

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Olivia Chow and Bob Gallagher
Conducted on June 16, 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: Chow is an Asian woman and former Canadian politician who was a federal New Democratic Party member of Parliament (2006-2014), Toronto City Councillor (1998-2005), and Metro Toronto Councillor (1991-1998). Gallagher is a white, gay political activist, strategist, and academic who worked for Chow as her executive assistant while she was a Toronto City Councillor. At the time of the interview in 2021, Chow was the Executive Director of the Institute for Change Leaders, and Gallagher sat on the Institutes' Board of Directors, while working for the United Steelworkers as Head of Communications and Political Action. The interview mostly concerns their experiences fundraising for the defense fund in the aftermath of the Pussy Palace police raid on September 14, 2000. They discuss how their experience in politics and fundraising helped them assist fundraising efforts, how the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee organized themselves post-raid, their histories of LGBTQ activism in Toronto, and other topics. The narrators speak about Toronto in the 1980s but dedicate most of their interview to Toronto in 2000.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Activism; Politics; Fundraising; Organizing; Police; Gay Bashing; Media.

Alisha Stranges (00:00):

All right. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History project and we're here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Olivia Chow and Bob Gallagher on June 16th, 2021. Olivia and Bob, are you both in Toronto?

Bob Gallagher (00:18):

Yes, I'm in Toronto.

Olivia Chow (00:20):

Yes, I am.

Alisha Stranges (00:21):

Okay. So, Olivia and Bob are both also in Toronto and they're going to tell us a little bit about how they mobilized their support for the LGBTQ+ community in the aftermath of the police raid on the Pussy Palace Bathhouse in the fall of 2000. So, Olivia and Bob, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Olivia Chow (00:42):

Yes, you do.

Bob Gallagher (00:43):

Yes, you do.

Alisha Stranges (00:45):

Thanks so much. So, before we get into your involvement in the community activism following the raid, I was hoping that both of you could start off by introducing yourself. Of course, many will already know everything they need to know about you, but in case there's a listener out there who doesn't, could you tell us your name, your preferred gender pronouns and anything you think would be important for the listener to know about you in the context of this interview? Bob, did you want to start?

Bob Gallagher (01:19):

Sure. My name is Bob Gallagher. My pronouns are he/him. I've been involved in the queer community in Toronto, pretty much since 1977, so I have a long history dating back prior to the bath raids around The Body Politic and then becoming quite active, involved in the bath raids in '81. And after that in a number of organizations in the queer community, organizing various activities, organizations, and founded a number of them, including the campaign The Coalition for Equal Families, the campaign The Canadians for Equal Marriage, Lesbian Gay Bi [Trans]Youth Line, and a number of other organizations. And as we had mentioned, just prior to this conversation, I was also a director on the Buddies in Bad Times LGBT theatre company. And also, my other part of my life is working in politics. And I've worked in politics for a number of years with Olivia Chow and her late husband, Jack Layton, and the things we're going to talk about today, very much stem from the work that Olivia and I did in her office as a city councillor and a Metro councillor.

Alisha Stranges (02:49):

Thanks so much, Bob. Olivia, are you all set to give us a little introduction of yourself?

Olivia Chow (02:55):

Yeah, I'm just trying to, my laptop is not agreeable this morning, so I'm on my phone.

Alisha Stranges (03:04):

I see.

Olivia Chow (03:05):

Nothing new here. Is that okay?

Alisha Stranges (03:08):

Yeah. Looks good.

Olivia Chow (03:09):

This is an oral, anyway. Yeah. My name is Olivia Chow, pronouns she/her. And I was a school trustee, city councillor, and then a member of parliament, and through the years I've learned a great deal from people like Bob Gallagher and have been an ally to many of the campaigns he just mentioned because we worked together since 14, 15 years. And through those years we did a lot of the campaigns together. So, I don't need to repeat all of those, but so I'm just going to say ditto to above. Not to that extent of what Bob was doing, but at least on the side, as an ally, maybe doing about 10 percent of what he was involved with.

Alisha Stranges (04:17):

I see, thank you so much. So, I want to invite you both to travel back in time to the fall of 2000. And this was when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host what they called the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was at the time of the fourth installment of the Pussy Palace, a series of exclusive bathhouse events for lesbian women, queer women, and trans folk in Toronto. Maybe both of you can take turns to touch on how you first heard that the Pussy Palace had been raided by Toronto police and what your initial reactions were to that news.

Bob Gallagher (04:56):

I found out pretty much right away. I think Lorelee [Gillis] contacted me, if not that night, the next morning. I remember she was still very upset and concerned. So, there hadn't been much time between when she was telling me about it, and when the actions actually happened. So, I had heard about that. I had in fact been involved with the organizing of the Pussy Palace indirectly in terms of giving them advice back in '98, when it first started, and then back in 2000. But really my involvement started when Lorelee [Gillis] contacted me and said that they had in fact been raided, and she knew my history with the bath raids back in '81. She knew my involvement with various police activities, involved with the Police Services Board. So, I think she kind of reached out to me for a lending hand and somebody in the community who could kind of give her a little bit of advice. But anybody who knows Lorelee [Gillis] knows that she doesn't really need any advice. She just needs a little encouragement with her own spunk and vigour.

Alisha Stranges (06:18):

Olivia, is there anything you want to add?

Olivia Chow (06:21):

Yeah. Ever since I was elected, I was always fighting for justice that was mistreated by the police. Early on the first situation was Sophia Cook, who is a Black woman that was shot at the back, ended up in the wheelchair, and subsequent shooting of Black men. So, I have a long record of dealing with police. And during the time when I was a Metro councillor, I dealt with the police budget for 10 years and, at one time, even served on the Police Services Board. So, on policing matter, I have a great deal of interest because they have enormous amount of power and, occasionally, they misuse it. So, I remember getting phone calls and I remember, I think they were in front of 52 division. One of the police headquarters.

Olivia Chow (07:42):

And I wanted to make sure that the media know. That they were there. And because having presence of other people, other folks could assist. So, I was phoning every media outlet because it was very late. This is before emails and text messaging. It was old-fashioned phone call, phone these and get down there. There's like, there are people in front. So, I remember those calls really well. It was late, I think. Yeah, it was last minute. It was slightly frantic, but yeah, that was my first recollection of the immediate aftermath of the arrest.

Alisha Stranges (08:40):

All right. And can you both walk me through how you move from this moment, sort of immediate response into showing your support by showing up to help fundraise for the defense fund?

Bob Gallagher (08:56):

Well, a number of things happened in between there, the fundraiser that you're talking about, which is really a second fundraiser. There had been a previous fundraiser as well, if I remember, but the Rodney's Oyster Bar

fundraiser, which is the one that raised real money, it didn't happen for a few weeks, if I remember, from the actual raid. So, the real work at the beginning was kind of getting the folks involved focused on what needed to be done. So, you needed to have a lawyer. I know I advised them in terms of finding different lawyers, ultimately connected them with Frank Addario. They needed to be able to realize that this is an ongoing battle. It's going to take money; it's going to take volunteers. And the very first thing you need to do, of course, is what they've already done, which is build a group of people who believe in what you're doing and can aid in all the various activities.

Bob Gallagher (09:57):

So, there was quite a bit of things to do, including going to the Police Services Board, including holding a community meeting. The rally outside of the police station was, if I remember right, was the march that we did after a rally at [The] 519. So, part of it was organizing the 519 meeting that would then ultimately end up in a march, which would end up with more media attention that Olivia now was helping out with. So, there was a number of things involved in that short little period of time that you have to do. And it hearkened back to back in February of 1981 when, in a very short period of time, the community had to kind of engage in multiplicity of various things. So, it was a few weeks. I'm not even exactly sure when it was, but it was at least a few weeks, about a month after that, that we had the one fundraiser at Pope Joan. That's where I was given my pink scarf, that was quite wonderful.

Bob Gallagher (11:09):

And then, I had been involved with politics, with Olivia, been involved with politics where fundraising is a key component of every campaign. There's not a campaign I've ever been involved with, which ultimately doesn't come down to your ability to raise some funds to keep it going. And this is something that they didn't have a lot of skill at. They had a lot of skill at community organizing. They had unbelievable understanding of what was involved, but they didn't have a lot of skill at fundraising. And if you've ever been to a community event where you charge as much as people want to give, you realize how little money you really make and how much time goes into supposed fundraiser. Where I kind of suggested no, let's have a real fundraiser. Let's have something that would actually raise real money.

Bob Gallagher (12:03):

Not only did I work with Olivia, but I had been quite involved with Kyle Rae, who was the city councillor at the time. And we realized that you need to put those skills to work and actually have a really event. And so, the Oyster Bar fundraiser was literally the outcome of that. It was the ability to actually connect with people who had money, who would support the cause. And you ask them for real money, rather than spending a lot of time organizing something you call a fundraiser that you're lucky if it breaks even. So that's kind of the involvement I had leading up to that event.

Alisha Stranges (12:43):

Right. And so, Olivia, what was the significance of your kind of... The way we've heard about it is that you sort of partnered up to work together on this. Why was this work important to you at the time, to partner up with Bob to help with this action?

Olivia Chow (13:00):

Well, Bob and I worked together every day at Metro Hall anyway. I was a councillor at the time, and Bob had me well-trained because he was also, through various campaigns, whether it's Equal Recognition or supporting the Youth Line, the LGBTQ, at that time called Gay Youth Hotline. So now every year we had fundraisers in a Chinese banquet where I would ask for money. So, I'm known to be loud and demanding

when the time comes to get money, to get people to give. So, it came naturally that that was the role that I play, to squeeze every dollar out of the room. Absolutely for a good cause. So, that's how I naturally fitted that profile because I've done it before in myriads of fundraiser. Art auction for the Youth Line, banquets, any number of events. Buddies [in Bad Times Theatre] fundraisers because every year they had a fundraiser where I was modeling stuff or asking for money. Auctioneering, you name it. My late husband, Jack Layton, also specialized in that, so, between us, we used our mouth for a cause.

Bob Gallagher (14:52):

I mean, to get the context of how this developed, you really have to get a sense of what Olivia Chow's office was. Olivia Chow got elected as a representative, primarily to change the world, not to actually expand her career. And when she got elected to Metro Council, and I came on board, and we formed a partnership that we would spend the time we have available to us to try to use that office to change the world. And that meant to be able to advance those people who couldn't and needed the kind of resources. And so, Olivia and I worked on many campaigns as she mentioned, many of them in the queer community, many of them not in the queer community, but all of them used her office and the ability of her to allow that office to be used to bring in volunteers who were committed to this cause.

Bob Gallagher (15:54):

And so, when something like the Pussy Palace raid happened, it was one of a number of various things that would happen out there, like a police shooting, like a raid on a bathhouse, like the passing of legislation. When those things happened, that office just came alive, joined together, and we did what we knew what to do. And one of the things we knew what to do was to raise funds, and the Pussy Palace defense team needed money to be raised.

Alisha Stranges (16:29):

Right. You know, I'm a bit curious of, we've sort of talked about what you did at this fundraiser, but I'm very curious about how it felt, what was the atmosphere like in the room? Is there anything, any sort of vivid memories from being in the room, raising funds that night?

Olivia Chow (16:50):

It was easy. I've been to events where I would call out, then there'd be silence. And that was the exact opposite. So, joyous giving, or giving because of rage, giving to go, "huh, here we are," as a form of power. It doesn't matter if it's five bucks, 10 bucks, or 100 bucks or whatever bucks it was, it didn't matter. It was that feeling that, "yeah, we are in this together." A sense of unity, let's show them. So, being able to feel that intensity was wonderful and unforgettable. So, there's real sense of unity and of purpose. Now, there wasn't a huge amount of money in the room, but people dug deep.

Alisha Stranges (18:04):

Bob anything that you wanted to add?

Bob Gallagher (18:06):

Well, I mean, at that point by 2000, I and Olivia had organized numerous fundraising events for various causes. I had organized a number of them right there in Rodney's Oyster House. I was familiar with it. The room had, as Olivia said, a little bit less money than some of our other fundraisers in the room, but it certainly had some money in the room. But what struck me about it, because I was all ready for a typical fundraiser that I had organized before for the NDP, for the Youth Line, various things. What struck me right

away was the way in which the organizers were behaving, right? Like Lorelee [Gillis] and Janet [Rowe], like they had their boas on, they were holding up their panties. They were not acting as if they're in a Rodney's Oyster House in front of people who have thousands of dollars, and they are going to come to them, really sweet, bowing their head and saying, "Could we have some money for our cause."

Bob Gallagher (19:16):

They were there to express themselves and express why it is the Pussy Palace was actually important. They weren't there just to get money. They were there to keep alive what the whole purpose of the Pussy Palace was, which is a celebration of female sexuality. And that was on display the whole time. I don't think Rodney's Oyster House has ever had such an event. I know I've never seen one like that. And so that's what struck me was that, this is a typical fundraising event that I've organized before, but it certainly doesn't feel typical at all.

Alisha Stranges (20:00):

Well, I'm noticing we're coming to the end of our time together. And I just wanted to leave some space here. If there's sort of anything more that you wanted to add. I don't know what your involvement was, following helping to raise funds for the defense fund. But if you want to speak to that or really anything that the questions haven't allowed you to touch on yet?

Bob Gallagher (20:23):

No, I'm not—

Olivia Chow (20:24):

You start, and I'll... Go for it.

Bob Gallagher (20:26):

I'm not sure what else I would add. My memories of the Pussy Palace as it happened, and then the raid and the aftermath and the battle for it, which included a long and tedious history afterwards of finally getting charges dropped, and then a human rights complaint and all of that, it was a long and involved battle. I've been involved with other political battles that have been long and involved. Some of them have lost, some of them have won, but what I remember really about this battle was the core team that were involved with the Pussy Palace. They were a tight-knit, really, really politically sophisticated, and I say that, politically sophisticated, in the sense of knowing what they were doing and what their sexuality, the threats that it provided to mainstream society. Not the politics in the sense of the role of the Police Services Board or the role of the Human Rights Commission, but they understood what they were doing and the way in which it was being threatening to society.

Bob Gallagher (21:37):

And I have just unbelievable admiration for all of them, including the people who got charged, for instance, JP [Hornick], who had been working with Buddies [in Bad Times Theatre]. And I had known her before, and all she did was go in and take out a liquor license. And then she ends up with the next five years of her life in turmoil. I just have unbelievable admiration for those women. They stayed together. They worked their ass off. They were so innovative. And then throughout that entire process, they had fun.

Olivia Chow (22:16):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I first got involved in LGBTQ issues in 1985 when I was elected as a school trustee. And I remember that summer, a gay librarian, Ken Zeller was gay bashed, killed in High Park by four graduating or four high school kids. And that motivated me to collect stories of LGBTQ students in the school board, and how they have been gay bashed, physically abused and bullied, et cetera. That led to a campaign to get the Toronto [District] School Board to adopt the beginning of the end the homophobia curriculum. Fast forward to today, slightly less gay bashing, quiet discrimination, but the bashing and the killing has moved on to the Muslim community, for example. What we are seeing is fear. And I sense that fear back then, and a fear now of the Muslim community, especially the women that wear a hijab, and it's their definition of their sexuality.

Olivia Chow (24:01):

It's not up to us to judge whether you put a top on, you don't put a top on, it's your choice. It's your celebration of who you are, and because of what they wear, they're identifiable, and they are easy targets, and they are now the ones that are in the frontline of being killed. So, but it does connect with power, hatred, and the people that, whether it's going into a bathhouse or abusing their power in many forms. And I think what we can also think about, while we have Pussy Palace, that's history, and how the hate have now transformed itself into something. It's still hate. So, I was just reflecting on that because gay bashing killings were very, very much, very intense at the time when I first got involved in politics. I'm no longer elected but that kind of hatred is still popping up in a very different format. And the victims right now, very much so, are the Muslim women wearing hijab, and they are fearful of their lives.

Olivia Chow (25:39):

So, I say that in conclusion to connect the different campaigns, to say that maybe there are lessons learned here from Pussy Palace campaign that can also be applied in a totally different format. But a campaign is a campaign. It's about winning. It's about changing hearts and minds of people. And maybe we can now take some of our energy to help and be good allies to those that need that kind of campaigns.

Alisha Stranges (26:17):

Yes. Thank you. Thank you so much. Both of you I want to sort of close here. I don't know if either of you or both of you can hang on the call for some housekeeping or maybe Abby [Abigail Richards] hangs on the call, but I just wanted to take a moment to say thank you both so much for taking some time out to reflect on this 20-year-old history. As I was saying to Bob, before we got on the call, everyone involved in the organizing team speaks about you both with such reverence, and it's so fascinating to be able to sit and speak with you about it.

Bob Gallagher (26:53):

Great. I've enjoyed it.

Olivia Chow (26:57):

Thank you for giving us this opportunity. Bob Gallagher, if you are online, can I call you?

Bob Gallagher (27:04):

Yeah. Why don't you give me a call when we hang up?

Alisha Stranges (27:06):

Okay.

Olivia Chow (27:07):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (27:07):

So, I'll stop the recording now.

Bob Gallagher (27:09):

Okay.