple of people, you know, on that last one I was just being like, "No, really you need to go home now so I can go home."

Lukas Blakk (01:01:08):

It didn't feel particularly celebratory. I still understood the need for the space. And I think it also is valiant to be like, "I'm getting back up on that horse," on an event organization level. Like, "We're not going to just never do this again because you fucked with us." That mattered, but personally... I don't know if as many of my friends were at it. I wasn't dating the same person anymore, so that shifted the experience. After that one, I did my duty, and then I think I walked away from the whole idea. So, I don't know. There might've been more after that, but I don't know. I didn't really continue to be involved in it.

Alisha Stranges (01:01:50):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right. Well, is there anything more that you wanted to share about your experience at all that maybe the questions I've asked didn't give you an opportunity to speak to?

Lukas Blakk (01:02:04):

No, I don't think so. I think we covered everything I can remember from that time. It's an interesting exercise to try to remember things from 20 years ago. I would think I would remember more, but...

Alisha Stranges (01:02:16):

It was an amazing account, and I'm so grateful that you reached out and agreed to participate. And it's an honour for me to bear witness to your efforts to remember. So, thank you.

Lukas Blakk (01:02:30):

Thanks. Thanks for doing this and collecting the history.