

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Noelle Campbell-Smith
Conducted on June 25, 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: Noelle Campbell-Smith is a 50-year-old, white, non-binary, lesbian person. At the time of the interview, Campbell-Smith was living in Toronto, Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic and working for the Ontario government as a web developer and accessibility advisor. The interview concerns their experiences as a patron and volunteer bartender at the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on September 14, 2000. Campbell-Smith discusses her drag king persona, her sense memories of the Pussy Palace, her experience while bartending at the bathhouse on the night the Palace was raided, her confusion around the need for a police presence given how attentive she was to the demands set out in the Special Occasions Permit, and other topics. Campbell-Smith mentions Toronto, Ontario; New York, New York; San Francisco, California; Provincetown, Massachusetts; London, England; and Ibiza. The interview concerns the time between 2000 and 2021, with a focus on 2000 to 2003.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Liquor License; Police Raid; Bartender; Drag; Drag King; Public Sex.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:00):

All right. Okay, so this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Noelle Campbell-Smith on June 25, 2021. And Noelle is also in Toronto. Is that right?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:00:18):

Yep, that's right.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:22):

And is going to tell us about their experiences as a volunteer, but also patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse events on the night of September 14, 2000. So, Noelle, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:00:39):

You do.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:40):

Thank you. And before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, I've got a couple questions here that invite me to... Invite you, rather, to tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold or categories you occupy and how, at least some of these, may have shifted or evolved over the past 20 years. So, can you start off by telling me your name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:01:14):

My name is Noelle Campbell-Smith. My age right now is 50. And I go by she or they, and in certain circles, he. But that's reserved for people from those circles. I don't have the experience of a male in my life, so, but I

did perform in that gender. So, in that community when I'm in drag especially, I'm cool with he. Long answer, but...

Alisha Stranges (00:01:47):

No, thank you, thank you. And how would you describe your gender and sexual identity today, in 2021?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:01:56):

I would say that I would identify as probably non-binary, as the language has evolved. And I still consider myself a lesbian. I have had pretty much solely female partners, and I was born a woman and still remain so to this day; I haven't transitioned at all. But I do associate myself with the trans community because of my non-binary-ness.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:27):

And, how about back in 2000 when the Pussy Palace event was happening? Would you have used different language to describe yourself?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:02:34):

Yeah, probably, I think. At the time, I would've said I was a lesbian and a drag performer and not long, or probably in that time period, I would have started referring to myself as genderfluid. So, a genderfluid lesbian, or lots of words that sort of bring up that thought, like "Bemmie Futch" or "Femmie Butch," or those kinds of thing, or "Fashion Butch." I don't know. We were just making up things that weren't quite adhering to the gender stereotypes, but still kind of portraying us. It was a time of labels, but I feel like it's less so now.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:23):

Right. Right. And what about racial, ethnic, cultural identity? How would you express yourself through those types of categories?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:03:35):

Yeah, well, I mean, I'm white. I'm a Canadian person, so my parents, my grandparents grew up in Canada. All but one. So, I guess I've got some European, so I don't really identify as anything but white, nothing interesting. I feel like I'm giving way too long answers, we can go back.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:01):

Oh no, absolutely. This is your time; this is your time. And what can you tell me about your educational path, your class background?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:04:12):

Well, I grew up in Toronto, so I've been here my whole life. And, my parents, my dad is a photographer. So, there was a time, I guess when I was a kid, we were just sort of lower-middle income. But, then as the years went on, my parents did pretty well. And I feel like I've stayed in that sort of middle-class section for most of my life. Grew up downtown, moved to the beach and went to high school in Toronto, went to a French school. My grade school was all in French and then my high school was in French, as well. And then took some years to do whatever, did a bit of post-secondary education, more a career style. And then, after working for many years, then I did my master's degree in 2012.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:05:08):

So, in my forties, I did my master's degree in Inclusive Design, as I've come to be interested in that. So, I came to education a little bit late. I went to art school and art college and then dropped out of it. I changed my idea about what I wanted to do after having a child. So, when I went back to school, I took just sort of a lot of taster courses and then decided on doing web programming. I also did, I guess, just a career college style degree, like a one-year diploma for doing web stuff. So, a little bit of everything. I kind of made my way there, but raising a kid, you know, there were some limitations. So, I did what I could.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:07):

Can you share a little bit more about the things that sort of occupy your time these days, professionally or otherwise?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:06:15):

Currently, and for quite a long time, I've worked for the Ontario government. So, I'm a web developer. Mainly right now I do design and research and give accessibility advice. So, that's my job. And then in my life, I have a wife who I spend a lot of time with, a wonderful wife. I have a daughter who occupies less of my time now because she's 27 years old. But even as recently as a couple of years ago, she preoccupied a lot of my time. And my hobbies, for fun, for the last 10 years I've been doing Kung Fu and that is definitely a focus, something I think about and/or do almost every day. I like to play like guitar and, now with the pandemic, I'm building stuff in my backyard. I decided I wanted to build things out of wood. And so, I've made some planters, I built a deck, I built some shelves. And I used to do drag, but that is something, as a hobby, that I have given up, for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:30):

Well, what about back in 2000? What kind of things were you up to back then?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:07:37):

I think it was a little bit more... Definitely doing some parenting, but I was a part-time parent, as my daughter spent a lot of time living at her dad's, as well. So, I saw her on weekends. I'm trying to think. I guess I would have been working on the web and going maybe to school in 2000 and just getting ready to... 2000 was when, was Twin Towers, right? That was...

Alisha Stranges (00:08:07):

Right. That was '01, right?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:08:09):

2001. So, 2000 would have been the year before that. So, I was working at an internet company. This helps to locate it there. I was already doing web development. My daughter would have been six, she would have been sometimes at her dad's and sometimes at my place. And I did drag quite a lot back in the day then. I would have been performing with probably the Toronto Drag Kings and maybe The Scandelles and probably on my own, as well. That would have been my main hobby at the time, other than cycling, and I spent quite a lot of time on Church Street and in the scene and going to all the parties and whatever, because I had my daughter on weekends. Generally, I had a weekend off a month and that was my "go out and party." But I went out during the week. I played on queer softball leagues, I played for the Crews and Tango team.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:09):

I didn't even know they had a team.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:09:10):

I don't know if that was exactly in that year, but it would have been in that time.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:16):

Yeah.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:09:16):

Just really plugged into burlesque drag scene and was very social, and I think I had come out probably about three or four years before that. So, I was very like "Yah, let's do everything and try everything and meet everyone." And, I can be a very extroverted person, so I think, at that time, I probably knew half of the people in every bar.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:45):

Can you just say briefly a little bit about what The Scandelles were, for anyone who doesn't know?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:09:55):

Yeah, for sure. So, The Scandelles were a burlesque troupe that performed in Toronto. I'd have to check all of the chronology. So, they were... First, Sasha Van Bonbon was pretty much the sun around which all of this revolved, was the originator of The Dangerettes, who I performed with, who then became The Scandelles. I started performing with them quite a lot later, but I would have done sort of random shows with them and with that whole crew of people. And they're a burlesque troop who had a lot of amazing shows at Buddies [in Bad Times Theatre] over the years and evolved from... We had these random shows at Lee's Palace and just did what you would think of as a traditional burlesque show, and that evolved into some crazy theatre shows. So, really impactful, also political, burlesque troupe that incorporated modern dance and all kinds of other things. A real different vibe than you would have been used to at a burlesque show.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:07):

Okay. This is a bit of a right turn here, but curious also about what role, if any, that religion or spirituality might play in your life?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:11:21):

I'm not religious at all. I might say that I was an atheist, but I do believe in some sort of universal energy, but in a scientific way.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:35):

And is there anything else that you think would be important to impart about how you understand the different identities you hold today as compared to 20 years ago?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:11:46):

Oh, that's a good question. The one thing that I feel like has always been prevalent is that I've always felt like somebody's mom. I've been a mom the whole time. That's been consistent throughout the years. And I guess I've felt different ways about that. Because I don't feel like a very traditional mom and that really genders me as a woman in a lot of ways. So, I feel like that's evolved over time. I remember doing my master's degree, I met another parent who had a similar gender identity to mine, and we called each other "other mother brothers," and that kind of felt right. But, over time, my gender identity has evolved. I was in a documentary in 2003 and we were calling ourselves genderfluid. So, I feel like it sort of started in the 2000s when I was exploring that in drag and evolved over the years and it's just been a very slow progression.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:13:12):

I've always just told people like, "I don't really care, I'm just me, call me Noelle, I am who I am." I don't try to conform to gender, and I never have, I haven't since I was a child. My parents bought me all of the boy things that I wanted, all the clothes. My grandpa used to call me Joe. So, I definitely was, since I was a kid, basically hiding in the guise of a boy, but not necessarily wanting to be associated with... I liked hiding, as a boy, but I don't want to necessarily be one. And I think that that specifically has evolved in the last little while because I don't want to be associated with the male gender, specifically. I am not a man. I deal with things that female-bodied people deal with, harassment on the street or certain types of behaviour from people.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:14:09):

And I can pass as a guy, but it's very, in a fleeting kind of way, in certain situations with certain people. And, when that feels safer for me, that's what I'll do, and/or have done. And in most cases, I just don't give one shit. I don't care how people perceive me. And, actually, it's this tour, also, when I go back to my drag tour that I went on, one of the people that I went on the tour with wrote a poem called "Gender Game." And I tell people, one of the phrases from that poem very often is, "I can't cure this visual disease of yours." So, I can't change how other people perceive me, and I've always felt that that's something that I know. So, how you see me doesn't matter to me because I don't know who you are.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:15:07):

The only people that that perception matters to is the people that I care about and that I love. And they know me, and they just know me as me. So, that tour and hanging out with... We all considered ourselves genderfluid, I think that just sort of cemented the thought that that's where I was at, kind of affirmed it. And we were all empowering each other and talking about it quite a lot. I feel like these are very roundabout answers.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:44):

No, I love it. Thank you. I'm really appreciating you going where you're going. I just had one clarifying question. What was the name of the documentary that you participated in?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:15:55):

It's had a couple of different names. So, the original name was *Ladies as Gentlemen* and it was presented on SHOWCASE television, that would have been a shortened version. But the genderfluid cast was not super cool with the title. So, when it went to a full-length film format and was presented at film festivals, it was called *Drag Kings on Tour*. It was a fun time.

Alisha Stranges (00:16:28):

I'll have to check that out. I'm very curious.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:16:31):

But that was also part of that discussion. There was this, "Um, we're not ladies, only some of us consider themselves ladies." So, I think there was one person who would have been okay with that. Another sort of gender discussion and, strangely, I feel like when I reflect on that time, it didn't seem unnatural to me. But, when I reflected with my mom about somebody who wanted to use a they pronoun at some point, I said to her, "I've been talking about this since 2003. I can't believe we're having this discussion again, now." I think it was about three years ago. But I realized that, for the general public, it is kind of a new conversation. Even my mom, even though she was at one of the drag shows, she's in a flash in the documentary, she's there. I guess it just feels like a conversation I've had so many times that I just assume other people have had it. You know?

Alisha Stranges (00:17:41):

I know what you mean.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:17:43):

Yeah. And when I think, wow, that was 18 years ago that we were talking about that stuff, the 2003, specifically. And then, when I'm thinking that this event happened 21 years ago... I can't believe that.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:00):

Well, then that makes a good transition, actually. I'm going to take you back now. We're going to ask you to travel back to the fall of 2000. And this is when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee would have been preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. What do you recall about how you would have first learned that this event was going to happen?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:18:24):

Oh, I definitely had heard about the previous ones. When they started happening, there was definitely some curiosity around it, like, "Oh, what is this? Who's organizing it?" And then realized that so many people that I knew were all involved in the planning or the organizing or volunteering. And they were all doing different things at it, et cetera, and people were going to attend. So, I was just like, "Oh my God. Ah, cool, cool. Let me know what it's like." So, a couple of events happened, I can't remember all of the reasons that I couldn't go, but I remember thinking, "Oh, well, I'm going to have to get to one of those, at some point." But, being a busy person, having so many other responsibilities, I was like, "Okay, well, we'll see when that happens."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:19:10):

I needed to wait for my weekend off, that sort of thing to have, to have a free moment and also not have a booking for a show or not have anything else sort of going on. And so, I'd heard about the events, and they sounded really fun, and I was like, "Oh, this sounds like a great time." But I always had in the back of my mind, because of my daughter and because my ex-husband was really not cool, that I needed to be wary around events that I went to, especially if they have any kind of, like, public posting or publicity around them. So, I think I took a beat also to just sort of sit out and wait and see what the event would be like because I was worried that my ex-husband would find out I went to something like that, bring it to court and do something with that information.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:20:11):

Eventually, he did bring pictures of me in drag to a court case. So, I had a good reason to think that. My hesitancy around attending was a bit around that sort of, "Would this put me in danger, or my daughter and the custody of my daughter?" And there had been all those bathhouse raids, the men's bathhouse raids. So, there was some concern around that for me. But eventually, after they had a couple of events, and I heard about all the fun people are having, and I kind of saw that it wasn't something that people posted pictures about or that it was very... If you went, it was like going to Vegas and people didn't talk about what happened at the bathhouse. And that was cool for me. And, because one was coming up and I knew the organizers of the 2000 Pussies, and they required a bartender who had a Smart Serve, and they were just like, "Hey, you're a bartender. You have a Smart Serve. Do you want to volunteer and do that?" And I thought, well, this is it. It's karma, the universe has put it out there, it's time for me to attend and, in volunteering and sort of taking a bar job, doing something I felt comfortable doing already. And, when I'm in a situation where I'm feeling maybe a little bit hesitant, I like to have a job to do. This includes somebody's party that I've been invited to, and I know no one at. If they're just like, "Hey, could you pick up all the beer cases and move them over there or pick up the chairs?" Oh yeah, that's me, I'm on it. I like to have a little job to do.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:21:56):

So, that was sort of the perfect opportunity. And, also, I knew I wouldn't have to wait in line, I wouldn't have to pay, so that all of that kind of stuff, and I could still explore from a sort of safe distance, in a sense. And I could decide what I thought of it or what I did not think of it. I'm trying to think if I was in a relationship at the time. If I had been, I would have been monogamous at the time, so another reason to kind of have a job and be more like a fly on the wall just to see what would happen.

Alisha Stranges (00:22:40):

Yeah. Well, let's go into the night a bit more. I'm curious about, what was the look you were having to go for as a volunteer to be serving alcohol that night?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:22:57):

I don't know that there was necessarily a dress code beyond, I think, for the bartenders, beyond what you would usually want to have, which is some covered-toe shoes, making sure you don't drop anything, if there's any glass on the floor, that sort of thing. I was free to wear whatever outfit I wanted to, as long as I was wearing shoes. So, I wasn't in flip-flops like most of the other people. And because of my drag persona, I had a signature outfit that I liked to wear, and I thought also because my signature outfit was leather head-to-toe, it was very fitting for the bathhouse. It felt kinky a little bit, but also sexy, but I also got to have my persona on and also be fully-clothed. So, I was quite zipped up. I would have had full leather pants to the floor and you... I think you might have a picture of this, but I have lots of pictures of me in it because it was my signature drag outfit.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:24:11):

Leather pants with a fringe, a long fringe, really soft ones. A cowboy shirt made of leather and probably a black tank top right underneath, zipped-up and hidden. And perhaps, usually, a cowboy hat that went along with the outfit as the fringe just screamed cowboy and the shirt screamed cowboy. So, it had to all go together. And I think it was just the right combination of sexy and kinky but also business at the same time. I was covered, and I could just do my bartending stuff without any worry. You know, sling anything I wanted to in any direction I needed to at any time and be ready. Didn't consider whether I'd get really hot or not.

Alisha Stranges (00:25:02):

I was just going to ask. The leather, it's quite hot.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:25:05):

But I don't remember being hot, but like a leather t-shirt right. So, it wasn't like a full sleeve. It was just perfect for things 'cause the pants, it's okay. And they weren't tight leather pants, like we would consider. There were only two pairs ever made and they're Wayne Clark's, who was a Canadian Designer, quite famous Canadian Designer. And he'd made two pairs, and my dad happened to get one of them at an auction. And at some point, he gifted them to me, and they were just the most comfortable things. You'd think leather pants will be sticky and uncomfortable, but these were not, they were just amazingly made. So, lucky for me.

Alisha Stranges (00:25:47):

What about the colour palette? What colours were you're were you wearing? Your pants or—

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:25:53):

Just black. Black, black, and on black. Yeah. So, black cowboy hat, maybe a bit of, it had a band with some silver on it, but I would have dragged up to. So, with sideburns. I don't like facial hair in the mouth area when I do drag, it makes me look a little bit shady and less like my drag persona was, which is a little more suave. So, I went for the sideburns. I would have put on full facial or full sideburns.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:32):

What do you recall about what you might've been trying to feel or communicate to others in this outfit?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:26:43):

Well, I wanted to still have that, I'm you're a bit of a performance. Definitely, here I am as your bartender, but I'm special tonight. I'm not just in whatever outfit throwing you beers. I'm here in my full-on outfit. I've got my cowboy hat; I've got my sideburns. And I'm here to entertain you a little bit and just sort of trying to pull that friendliness out and like greeting people with enthusiasm, just getting into the spirit. Everybody was in such a good mood and having such a wonderful time. And yeah, I wanted to kind of amp it up, make everybody feel like they were having a great time. And I did have quite a lot of fans, so also just being there to sort of greet people and be that, a little bit of, I don't know, a bit of an entertainment, I suppose. Without doing any drag-style performance, really per se, but in a drag way, a drag bartender kind of.

Alisha Stranges (00:27:49):

Yeah, would you be comfortable to share the name of your drag persona?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:27:54):

Oh yeah, it's a Christopher Noelle. So, again, I always thought of it as sort of like the other side of my gender fluidity that I could like... So, that's why my name is still incorporated into my drag name. And Christopher was kind of a name proposed to me by another drag king, Flair, who was like "Oh, Noelle, it's like Christmas. So maybe Christopher." Again, kind of just like a reflection of me. So, it's still Noelle, but it's this other side. So, I was Christopher Noelle still me, but I'm "male-d" up a little bit. So, yeah. I think that was also great. In that space, maybe people would have called me he but...

Alisha Stranges (00:28:43):

Well, I'm curious what your reflections are on the space itself. Can you sort of describe it for me, once you're inside?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:28:53):

Yeah. Well, surprisingly to me it felt a lot like it's a house. It is an old house; it's a converted house. So, you really get that feeling. When you first walk in, it seems a bit more like a club. There's a place to check-in. You got to line up and go to a window and talk to somebody and get a key and a towel, etc. So, when you first walk in, you're like, "Oh, it's like the YMCA or something." When people are checking your ID and you're just in this weird hallway and you don't really know what's going to come next, but as soon as you walk through the doors into the space, there's like a hot tub room near there. I guess you're in sort of like a lounge with a bar area. And then there's like hot tubs and all kinds of stuff, but then there's staircases and doors and things going places. You start exploring and going up the staircase and you're like, "Oh my God, I've turned the corner into somebody's house."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:29:51):

And all of a sudden, it's like carpeted... I don't know if they were carpeted or not, but it's staircases and little rooms off the side. It was really fascinating to just... I had to go and find the place where the bar was going to be, which was actually up in between two staircases. So, I went upstairs and downstairs. I think I did a full tour out to the pool deck, through the change rooms that are just off the pool deck area. But yeah, just like a bit of a maze. I don't, I couldn't tell you after, I'm trying to recall it in my head where I went after I went up those stairs and what direction went where because it does become a bit of a blur and there's a lot of little spaces to go into.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:30:38):

So, I would have been, I would have taken a path. There's a quite a lot of big rooms on the second level, if I remember. So, there was a few rooms around where my bar would have been where they were having demonstrations or sort of like open rooms where sex acts might've been happening, or I know that there was like a spanking demonstration, that sort of thing. And those would've had been in bigger rooms that were close to the bar. And then I know that there were private areas and smaller rooms, which I didn't see into at that time, except for the ones that had been open, which there weren't that many of.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:21):

What time would your shift have started? How long would it last?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:31:27):

I can't really recall at what time my shift would have started; I would guess around 8:00 p.m. I know that it started to get dark. But that's not saying much in the fall. But then, because it was a bar shift, I know that the alcohol had to stop being served at 1:00 a.m. So, just considering I probably would have done about a four-hour shift.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:55):

Right.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:31:56):

I probably would have arrived early just to make sure everything was in order and make sure that I had connected with all the right people. So, I guess, my guesstimate is getting there around 8:00 p.m./8:30 p.m., just considering.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:11):

Would you have been working the bar by yourself or with somebody else or...?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:32:16):

Yeah, so this particular bar because of its placement... And I don't even recall, I don't know if there was a formal bar at that party or not. But this bar was up between some rooms. Just at the end of the hallway where there was a kind of folding-door cupboard right behind me, which was where we kept all of the stuff. They just set up a table in front of this cupboard. It was very much like an ad hoc bar. Yeah, you got it. So, and I was good at ad hoc bars. I think that's another reason. I did a lot of event bartending. We'd just be like, "Hey, this room is the place that the party's happening." So, we had to set up the tables, and set up the ice, and set up the glasses, and set up all the stuff. This is very, like, right up my alley. A weird bar, in a strange place. That's just what I did.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:10):

Right. I mean, which parts of the space would you gravitate towards would just kind of stay near the ad hoc bar or...?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:33:20):

Well during my shift, I definitely did do that. I remember, I guess I had some time early because I had time to look all around. I know that I went to the pool deck, just sort of looked around, maybe spent probably 10 or 15 minutes hanging out on the pool deck because it was an outdoor space. Really cool. Also I think I was thinking about, "Oh! Next time I come, what might I explore or what kinds of things would there be to do for me?"

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:33:52):

I think, I tried not to go into like... Obviously, people have their private areas, but I did check out any demonstration things that were happening. I remember there being some unusual games for socializing, etcetera, that I wouldn't have expected that a men's bathhouse, but I didn't really partake in those. I was curious about them, but I didn't hang out and find out what they were about. I think, I just didn't think that I'd have time. And they seemed a bit off brand for a bathhouse for me, but I realized that it's women. So, they are going to want to socialize and have different things going on. That this whole thing was a bit new to a lot of people and maybe they needed some things to make them feel more comfortable in a very sexy space. Hanging out with burlesque people and doing drag and that sort of thing you sort of, I don't know, it becomes sort of the norm. I remember, I've said this many times, but there's a specific person in our burlesque troupe, and I'd always say, "Well, it's not a party until [inaudible]." Pretty much, 'cause at every party they took all their clothes off.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:08):

Okay. I, you cut out a little bit. I missed the key words. You said, "It's not a party until..."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:35:16):

Until that particular person gets naked.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:20):

Okay, I see.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:35:21):

It would always happen. It was just invariably... They're burlesque people. That person gets naked. "Oh! Now it's a party, here we go."

Alisha Stranges (00:35:36):

What else would I want to ask here about space? Oh, the atmosphere... Sitting behind the bar, slinging drinks for folks, what was your perception of the atmosphere inside the club?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:35:49):

Everybody seemed to be having a great time. Everybody was really friendly. It was such a great place actually to be located, I think. Because I could have been isolated in a small room, but where I was, was like a thoroughfare. I was down the hallway and in front of a staircase and beside a room where not far from me, something was happening. People were, would all a sort of mill... They could be going upstairs, or going downstairs, or going to this room, or going... So, they'd all be walking by with their towels or their whatever outfit they had on. A lot of people were in towels. And then they'd just smile at me or say hi or whatever. Even if they weren't getting a drink, I was in this perfect place to just greet people.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:36:35):

And because I was quite a social person, as I said, I spent a lot of time going out and meeting people, just generally, I had a lot of people to say hi to. And a lot of people were walking by and being like, "Hey, what's up?" and "Hey, how are you?" and "Oh my God, I saw your show." Even people I didn't know, drag fans are coming and saying hi, so maybe it was just where I was, maybe it's because I was near the alcohol. But I think everybody seemed to be having just a great time, just revelling, and so many kinds of outfits and people. And it was just a great atmosphere.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:37:19):

People were there to have a good time and to be social. And I just felt like it was so welcoming and just whatever you wanted, and everybody was really kind to each other. It wasn't any, I don't know, unsavouriness of any kind. Everybody was just there to have a good time. Nobody was being messy, or rude, or I don't know, as sometimes happens at bars when alcohol becomes involved maybe a couple of people get in each other's faces or whatever. There was none of that, didn't feel like that.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:57):

I'm curious a little bit about being in the position you were, volunteering as a bartender. Was there any kind of special preparations going into the night, or given that you have the special occasions permit, restrictions to sort of adhere to, is there any kind of preparations involved?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:38:18):

All of the making sure that I have my Smart Serve training was something they wanted to make sure. So, I could make sure people didn't get too drunk, not even, like, tipsy, really. I think it was more like serve people, but just watch and make sure that they're not getting loaded. And because you can control the amount of... You realize who's coming back and kind of like keep a little bit track of that. And as a result of, I don't know whether it was because the cops arrived or whatever, but the one thing that we did was we'd close the bar down. I thought last call was going to be just before 1:00 p.m. or 1:00 a.m. And then I was going to close the bar around 1:00 a.m. and just lock everything up, but we in fact ended up closing up at 10 to 1:00 a.m., just to make sure.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:39:17):

And I think that that was actually something that had been in the mind of the organizer already. We might close up the bar a little bit early, just to make sure that we weren't going to be in any trouble areas. Alcohol was definitely an area of concern because it seemed to be something that the police were saying that was the reason why they raided bathhouses was because there was alcohol plus sex, and they wanted to make sure that people were consenting and it was all being safe, etcetera. There was some emphasis around safety of people and making sure people weren't drinking a lot. And I know that there were people at all of the doors to make sure that no alcohol went outside or went places that it wasn't supposed to go, quote unquote. But I wasn't actually aware of that 'cause it wasn't my job. It was more like in the serving and in the putting away of the things, and just making sure that I actually had that training — the Smart Serve training — which in and of itself is like, you don't get people drunk.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:23):

Yeah. Well, I want to invite you into a little exercise here with me to try to get access to whatever sense memories might be remaining.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:40:35):

Yeah, for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:37):

So, and I'll do it with you. If I can invite you to sort of let your weight of your body sink into your seat. Yeah. Take a sip of water.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:40:50):

All right.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:53):

And letting your arms rest in your lap. Yeah. Take a breath, soften your gaze, or even close your eyes, if you feel comfortable to. Just take a couple breaths in and out, relaxing your jaw and with each inhale, allowing yourself to re-inhabit the space of the Pussy Palace. And in your mind's eye, sort of traveling back to one particular location, doesn't matter which one comes to mind, whichever one comes to mind as a perfect one to work with.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:41:52):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:41:52):

From this sort of contemplative, embodied space, look around and tell me what it is you can see.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:42:09):

I see the place where I was bartending. Looking down the hallway and up the staircase, near the banister. I see a brown, wood banister that goes up the stairs and the pretty carpeted steps that go up to who knows where. Some magical place. And kind of a humidity in the place. It was really warm. And you could tell that there were baths and water in there somewhere. So that kind of humid feeling a bit, lots of noise of chatter. Quite a dark place, the walls, a lot of wood and not a bright hallway at all. Very much like an old house, somebody's old house. Reminded me a little bit of the place where I went when I was a young, to my pediatricians was an old house up on St. Clair [Ave.] in Forest Hill. I guess it was a Forest Hill-ish region. It's a big giant house, near Casa Loma, actually.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:43:29):

That sort of feeling of, sort of a bit musty, old, and just people streaming by in their towels, smiling. I remember one particular person who I knew through friends, who I hadn't seen in a while, strolling by in her flip-flops and her deck shoes and a towel just around her waist. A lot of people like that saying, "Hey." Yeah, I guess I was wondering a lot where people were going, where were they off to? What was the next destination in the maze of things that were happening?

Alisha Stranges (00:44:14):

And if you could distil this space you're describing, if you could distil it into a single colour, what's the prominent colour that's coming through?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:44:32):

Wood-brown, like deep wood-brown, not orange-y but walnut.

Alisha Stranges (00:44:40):

And you sort of described some of the smells maybe, but I'm wondering if there are any other sort of lingering odours around you?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:44:53):

Chlorine. People had definitely been in the pool and people had taken showers, so soap. And then sweat too. Definitely people had been exerting themselves, and they were wearing different scents. I don't really remember a lot of scent but some subtle ones maybe that people were wearing, but mainly just smelled like soap, chlorine, and sweat. And yeah. And beer because I was at the bar.

Alisha Stranges (00:45:34):

And what about, what can you hear?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:45:46):

Lots of things going on. Faint music, people laughing, talking... Even like, I'm pretty sure far off I can hear, like, smacks. I think there was some kind of spanking demonstration going on somewhere close. Seeing people watching and chatting with each other. Whispers, talking about where they were going to go next or

what was going on. Definitely, people were making out or whatever. So, some sexy noises coming from different places, but who knew where? I was in this sort of like transitional space, but yeah, sometimes in the hallway, things were happening. But mostly I feel like there was often a line of people waiting to get whatever drink they had, and they were eagerly awaiting the bar and chatting about what was going to happen next and getting excited about that kind of stuff. So, lots of chatter.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:58):

And if you could reach out right now and some part of your body could brush up against some part of this space, what are you touching? What are its textures?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:47:12):

Well, right behind where the bar was a folding, a bifold door, set of bi-folding doors. You'd think of it as like a closet in your house. You have the two doors that would open like that. And they were like a shutter door, the ones that had the sort of slats down them. So, that was right behind me. So, if I backed up, I would touch that slatted back area. And then it wasn't a very friendly corner. It had the table, but it was just the end of a hallway. I think there might have been a radiator or something beside me, just like this weird little corner and wood trim on the walls. And very much like an old house might be, but a very decorative one that had a lot of moulding and trim.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:02):

Right, right. And this is a bit of a strange one maybe, but if somehow you could taste this space, what would its flavour be?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:48:15):

Probably salty, all that sweat. It's tastes like a bar a little bit, a bit sweaty, a bit of beer, a bit of people.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:34):

And you can let that go. Open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you for taking me there.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:48:46):

This is all obviously in the peaceful time before the cops arrive.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:51):

Yes, we'll get to that now actually. So, we know at 12:45 a.m., five men, all plainclothes police officers, entered the club and stayed about 90 minutes. Were you still in the Pussy Palace when they arrived?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:49:07):

I was, I was.

Alisha Stranges (00:49:10):

What were you doing when the police arrived?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:49:12):

I was still on the bar. I would've been probably giving the last of the drinks out. Not to my knowledge. So, it would've been 12:45 a.m., so I would've been getting ready and telling people it was last call at the bar and that drinks were going to get cut off just before 1:00 a.m. and to be prepared. That's it. However, many people were in line, get set and ready for that kind of thing. And then not long after that, because it was 12:45 a.m., I would've done last call exactly probably on that minute. And not more than a couple of minutes later than that, or maybe even a minute, rushing up the stairs came Richard [Aitcheson] and was like, "Shut the bar down. Close it up. It's last call, serve these two people. That's it, cut it off. Sorry. You're the last two."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:50:08):

And I was like, "I just told them all last call was at five to 1:00 a.m.," or whatever it was. I just did the call and I told everybody in line to get something. "Nope. Those two people. Shut it down. I'm sorry, go." So, I was like, "Cool. You, you, okay. Two more bottles. Bye." We did have to put them in cups again. So, I guess that would've been consideration. No glass. I didn't think of that earlier, but we would've poured out all the beers into cups for people. And so, that was it. And then it was last call and I had to just start cleaning up. So cleared the cups, cleared the beer, and because this cupboard thing was right behind me, just opened it up and started loading that stuff in. And it didn't take very long because the bar wasn't very complicated. It was cups, beer, opener. I don't recall serving any mixed drinks or anything. I think it was like the beer bar and that was it. So, really simply done, whiz bang. And by the time any police officers arrived on, I guess it would've been the second level of the club, that bar was shut and the cupboard behind me was locked with a padlock. I locked it all up. Cleared the table.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:36):

So, how did you become aware of the police presence then? Was it when they came up the stairs?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:51:41):

Yeah, exactly. When the organizer came up the stairs and was just like, "Time to shut it down." I think there must have been a buzz. It was sort of like, "There's cops, there's cops," but I don't know that I clocked that because I was busy serving. But definitely the moment I became aware was that I was basically told, "Shut the bar."

Alisha Stranges (00:52:09):

But it wasn't sort of shared at that moment why, just that you must close it now?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:52:15):

Well, I believe it was like, "Cops are here, we're shutting the bar. Shut it down now."

Alisha Stranges (00:52:21):

Right. Did you have an interaction with the police at all?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:52:26):

I don't believe that I did. Well, I guess it would've been a very fleeting one. It's not strong in my memory, but I do remember that they did come to the bar, past the bar. They would've seen it and checked it. And I was like, "Yep. The bar *was* here." I'm standing at an empty table, a clear table, just standing behind it and being like, "Everything's in here, it's all locked up, all done." And then they were like, "Okay." Like nothing, there

was nothing. I'm like, "Nothing to see there." Right? That sort of was the vibe from them. Just like they wanted to check out where the bar was. There was nothing there to see. So, they moved on relatively quickly. But I for sure talked to them for a sec.

Alisha Stranges (00:53:18):

What did you do after that? You shut the bar down. They come up; they check out. Everything's fine. What was your next move?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:53:26):

I don't know. Honestly, I think all of the fun vibe of everybody being smiley and feeling great and whatever was just like sucked out of the place in a second. And people were like, "What the hell's going on?" And I was curious to know what was going on with other people and what was happening. And I just heard... Like, I had to clean up the table and make sure that things were put away. So, I would've finished doing that and then talked to the organizers. So, I probably got some inside scoop from that. And then there were just people talking about where the cops were, what they were doing. And I heard somebody say like, "Oh, they're questioning some people in the sling room."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:54:13):

And I was like, "What the hell? Why? Like, what about? What could have been happening in the sling room?" That seems like a weird place. Immediately because of my Smart Serve, because I was a bartender, because we had been concerned about it, because of past men's bathhouse raids, my brain was like, "Alcohol? No alcohol in the sling room. This couldn't have been alcohol." So, I was curious, why would they even go there? But it was just trying to understand where they were, what they were doing, why they were there, what the heck was the problem.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:54:51):

Because especially as the bartender, I was like, I didn't do anything... I was by the book. And in fact, we were shut right down. There's no way. I didn't serve anybody too many drinks. I didn't this, I didn't that, kind of thing. So just trying to ascertain with the organizers like, "Didn't I cover everything? I think I covered everything. Did I cover everything, and what could have been wrong?" So, because we didn't know what the problem was and there wasn't a stated thing, "Oh, we're here because this, that, and the other thing happened," I think the only thing that I heard sort of in passing was, "Oh, somebody brought a drink onto the pool deck."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:55:33):

I was like, "One person? How'd they get by so and so?" I can't remember who was at the door. I was like, "These people are at the doors." Obviously, walked upstairs and out of bars all the time with drinks. But this was really locked down and people were sort of inspected as they went out. Maybe they said it was water and they lied, or who knows what. Like, I couldn't understand.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:01):

And so, your ad hoc bar was the only bar?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:56:08):

I don't know because I was sort of like, "Here's your place, here's the thing you're doing." There might have been other kinds of alcohol being served, but I wouldn't know. And I've been back to the place since. I've been to Club Toronto/Oasis [Aqualounge] pool bar since. So, I do think the placement of the current bar is what's making me question, like, was there a bar there? Were they serving alcohol there? I don't know. I believe some of The Scandelles performed, and I can't remember which version of it, which version of the Pussy Palace it was, but I would've gone to watch my friends perform in a performance space. But I think after knowing the cops were there, trying to figure out, make sure that I had done everything correctly as I needed to do for my job, and then finding out where they were, what was going on and seeing like, "Okay, it doesn't involve the alcohol, it doesn't involve my job. I should probably just get the heck out of here."

[crosstalk]

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:57:38):

But I don't know if they let people leave. I can't remember whether we were held, like not let to leave. Because they were in their questioning people or whatever. So, I might have hung out for the entire 90 minutes, but yeah, it's hard to recall. But I'm sure that I would've, as I was saying before, I would've been concerned that because of my daughter and my ex-husband being very concerned with what my life was like and what I did in my spare time, if I came across the cops too much, that wouldn't be good for me. So, definitely making sure that I did my responsibilities as far as Smart Serve had been concerned. And yeah, I would've tried to get the heck out of there as fast as possible, but I absolutely cannot recall whether I stayed until the cops left. But part of me thinks that I did because it was like, "Oh, now they're gone." I feel like I was there then. So long ago now.

Alisha Stranges (00:58:50):

I know it is. I can appreciate the difficulty in those kind of minute details. And especially at a moment that was so impactful.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:59:02):

Yeah, it would've been stressful too. So, "Where are the cops? What do we need to do? What needs to be looked after?" And being a volunteer and a friend of the organizers, of the key organizers, I was just like, "I am on top of whatever you need me to do. Whatever you need right now, I am on it. Let's go." So yeah, like I said, shut down the bar like so fast, I'd never shut down a bar so fast. So yeah, I was just on top of stuff, and I would've definitely tried to just be a helper, figure things out at that moment.

Alisha Stranges (00:59:34):

And it was later revealed that before the plainclothes police officers entered the club, there were two women police officers who were undercover, who were inside surveilling folks. How did it feel to learn later that there were these sort of outsider folks surveilling everyone?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (00:59:54):

Well, I think I remember here that actually on the night, because that was, I think one of the things that the male police officers, "Oh, well we didn't come in here for no reason. There were undercover officers in here and they're the ones that told us that we needed to come in," kind of thing. So, I did know at the time, and I remember being like, "What did they see? Who did what? What could have happened? Who went somewhere

with alcohol? I didn't give it to them. Who let them out? They couldn't have got out that [inaudible] door to actually have a cup. They weren't supposed to bring their cups."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:00:36):

So, I was just like, "Well, if they were here and they saw everything, then they knew that we were having just a nice time, and everybody was being nice and really great. And nobody was messy, and nobody was mean, and everybody was in a great mood. Couldn't, they have told them that? Like, how nice we all were and what a great time we were having, and how everyone was being really safe and nice and consensual with each other?" I think that was what I was just like, "I want to talk to them. What did they see?" I couldn't believe that if anybody had been attending the event, that they would've thought anything was wrong or bad. And to this day, do we even know what they accused them of?

Alisha Stranges (01:01:29):

Well, yes, there were violations laid in the hours, like the minutes before and while the police were there, but I'm in line with you. It's a bit confusing as to what they were trying to target people for, specifically. What about after the raid? So, the night ends, eventually you leave, but we know that there was a lot of community activism and of course, fundraising for the legal defence. Were you involved in any part of this part of the process?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:02:15):

Well, I would've known about it. I don't recall all of the things that happened around it, but I do know that there were some fundraisers. I'm not sure if I performed at one. I probably would've volunteered to. But whether I did or not, I cannot recall. It doesn't stand out in my mind, but I did follow the case through friends, especially certain people attended a lot of... They actually went to court all the time. And as I said, the two organizers who were charged, I lived in the same building as they did. So, we were neighbours, so I could catch up on what was happening. And I recall fundraisers and just sort of being like, "This totally sucks. I can't believe you have to go to court over all of this."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:03:11):

And I definitely know that one of them was like really, obviously it's really stressful and makes you really unhappy. But they were very like, "This is awful, but my name's on the thing, so it's on me." And they took that responsibility. So, I felt like, wow, it's a lot. But yeah, they had a lot of support in the community and a lot of people were going and being at the court and being with them and rallying around them to do the fundraising. It was cool. That was cool. And then I heard through the grapevine again, I can't remember who initially said, "Oh yeah, the court case was amazing. The judge gave all the cops a smack down and gave them an hour-long lecture."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:04:07):

I was like, that's awesome. I don't know which of my friends told me that, but I was just so jazzed about it. I was like, "Yeah! Yeah!" And then the organizers got to be the Grand Marshals of the [Pride] parade. And I was like, "Yeah, yeah, Pride. That's it. Here we go." I don't know. Pride to me, and I said it this year, to me it's always been a protest. And so, I felt really proud of my friends being the Grand Marshals that year, because that was a turning point. I don't recall bathhouse raids. I remember them happening before that to men's bathhouses, but I don't remember them happening, like, hearing about them after that. So, to me, it was a turning point, and it was like a protest in a sense.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:05:03):

And them being in the parade made it a protest parade a little bit. So, over the years, I quite went off the Pride Sunday parade. I don't generally attend it anymore. I'm a trans marcher, I'm a dyke marcher. I go to the protest marches. And so, that year, it really felt like, yep, they're representing something that I feel really connected to. And people that I feel connected to, and I feel proud of, and they fought hard, and they took responsibility for that, and they went to court. And they had to go through that hell. And I was like, yeah. And they've been vindicated. So yeah, this is awesome. It was a great year for that.

Alisha Stranges (01:05:53):

When you made the decision to volunteer that night, what were you hoping to experience and how did your expectations for the night compare with your lived experience of it?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:06:10):

I guess I knew a little bit what to expect because I'd heard from my friends a little bit, but, at the same time, you can't get an idea for the atmosphere and really what it feels like until you're there. Sorry. Repeat the question, because now I'm going off into another thought. Sorry.

Alisha Stranges (01:06:34):

That's okay. Yeah, I can definitely repeat. So, I'm curious about what your, sort of asking you to be in two places, before and after. What were you expecting for the night, and then looking back, how did your expectations compare with what your lived experience ended up being?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:06:54):

Yeah, well, like I said, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. It seemed like it might be a bit of a... There's sort of like a group of people who go off into private rooms and then sort of a regular party for everybody else where there was like some mingling and little games and performances and music and dancing. I believe I did some dancing. And so, the beginning of the night did seem a bit like that. I was like checking in with people. It was very much like there was a bar, there was some stuff going on in the main room, some dancing, and that sort of thing. So, like, okay, cool, cool, cool. But then I was not expecting so many women to be just completely undressed or just walking around in towels and very much like this bathhouse vibe. I was like, "Oh, okay, cool."

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:07:54):

Like, everybody's not just here to browse and to see what this thing is like. People are actually like going to rooms and things are happening. So, it was a lot sexier than I thought it would be, more outwardly. More exhibition-y than I expected. So, people having their doors open or having rooms with demonstrations, but that they were wide open, like a whole 20 people watching somebody getting spanked. "Okay, cool." Those were things I was just like, "Oh, I couldn't have pictured this exact thing in this exact space." And the makeup of the place, the fact that it was so much like a home, like a house, an old house, was unexpected to me. I had pictured it being much more like a sauna. Like a lot of very clinical rooms where they could hose things down and whatever, but there was a lot more wood than I expected and a lot more, I don't know. To me, it reminds me a little bit of this place, it was like a fun house that I went when I was a kid. Just like a weird, that had lots of little hallways and little rooms off it. That you're like, "What happens in here?" It wasn't a fun house. You ever went to this thing; it was called the Mad Hatter's Tea Party?

Alisha Stranges (01:09:25):

I didn't grow up in Toronto, so I don't know about that.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:09:26):

Okay. It was a weird, weird place for children's birthday parties. They had lots of little rooms and different things happened in the different rooms. Things that children only dream about, like ketchup and mustard fights and things like that. So, there'd be a room just for that and a room for the water fight. And a room for, we played snowball fights with marshmallows, and things like that. There was food throwing and, so it was a long hallway with little rooms you go off and do messy things in. To me, the bathhouse is a little like that. It's just these little doors and then there was something happening behind one, but you didn't know what.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:10:15):

And a bit of a maze. So, I couldn't have pictured that, and I couldn't have pictured how much like, Honest Eds it is a little bit. Like a store or a place where there's all these weird levels that you don't know how you got there. And this room off another room with a staircase going somewhere that you're like, "Where does that go?" Always a new place to discover. I didn't expect, I don't know, the pool to be so full of people. And people were having sex beside the pool, on the pool deck, and that sort of thing. Just going at it. And I was like, "Whoa!" I kind of thought there would be these clinical, private rooms and a lot of people, there would just be a sort of quiet hallway. "Shh, everybody's having sex in here." It was much more like, "No everybody's having sex everywhere."

Alisha Stranges (01:11:15):

Okay. Gotcha.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:11:19):

But that's great. I was like, "Wow, this is awesome," because I had thought the community was a lot more buttoned up than it was. That's the impression that you get from the outside a little bit.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:31):

Right.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:11:34):

I was curious, I thought it might be like that. There might be some pockets of it. Would I see it? Would I not? But, oh yeah, it's there.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:43):

Well, we're nearing the end here. Just a couple more questions for you. I'm curious about your impression. What do you think the intent behind the Pussy Palace was, it's sort of reason for being?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:11:59):

Well, I mean, there was definitely, well the guys get to have a night and they get to go there any night that they want, and they can just have sex with whoever. There aren't spaces like that for women. What, you don't think that we want to have casual sex? You don't think that we want to just be sexual, are we not sexual? Part of what I thought might happen was that impression. Like, "Oh, will everybody be quietly, as if they had gone

home, having sex in little rooms?” The purpose of the thing was definitely there. It was like, “Yeah, no, we want to have this space and we want to have this opportunity. We want to be able to do like the guys do, have that be an option for us.”

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:13:02):

Why is it only once a year or once every six months, even? I think, was also the thought. It’s like, this should happen often, and we don’t have to have our own club because that’s probably not sustainable and etcetera. But let’s make space for this because it’s just not available. I hung out with a lot of very sex positive people, but pretty much all of the parties that were happening for people that wanted to engage in something like this would have been private parties. With a smaller group of people who would have been the same people a lot of the time.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:13:44):

So, this was much more like anybody and everybody can come and see and experience this. It isn’t a private party thing. You don’t have to be part of this subgroup of people. We’re just women who want to have sex, and/or watch people have sex. We didn’t have that opportunity, absolutely ever, ever. Live, two women having sex in front of you? Never going to happen. Unless you caught people in the bathroom at some bar or something, and it wasn’t on purpose. So that, I think, was just like, “We’re allowed to have that. There should be some of that for us.” So, and those people who were part of the private party community were definitely part of this group. It was really nice to just make it not be private. Make it be part of what women did, queer women.

Alisha Stranges (01:14:47):

Yeah.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:14:49):

Yeah, and swingers can do it. I mean, for God’s sake. For years, like, oh yeah, it’s the gay men get to do it, gay men couples. Straight couples have swingers’ clubs, but nope, not lesbians. It’s like, what? It’s really weird. So, I’m pretty sure it was born out of that, and it definitely achieved its purpose.

Alisha Stranges (01:15:10):

We know that the Pussy Palace, it’s been described as a space that was publicly inclusive, as you say, of lesbian women, queer cis women, and trans folks. From your vantage point behind the bar, what’s your impression of the relationship between these differently gendered groups at the Pussy Palace?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:15:35):

I didn’t see any separation between the groups. It was mainly cisgendered women. But anybody who didn’t fit that description was just another one of the people that were there. Between the gender fluid folks and the... I was there in drag and definitely people were in their leathers and their butch outfits and their whatever outfits they were going for. I definitely, at one of my other volunteer gigs, I noticed people a little bit more because I had more close interaction with them, as opposed to just the bar. Who comes to the bar, comes to the bar, and you don’t interact necessarily with everybody as much. I wasn’t as mingle-y that time, so I wouldn’t have seen all of the spots, but it just seemed like we’re all here together. We’re all the same. There wasn’t like, this is the group of this people, at all.

Alisha Stranges (01:16:41):

Yeah.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:16:42):

I thought it was so great. Later on, I feel like there was much more awareness of who people were and what their gender identities were and la, la, la, la, la. This was just like, “No, anybody who’s not a gay man. If you don’t identify as a cisgendered male, this is for you.” This is all the other people and as a heterosexual couple or whatever, that kind of thing. The spaces that were already available for those groups of people who wanted to be swingers. It was like everybody who’s excluded from those spaces is included here.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:18):

I see.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:17:19):

That’s how it felt. It was just like be who you are and do your thing. Everybody was in such a good mood. Like I said, just no evil vibes at all.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:30):

Well, by way of conclusion, I know that you later attended and volunteered in different capacities to other Pussy Palaces. Is there anything you want to say about reflecting on those experiences, post raid?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:17:50):

I mean, I guess the thing about the court case and then the judge rendering that judgment and giving the lecture to the cops made it feel like that wasn’t something that was going to happen again. That if anything would happen like that, there better be a really good reason. There better be a real violation and that the organizers were really good the first time I had been part of it. I knew that they were being very cautious, that they were being really conscientious. When they came in and tried to catch us undercover or whatever they basically found nothing. We hadn’t done anything wrong. I was like, “That’s it, we’re good, like, yay!” Now we’re free to go and it’s not going to be a stress and I wasn’t so worried anymore. I wasn’t worried it was going to get raided again, I was going to be questioned, and then I’d be taken, and then that would make trouble for my life. So, I felt a lot more free to then get a little more undressed. On another one I did, my volunteer gig was lap dancing. So, a lot more contact-y and whatever, but still wanting to stay in charge of my own space and my own body. Lap dancing gave me that. I can touch people, but they can’t touch me, necessarily. We have a little consenting relationship, but it’s a fleeting one. Lasts a dance, kind of thing and I did it also in my drag outfits. Well, a very skimpy drag outfit. Like a jockstrap and stuff, but I did a little strip tease kind of thing and that was really fun. It was a little more interactive, and I felt like more in that state of undress and much more part of the happenings. I can’t remember what other events or how many events I went to. I’m pretty sure that I went another time that I didn’t volunteer. I remember going in the pool, but it’s starting to blend with maybe another party where I went with the burlesque troupe after it was Oasis [Aqualounge]. I’m just getting a big blur right now.

Alisha Stranges (01:20:22):

No problem. That’s okay.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:20:24):

But I think it was definitely like, cool! And then they just kind of stopped happening. But, then Oasis [Aqualounge] came around and they had actual women's nights. Sapphic, whatever night, and different things like that. I did attend probably, I don't know, six years ago or something like that. So, checked it out, been there a couple of times. Gone swimming in the heated pool, it's really nice.

Alisha Stranges (01:20:57):

Is that kind of a different vibe than the Pussy Palace, the sapphic nights?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:21:01):

Oh yeah, for sure. Just not a lot of people. Not really... It didn't feel as much like an event. It didn't feel as exciting. It didn't feel... Like, they definitely didn't have as much stuff going on. It was not as well organized, maybe. And just because, I guess, it was just becoming a regular night. At one point, I think it was once a week. So, it was just a mixed bag of people because close to Ryerson [University], so there's a lot of miscellaneous people, people I hadn't seen before. As opposed to before, when it was like, it's the tight-ish-knit community. It would have been people you already saw out and social. Then their friends were added. You kind of had a two degrees of separation from people. It was very much that community, whereas later it was like, "Oh, who are all of these people and where did they come from?" It was so open and frequent.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:22:08):

They didn't obviously put on lots of, like, fisting demonstrations and... Like, how do you do bondage and how do you do this? All these activities weren't happening either. It was just like, hey, it's the bathhouse, like any other night, but you could come as well. So, yeah, and it's nice to have that, I think, for our community to have that sort of like, "Hey, here it is, it's the big night, we're all going to go." That really brings that energy there, as opposed to, it's not a special occasion. It's just a weekly thing and it usually happens, or even if it's once a month thing.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:22:52):

And it wasn't organized by the same people. It wasn't the same group putting it on, so it just didn't have the same vibe later. While it was a fun place to go, it just seemed like, "Oh, it's a bar with naked people and a pool that you could swim naked." Less like a sexy, fun night that you kind of gear up for and think about what you're going to wear and who you're going to see. Maybe, who you might want to randomly have sex with one time. Be like, "Well, that would be a good night to have sex with so-and-so. I don't really want to get down in any other way, but that would be fun."

Alisha Stranges (01:23:37):

Well, is there anything else about your experience that you want to share that maybe my questions just didn't invite you to speak to?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:23:50):

I don't know. I feel like I felt concern for my friends, and then I got really angry afterwards. Knowing that some of my friends who were in, I would say, vulnerable positions, completely naked, were questioned in their states of undress or whatever it was. I remember being really angry during the proceedings. The fact that my friends were being taken to court. The fact that they had had the audacity to just have fully uniformed officers. Fully-clothed, is what I'm looking for. Fully-clothed officers questioning pretty much, naked people

or almost completely naked people, women, in the place where they were, just a moment ago, having sex, in a sexual position, etcetera, I was just like, “How is this okay?”

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:24:55):

It was the beginning of my erosion and really becoming aware of... No, I guess I had had eroded trust in the police before that, but because of bathhouse raids, specifically, that really started making me wary of cops because I didn't know why they had such a problem with the gay community. What exactly were men doing in the bathhouse that offended the police so much? And what was it any business of theirs where we had sex, and what we wanted to do, and what kind of sex we wanted to have? It just made me really angry.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:25:45):

Specifically, when a bunch of people were just out to have a good time and really tried so hard. And just did everything they could to make everything be perfect, and right, and on board. Making sure your bartenders have Smart Serve and all that kind of stuff. Having guards everywhere. Doing everything that you needed to do. And they were still being taken to court and dragged through the mud. They had to spend all this... It was really expensive, etcetera, etcetera. It was just so unfair. So, I think that was a prevalent thought in the community and that's why people started just being like, we're going to raise money. This is not cool, and we're all going to stand up. People went to court and sat in court. And we got to fill up the court with people. We got to be there, we're all going to just show face and be there.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:26:36):

I was like, I support you, I love you. I cannot go and be a face at the court because I don't want to be seen on television. I don't want a record of me to be anywhere, but I'm here for you and let me know what I can do. I think it created quite a lot of interesting dialogue, as well. It was supposed to be a fun party, but it made us think about things. About politics, about the police. So, I think it was an interesting and really historic, looking back on it, time. And like I said, it just felt like the end of bathhouse raids happened after that court case went through. It was just like, nope, no more of this. It's really not cool and you don't have a real reason to do it. And you better, if you come and stand in front of me ever again, better be for a really good reason.

Alisha Stranges (01:27:41):

Right.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:27:41):

And that seemed like actual justice to me. So, while I was so angry, I was absolutely on this other side of the card when it was done, thrilled beyond belief. And it really felt like a big win. So yeah, kudos to all of the people who did go and sit in court and show face all the time.

Alisha Stranges (01:28:06):

So, is this where you want to leave it?

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:28:09):

Maybe, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:28:11):

Okay. Well, thank you. Thank you so much, Noelle-

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:28:15):

No problem.

Alisha Stranges (01:28:15):

For taking this generous time out to sort of sit and reflect back to something that I know happened so long ago, but it's an honour to bear witness to your story, and I really appreciate your vulnerability.

Noelle Campbell-Smith (01:28:32):

Thank you. Thanks for making this project happen, really. It's really important, as I said before, it's like a historic moment and it really did make some changes. And it's from the lesbian community. That's a really big thing, especially in Toronto, but in Canada, I'm sure. And I'm sure that it has affected other cases outside of that, so it's really important to me. I don't know if it's the reason, but I think of Toronto as like the queerest place on earth. I've been to London, England. I've been to San Francisco, New York, places that are billed as really queer-friendly places. Ibiza. I'm trying to think of other places that I've been to that are billed as queer-friendly. Provincetown. Okay, maybe Provincetown is that one block or the three blocks, is queerer than Toronto all in of itself. But still, like, it's such a queer place, and I don't know if it would be quite so open, and just like a place to feel really safe being your queer self if it hadn't been for that change because we were afraid of the police. There were people who were very wary of them and if that hadn't changed, I think that sense of safety wouldn't be the same. This really is going to detail that and say something about a pivotal part of Toronto's history.