

Pussy Palace Oral History Project

Oral History Interview with Nancy Irwin

Conducted on April 29, 2021 via Zoom

Interviewed by Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)

Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Nancy Irwin, now 60, is a white woman, a rebel femme, and the former proprietor of “Naughty Nancy,” a clothing company specializing in custom latex for all genders. Nancy is an important pillar within Toronto’s SM/Leather Community and has a long history of engaging in LGBTQ+ activism via her editorial contributions in publications such as *Xtra*, *Siren*, and *Canadian Biker*, to name a few. At the time of the interview, Nancy was living in Toronto, Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic, while working in construction and landscaping. The interview mostly concerns Nancy’s experiences as a patron of the Pussy Palace on September 14, 2000. She discusses her recollection of the physical space; the fashion she donned and the toys she brought to play parties, both like and unlike the Pussy Palace; her observations of police behaviour during the raid and its lasting impact on Palace patrons; and other topics. Nancy highlights the connection between the 2000 bathhouse raid of the Pussy Palace and the history of police brutality against racialized folk, queer folk, and sex workers, both past and present. She stresses the need for the abolition of policing as a cultural institution. Nancy speaks about Toronto, London, Ottawa, and Port Dover, Ontario; and Montreal, Quebec in Canada. She also references New York and Michigan, USA. Nancy addresses the time period between 1969 and 2021, focusing her interview on the year 2000.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Abolition; Police; Bikers; Dyke; S&M; Play Parties; 1981 Bathhouse; Bruce McArthur; Sex; Latex.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:03):

All right. So, before we get into this, I’ve got a little spiel I’ve got to do here. Just to frame what we’re talking about.

Nancy Irwin (00:00:10):

You’re going to do that while I make my tea. So, I’m just going to walk over there, but I will hear you. Okay?

Alisha Stranges (00:00:17):

Okay.

Nancy Irwin (00:00:18):

Okay. Spiel away.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:22):

All right. This is Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project. And we’re having a great time in Toronto, Ontario, interviewing Nancy Irwin on April 29, 2021. I believe Nancy is also in Toronto. Is that true, Nancy?

Nancy Irwin (00:00:41):

Yes, it is.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:43):

And Nancy is going to tell us about the experience of being a patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. Nancy, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Nancy Irwin (00:00:58):

Yes, you do.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:00):

Perfect. Okay. So, we're all set, and I'm just going to pause it here until you're done making your tea.

Nancy Irwin (00:01:09):

Actually, the community I came out into, in 1981, was really pushing androgyny. They were moving away from the butch and femme... Like, the butch or femme, and pushing androgyny. But androgyny turned out to be everything on the butch side. And, oh shocking, everything on the femme side was being dissed, basically because we were trying not to be feminine and attractive to men. And so, the dyke community... And we've gone through this so fucking many times. Pardon me. Like, you all do know the period of time where all the butches were really being pressured to cut their tits off and become boys. Do you know about that? Did you live through that? How old are you both?

Alisha Stranges (00:01:59):

We may not have lived through that. No. I'm 38.

Elio Colavito (00:02:03):

I did not live through that. I'm 23 years old.

Nancy Irwin (00:02:05):

Okay. 23 didn't. 38, you were looking the other way.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:10):

Right.

Nancy Irwin (00:02:12):

Because it's only frigging been the last 10 years that we've kind of recovered from that and started respecting femmes again. At least, it depends on what world you're in. I've been in the dyke SM community, which is the section of the Pussy Palace party that I was playing in. Right?

Alisha Stranges (00:02:34):

Well, I want to make sure that... We have a lot of questions to ask around identity here, right off the top, so why don't we just dive into it? Did you want to pause, so you can finish your dinner? Or do you want to eat?

Nancy Irwin (00:02:50):

You know what? Go ahead. I mean, people have seen people eat. I've done worse.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:59):

Okay. All right. You can sit down if you want.

Nancy Irwin (00:03:02):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I'm going to put this in the... In a minute.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:06):

Okay. All right. Well, to start off, I'd love if you could just share your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns.

Nancy Irwin (00:03:17):

Which we would not have asked. Okay. I'll sit down. We would not have asked that 20 years ago. My name is Nancy Irwin. That's my legal name. I am also known as Naughty Nancy. That's my play name, my scene name, and my former business name, when I was custom making latex clothing. So, just so you know, that's out there. Pronoun, she — she/her/elle. You know, those things. I am a feminist. That has become a bad word. Too bad.

Nancy Irwin (00:03:59):

I am a co-founder of the SM women's discussion group, which organized play parties in a fabulous dungeon in Toronto for women and trans people since 1999. And the Pussy Palace parties were organized by someone else. And we would all go to those, just saying. So, just so you know, the Pussy Palace parties, there was a rise and fall, as there often is to anything. I mean, the dungeon parties are completely over right now, because of COVID. They're also called sex parties, play parties, whatever. There's been a long history of this sort of thing. Okay. Next question? Am I getting scored? Did I answer it all?

Alisha Stranges (00:04:51):

How old are you?

Nancy Irwin (00:04:53):

Oh, yeah. 60.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:54):

60. You sort of were speaking about it a bit earlier. But can you say again how you would describe your gender and sexual identity today, in 2021?

Nancy Irwin (00:05:08):

I had to write a by-line for an article in *Xtra*, and I decided that right now I am a rebel femme.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:19):

Okay. Can you unpack that term for us?

Nancy Irwin (00:05:21):

Yes, sure. This comes from years and years of, like I said... I actually, I lean on the feminine side. But you know everybody talks about masculine-of-centre. Well, how about feminine-of-centre? Even though we don't hear that term because feminine, female, everything is squashed in our society, and the lesbian community is no better. We live in the real world, and we internalize the oppression along with the homophobia. So anyway, as it happens though, my life is kind of on the line because I do a lot of things. I do construction work at home. I don't know. I ride one motorcycle mostly, but I do mechanical work. I do a lot of things that are typically male.

Nancy Irwin (00:06:24):

And I actually avoid some of the... Like, don't ask me to cook. But I garden, and I do sew, and I do other... You know what? All my life, I've done everything since I was a little kid. So, if we didn't have all these stupid gender rules, this would be irrelevant. And if we didn't have all these stupid gender rules, you could just be who you are, who you want. And there wouldn't be labels. You could just go and join that activity, or you could join this activity. But because we remain so gender divided — you know, we still have the blue and pink for boys and girls — because we're so gender divided, you're asking me that question. Right? So, rebel femme. Because when I do put on high heels and a dress... You know what? People don't believe that it's the same person who is wearing steel toe construction boots, and everything that goes along with that. So, both.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:44):

Yeah. Can you tell us a little bit more about your work? The work you're currently involved in?

Nancy Irwin (00:07:50):

Without mentioning my employer? Yeah, sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:53):

Please. Yes.

Nancy Irwin (00:07:59):

I'm currently doing construction work. I make money. I have been paid as... Basically landscaping and construction. Gardening, horticulture... All of that is my primary employment. I have been a writer for *Xtra*, for *Canadian Biker*. I'm really not writing professionally anymore, except for the article that I published a couple months ago, about my 81-year-old trans friend, Joanne, who died of COVID, who was living in a nursing home. And that reason I wrote that article was twofold. One, was to honour her, and announce her passing. And the other one was to let everyone know, particularly young people who don't think they're vulnerable to COVID — and I got the idea to the article in December — about getting a power of attorney for personal care. Because even if you don't own property, you don't care about what happens to your couch, if you end up really, really sick, and in the hospital on a ventilator, and you can't make decisions for yourself, who's going to make those decisions? And if you're queer or trans, you may not be any better off than we were 40 years ago, when I was 20. You might be separated from your biological family. You may think your best friend, or your lover, your girlfriend, your partner, your boyfriend, whoever, is going to step right in and take care of you. But if they don't have any legal authority, then you could end up with a public guardian. So, that was my last article that I wrote. So, I'm actually an activist.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:55):

Were you involved in these, kind of, two worlds: construction/gardening and activist writing, back in 2000, when the Pussy Palace raid would have happened?

Nancy Irwin (00:10:05):

My article?

Alisha Stranges (00:10:07):

I'm Sorry?

Nancy Irwin (00:10:08):

Did you read my article?

Alisha Stranges (00:10:10):

Yeah, absolutely. For those who don't know. Right? I mean, *I* know.

Nancy Irwin (00:10:15):

I see. Right. I have written two articles, that were basically not very sympathetic towards the police. The other one I wrote in *Canadian Biker*. And it was when the police in Ontario were given... I don't know what it was. It seems like it could have been... I think it was \$10 million to buy weapons to fight Outlaw bikers. And they went to Friday the 13th in Port Dover with their automatic machine guns. They just showed up in such force, they were like the new disease on the street. It was unbelievable. It's like a plague of OPP [Ontario Provincial Police]. I also wrote an article about that because it was essentially a family event. It was an event that all the Outlaws knew. This is like a "no-fight" zone. You can come. You can wear your colours, and you can't do anything bad. And then the police showed up *en masse* one year, and it was horrible. The police showed up... You know what? There were only five cops at the Pussy Palace bathhouse raid, plus the two undercover women who came earlier. But let me tell you, it's the same thing. When you get a certain amount of police, or policing authority, like at the Pussy Palace raid... Five men walking through the place, everything stopped. So, I'm not a major activist, like some people, but when something comes up, if I can, I do something. I use what I have. I am not silent. And so, the article I wrote about the Pussy Palace bathhouse raid is the other article I wrote. That was about the Toronto police. The other one was in *Canadian Biker*, where I wrote a monthly column for decades. And I wrote one that was scathing about the OPP.

Nancy Irwin (00:12:33):

I also rode my motorcycle in Pride, back in the beginning in Toronto. And the thing about that is, when I need to have my voice heard, I have two things that I say. I say, "I rode my motorcycle in the dyke contingent with the Amazons." The first year we had the actual Pride parade, and the next year, and the next. The police came out with cameras. They took pictures of us. They took notes. They photographed our license plates, so that they made sure they had a full description of each and every woman, and what bike she rode. Back then, the city was smaller. The population smaller. I was riding a Norton or a Triumph. This might mean nothing to you. But back then, it was sort of like the Harleys were the Outlaws, and the British bikes. And the Japanese were the new incoming.

Nancy Irwin (00:13:29):

So, almost all the women were riding Japanese bikes. I was riding a really identifiable, not Japanese bike. And so, the whole reason Pride started was because of police harassment. In 1969, in New York City, at the Stonewall bar, it was just another frigging night of police raiding the bar. They did it here. If you look up *Xtra*, and type in my name, and look up Cherry Beach, you will read a large article about... It's partly about the sex that goes on in the bushes these days. It is also about police harassment, and includes that song called "The Cherry Beach Express," which was about the police picking up people in Toronto, taking them down to Cherry Beach, beating them up, or raping them, or getting blow jobs, which is what happened. Which is our queer history. And so, you need to read that article. Yes, I'm a frigging activist.

Nancy Irwin (00:14:31):

I interviewed people for that article, and I accessed historical information. Doing what you're doing, which is plucking interviews out of the hands of university students' work, or professors. And with permission, republishing it. And interviewing older women about what life was like. So, you want to look that up. Cherry Beach, *Xtra*, Nancy Irwin. You will get some of your people's history. Because I've done what you're doing, only I just did it alone. Right? So, talking about riding in Pride, talking about being at the Pussy Palace when it was raided... Those are the two things that give me credibility to speak on things like abolishing the police, and why we need to do that, and why we need to support Black people. All BIPOC people. Why we need to stand behind Black Lives Matter and Not Another Black Life.

Nancy Irwin (00:15:37):

Why we need the police out of Pride. Why we need them off the necks and the backs of frigging Black men, in particular, all over. And why we need to actually look at and study slavery, particularly in the U.S. Because if you don't know that history, then you don't understand how it's spilling over today. So, *The New Jim Crow* is a great book to read. *When They Call You a Terrorist*, which is about the women... People don't know that Black Lives Matter is a queer movement. Did you know that? Started by queers. Right? Lots of people don't know this. So, if you read *When They Call You a Terrorist*, you read about the personal experience of the women who started it. If you read *The Half Has Never Been Told*... It's about the economic development of the United States from a perspective of slavery.

Nancy Irwin (00:16:42):

If you read that, and you read *The New Jim Crow*, you can't not know why the police are doing what they're doing now. And the police frigging raiding the Pussy Palace was just another example of police suppression. It's just another example. Only that time they came in to a women's space. 1981 was when they raided the men's bathhouse here in Toronto... Not one house; they raided five of them. They did something like a million dollars damage, which back then, was 10 million now. Some of these places could not open again. But after that, and the community response to that, there became a kind of an agreement, where the police agreed to stop doing that. But then they had a little accident, and they accidentally, you know... Rogue cops raided the women's bath... Like, we'd only had a few.

Alisha Stranges (00:17:45):

Before you go too far into that, I want to sort of pause you. Because we want to kind of take you through different elements of the night, and the Palace itself. So, I don't want you to get too ahead of yourself because I think there'll be space for you to expound on the things that you're talking about now. I know you were sort of involved in the SM scene, and knew about the Palace events already. So, I'm curious about what would have prompted you to go to this 2000 event?

Nancy Irwin (00:18:32):

The same thing that would have prompted me to go to the other events. The raided bathhouse wasn't the first.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:44):

Of course, yes. We know it started in '98. So, you went to the other events as well?

Nancy Irwin (00:18:49):

Well, I went to all of them, but the first. Because I was at the first bathhouse party in another city at the time that they did the first one here. So, I did not go to the first one, but I went to all the others for quite some time. I have not been to every one, but we all went. We had one a year. It was something like a Thursday night, on the week before Pride, that the Club Toronto agreed to rent to women. All the other bathhouses, they didn't want cooties. They wouldn't shut down for one day a year. The gay men, who the lesbians took care of all the time that they were sick and dying... If you haven't heard this, you're going to hear it. There was a sudden real increase in breast cancer in women. We were on our own. The gay men who survived were not a whole lot out there helping us. But we took care of them. And when we wanted to rent a bathhouse to have one night once, it was really hard to get. And finally, Club Toronto agreed to rent us a Thursday night. One a year. So, we went.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:18):

Were you involved in the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee? Or were you more of a patron?

Nancy Irwin (00:20:24):

Oh, I was just a patron. I knew some of the organizers. But believe me, there was overlap.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:32):

Was there anything particular about the September 14, 2000 Pussy Palace event that you were particularly excited about? Or is it just sort of like, "And here's the next one, and I'm excited to go"?

Nancy Irwin (00:20:46):

"Here's the next one." The thing is, it was no longer once a year. Because it didn't happen in June right before Pride, that means it was one of the ones that... I don't know how many they ended up having. I know it started out once a year. And then there were more. The one thing about that one and others... The thing is, I'm not a beer drinker. Not being a beer drinker is important because it means I never actually cared if there was beer there or not. But what they did was, they sold beer. They got a special event permit, and they sold beer, which some women really liked. They didn't charge a lot, but they charged more than the cost. And the proceeds they donated to some queer youth thing. Right? So, that was how ultimately the police ended up... You do know they came in three times that night. Right?

Alisha Stranges (00:22:01):

I don't think we've heard that yet.

Nancy Irwin (00:22:04):

Okay. So, you want me to tell you, but...

Alisha Stranges (00:22:06):

Don't tell us yet. Because I want to pause you and slow you back down. Really trying to focus first on just your experience as a patron, before you would even have been sort of encountering the police invasion. Really want to try to focus on all the moments leading up to the raid. So, if you can sort of travel back in time, and maybe talk to us a little bit about that process of moving from someone who decided to attend the event, to someone who becomes an official patron of the event. So, thinking about: where were you before you made your way to the club? How did you get there? What kind of transportation you would take?

Nancy Irwin (00:22:56):

I rode my motorcycle. That's the only thing I know. I mean, I would have eaten dinner. I don't think there's anything particular...

Alisha Stranges (00:23:12):

What time were you planning to arrive?

Nancy Irwin (00:23:15):

Who the hell knows? After dinner. It would have been open from who know, maybe eight o'clock at night until three or four in the morning. I don't really remember. And so, you just had to get ready and go.

Alisha Stranges (00:23:39):

Did you go alone? Or did you go with someone?

Nancy Irwin (00:23:44):

Well that one, I can't tell you. Because I had a group of friends who went. I would have known many people who were there. So, I could have gone with a lover, a playmate, or alone. But for example, one really memorable night was the night that a number of us had volunteered to be monitors. And we were all friends, and we were all people who went to these play parties. We went early to get ourselves settled in. There were locker rooms. You had to put your stuff in a locker room, and this and that. And there was a sling in one room. And what I remember was that all of the people who were supposed to be volunteering ended up alternating in the sling.

Nancy Irwin (00:24:52):

So, we ended up laughing at ourselves because we were supposed to... I mean, we did all do our job but we... You know, the person who was first on shift ended up in the sling first, and then the next one, and the next one. And there's the whole group of us. And it just happened that way. And if we were volunteering, wandering about, making sure everybody was happy, if anybody needed help with equipment or anything. It wasn't like it was a hard job, but that was not the night the police raided because the night the police raided, partway through the party, everything stopped. What I remember about that night, wasn't about all the fun. It was about many really fun parties, and the situation... Like, seriously, what I did leading up to it isn't like... I went grocery shopping. I worked. I cleaned the bathroom. What do you do before you party on Saturday night, right?

Alisha Stranges (00:26:05):

That's the thing. Everyone has a different relationship to the Palace. Some people, it was a frequent thing, others, it wasn't. So, we're just trying to get sort of the perspective of what's going on for each person when they're making their way there. I'll pass it over to Elio [Colavito] now.

Elio Colavito (00:26:29):

So, I understand that going out for you and doing this kind of stuff was a regular occurrence. So, I don't want to push you too far, but we're trying to get a sense for what you would have worn that evening, or if you want to speak about more generally what style you would have worn to those kinds of events.

Nancy Irwin (00:26:49):

Okay, that I can do. I would have very commonly worn a latex dress. I may have started out in high heels. I would have ended up not in high heels. I could go swimming in the latex dress. That was really fun because the pool was really nice. And you could jump in, and women who wore other things, unlike the men, women tended to wear outfits. But those of us who were fucking and doing other kinds of play, I mean, sometimes the outfits just come off. Yeah, you're talking to somebody... If I was going to a fetish party, which I did a lot of, we would spend hours getting dressed. And we would plan for two days what we were going to wear, but to a bathhouse party? You know Oasis [Aqualounge] is still there, right? Well, I've been going to Oasis.

Nancy Irwin (00:27:49):

I'm probably the only person who honestly says: "I go for the pool." I do. I go there... Like, I haven't had sex there in years. But I've gone there. The only thing that stopped me from going is COVID, but I used to go after work. And I'd go swim in the pool, and lie in the sun, have a friend come and meet me, and we'd hang out. I had a little group of dykes who would meet up. And we'd all go swim in the pool, and so it's the same location. So, going to the Pussy Palace, whatever outfit I wore was minimal, and might end up off. There wasn't a lot... You know, some women were some more interesting outfits. I mean, a latex dress, it's like woosh. You know, it's as quick and easy as a tank-top. A slightly long tank-top. And flip-flops, or high heel shoes, right? But, probably both in the same night, that's the outfit. The bag has lube, gloves, and various toys. So, really asking what's in the bag is more interesting than what's the outfit because what's in the bag is important.

Elio Colavito (00:29:16):

So, do you want to take us through what's in the bag specifically, if it's more important?

Nancy Irwin (00:29:20):

Okay! Lube, big time. Lube, right? Gloves. We would bring chucks. Chucks are disposable incontinence pads that you can just throw down, and they're called chucks because you chuck 'em out when you're done. And so, this is all from the SM community. All this stuff comes in from SM play parties. So, the bag that would have that, it might have a handful of toys. It could have. And in my case, they would be small because... Some people show up with like a frigging suitcase of toys. I'm lazy, and so I like to have a small collection of fun toys that are easy to use. I don't have to like swing real hard to throw a flogger. A little tiny rubber one will do quite a trick. Needles are great fun to play with, but I don't know that I took needles to those parties because they're not really that appropriate for that environment.

Nancy Irwin (00:30:39):

But I'm what they call a lazy top, which could be an insulting term. But in my case, I'm quite proud of it because that means I want to do, what I want to do, without a lot of effort. And so, I would have a small toy bag, and there could be clothes-pins in it, and a little bit of rope. But little, little. My toy bags are little. And I would have chucks, lube, and gloves. And who knows, maybe there's a dildo, and maybe there's some condoms, or something. But the people who are into fisting bring gloves. Maybe there's even a blindfold. This is a toy bag. So, we would, my friends, we would bring toy bags. So, the outfit, wasn't the important part, the toy bag's the important part.

Elio Colavito (00:31:43):

Interesting. So, you arrive at the club, motorcycle, latex, you have your bag. Can you describe the scene outside of Club Toronto, a little bit?

Nancy Irwin (00:31:54):

Sure. It looks like Carlton [Street] and Jarvis [Street]. And one block over is Mutual Street. There will be traffic.

Elio Colavito (00:32:05):

Okay.

Nancy Irwin (00:32:07):

There will be a sidewalk. Down the block, there's a greasy spoon. It's a street, and there's a big, old house. Like the Jarvis Street houses. And there's no label on it. There could be a line-up outside. In fact, at a certain point, and I don't know when they started doing this, but these events were selling out. You had to buy a ticket in advance at some times. And at some times when they were selling out, they ended up doing a thing where they let people of colour... Like, it was a front of the line for BIPOC. So, if you were BIPOC, you got to just go the front of the line. You didn't stand outside in line. So, depending on what time of day you got there, or evening, I should say, you may have stood in a line outside.

Elio Colavito (00:33:07):

Do you recall standing in the line that evening?

Nancy Irwin (00:33:10):

I've stood in the line more than once. Yes.

Elio Colavito (00:33:14):

And can you walk us through the process of going from being in the line to being admitted into the bathhouse?

Nancy Irwin (00:33:23):

Yeah. I suppose it's like going to a movie theatre, if you have a ticket in your hand. You stand in line, you walk in the door, either your name is on a list, or you have a ticket, and then they welcome you in. Except that night, the night of the raid, was different than any other night. Because that night they gave us a printed sheet of paper that had information on what to do if the police showed up. We never had that before.

Elio Colavito (00:33:56):

How did you feel receiving that? You'd been a bunch of times, never had anything like that happen before. Do you recall what you felt, or what you were thinking when you received that slip of paper?

Nancy Irwin (00:34:09):

Well, it would have been a point of curiosity: "Gee, that's interesting." As a person who has been running play parties, we're always aware that we could get raided. And so, we had, until COVID, a sign-in sheet, a waiver that basically says: "You're here on your own free will, and if the police come, there you are." And ours were not the only play parties I went to. I went to play parties in other cities, and other play parties in this city, and the Pussy Palace party here, and in one other city. You knew going in, you knew going there that there's always a risk. There remains a risk.

Nancy Irwin (00:35:09):

The swingers in Montreal got busted, and they took it all the way to the Supreme Court, and won. And so, thanks to the swingers of Montreal, Goodhandy's started allowing sex. The Black Eagle started allowing sex. Various bars in Toronto started allowing sex in the bar. And then they were doing it membership only, and doing it in the back room. And then, eventually, it got so that the police aren't raiding us. Maybe we don't have to make people pay five dollars for a monthly membership, but we've always known we could get busted. So, getting handed this information would have been unusual, and made us think, "Gee, wonder why they're giving us this." But it's good information to have, and there's no better day than today to get that information, right?

Elio Colavito (00:36:07):

Right.

Nancy Irwin (00:36:08):

Now that I have this information, could have, should have had it before. I'm glad I got it now. It's like, "Hmm, why are we getting this information today?" And then off you went to play, but I read it. I read what to do if the police arrive. I think many people scanned it.

Elio Colavito (00:36:39):

So, you've gotten your spiel on the sheet, you're ready to go into the bathhouse. Once you're inside, how do you describe the space itself on that evening? We know that there's been a renovation, so let's...

Nancy Irwin (00:36:54):

Yeah, the new space doesn't count. It was a little tired. It was a little grungy. Women went in, they rented it, from 10 o'clock in the morning or whatever, but women went in and did a major cleaning, as best as they could before the party. So, they had hours of work cleaning so that, not that it was that bad, that the carpets were worn on the floor, and you didn't want to walk around it. I mentioned high heels or flip-flops. So, the reason is, it wasn't really a space that I personally wanted to walk around in bare feet. And I think you will hear that from a lot of women. And you would have a towel that you could sit on so that you weren't sitting...

Nancy Irwin (00:37:50):

And I don't think it was our bare asses that we were as concerned about, but if you are naked and you're sitting on a chair, a bench, a bed. Oh, there were all these little rooms of beds. So, they had some kind of clean sheet, but... Yeah, all these little tiny rooms, and you had to get there early to get the best rooms. So, we would sometimes go... You know, it's been a long time, but we would go, and go early so that we could grab a good room. 'Cause if you didn't, you didn't get a room.

Elio Colavito (00:38:30):

Can you describe what made a good room versus a bad room at Club Toronto?

Nancy Irwin (00:38:35):

Size. Location. There were beds that were this big, and then the room was that big, but some of the rooms were that big, right? A room was better than no room. And a room was a place you could invite people to come and play with you, if you wanted privacy. You could also go hide in a room and just close the door, and listen to what was going on all around you. Or you could invite someone in. There were women who went, there were monogamous couples who went to these parties, and they'd go in a room together and they do whatever they felt like doing in that room, and just enjoy. Or they'd do whatever they felt like doing out in the open, and they remained monogamous.

Nancy Irwin (00:39:38):

It was a space... It was a wonderful environment. In town, you didn't have to travel to Michigan to hang out with a bunch of naked women. The funny thing is most of the women weren't naked. So, when the police came, it wasn't that we were all stark naked. If you went to a men's party, a number of people would be wearing a towel around their waist and the rest weren't. Wouldn't. But the women, we were a lot shyer, and so we were wearing outfits. The butches would have on long shorts, and a tank-top and, maybe a leather harness, and maybe some arm bands, and some little cap or whatever. Maybe walking around with a harness, and a dildo on it and whatever. But most of the people were dressed in some form of dress. Most women had something on. Anyway, so you walk around and there's all these little rooms. And then there were some big open rooms. The rooms with the beds were tiny little rooms, barely big enough for... You walked down; it was like closets. And then there were big open spaces, and very large hallways.

Elio Colavito (00:41:12):

Right. So, what kinds of activities did you take part in that night? Do you recall what spaces you went to, and the kind of stuff that you were up to that night?

Nancy Irwin (00:41:23):

I know I had a room. I know I was in the room when I heard that the police were coming. And really, what I was doing in the room and who I was with... What became important was what happened after. We had lots of sex. The details of sex are not important. Like, you want to tell me about the sex that you had last weekend, in detail?

Elio Colavito (00:42:04):

I'd prefer not to but...

Nancy Irwin (00:42:07):

But why is it important? Why are the details of the sex important?

Elio Colavito (00:42:13):

No, we're just trying to get a sense to kind of what rooms you would have gone to, where you were at, you don't need to go into detail, at all.

Nancy Irwin (00:42:20):

Well, that's what I'm saying, all over the place. If you went to a house party, and the house party had a pool in the backyard, and it had a second floor and a third floor, and it had bedrooms on the second floor and the third floor. And the main floor had a kitchen and a dance thing set up in the living room, which is the equivalent of what I've just described, except that there really was no kitchen. But there was a bar that served beer. And because it was lesbian, there was a little food table, and there were juices, and water, that were all just free there you could just access. And there was music; you could dance, you could go out to the pool in the backyard, you could swim in the pool. You could go in the hot tub. You could go in the sauna. You could have sex in the hot tub. You could have sex in the sauna. You could have sex in the swimming pool, beside the swimming pool. On the bench, by the swimming pool. You could play in any of the little rooms, you could play in any of the wide-open spaces. There were a couple of big rooms. One of them was the sling room, where there was a sling in a room and that room would easily fit, say five people. Sort of all of these rooms, so it would be just like going to a party. If you went to a house party, and stayed there for five hours on a Saturday night, you would move from room, to room, to room. You'd meet someone, you'd stand there, and you chit chat.

Nancy Irwin (00:44:02):

And then you'd say, "Wow, isn't that hot. Look what's going on over there." And then somebody'd say, "Do you know that one who's standing over there alone? I think I'm going to go introduce myself." And so, this is what it was like, it was a party. And friends would introduce friends, and strangers would introduce, and they had things going on. Like, you got to understand, this is years ago. I'm busy scanning myself, if I'm allowed to talk about this or not. But I can't see why not anymore. One night... There are massages. There was a room you could go and get a massage, or multiple people doing massages. There were volunteers who did lap dances, and that helped... You know, these were icebreakers, right? There was probably painting, or makeup painting, or something.

Nancy Irwin (00:45:07):

But there was a line-up for a room where there were three stations, and you got blindfolded before you went in. And there were three fucking benches, which for those of us who frequent these kinds of places, it's something that you kneel on and your ass is up in the air, and it usually has an angle down like this. And then there's a place for your elbows. So, it's comfortable, and you're comfortable. And so, women went in blindfolded, they were escorted in blindfolded, and there was a five-minute switch. And so, three other women were doing the fucking, and gloves would come off. If you were on a bench, you got fucked by three different women for five minutes each, and some of us were privileged to be sitting on the floor while this was going on. The shift would happen, and then those three women had to leave after 15 minutes. And the next group came in and the women doing the fucking would swap out. But the participants were blindfolded. Does that give you a story enough?

Elio Colavito (00:46:31):

Absolutely.

Nancy Irwin (00:46:32):

Like, what went on?

Elio Colavito (00:46:34):

Yeah. You don't need to feel pressured to say anything in too much detail, or too specific. We just want to get a sense for how you felt in the space, which clearly sounds, like you were pretty comfortable. This is like run of the mill stuff for you. You were just hanging out, doing what you want to do.

Nancy Irwin (00:46:50):

Yes. I wasn't scared it. It wasn't my first time at such a party. I had been to many parties that had public sex. And so, right. Okay, so for that, if you were asking someone else, they would have a different answer—

Elio Colavito (00:47:07):

Some people were way too nervous to take their back off the wall. It's like that. And we do know that there was a photo room where you could take a Polaroid, and leave. Did you, stumble upon that room at all?

Nancy Irwin (00:47:22):

I don't remember that.

Elio Colavito (00:47:23):

Okay. So safe to say you don't have one.

Nancy Irwin (00:47:26):

No. Not that I know of. You know, that sounds vaguely familiar, but it's long time ago.

Elio Colavito (00:47:46):

Yeah, fair enough.

Nancy Irwin (00:47:48):

It's a long time ago, and it was one of many parties. And that three-person thing, I don't think was that night.

Elio Colavito (00:48:00):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:48:02):

I think it may have been.

Nancy Irwin (00:48:05):

If you've heard other people talk about it, then it was. The thing is, I tend to be the person who ends up in the swimming pool. Right? The weather would have to really suck for me to not go in the pool. What was that?

Elio Colavito (00:48:28):

My cat. She's being a brat. But final question before we move on and take a little break. If you put yourself mentally back in the space, is there anything that you would like us to know about how it felt, or smelled, or sounded? Or maybe if it had a colour to you? If that's the kind of way that you think about things.

Nancy Irwin (00:48:53):

It felt electric. It felt fun. It felt exciting. There were enough women there who were relaxed, enough women there who were excited. There would be some trans people, which is why when I say "women," we had trans people there. It felt wonderful. And it was destroyed. You see, this is what's really important, is... [coughs] Pardon me. It felt wonderful. And we felt safe. We... [coughs] We were free. We were relaxed. We were safe. We were in an enclosed safe space. And yeah. And it was lots and lots and lots of fun. And then it wasn't. And then, it never, ever regained that. Not that night, and not in other nights.

Elio Colavito (00:50:22):

Well, this is a perfect place to break. Because our next set of questions is going to be about the raid, and all about the stuff that you're talking about. So, if we want to just grab a drink, go to the bathroom, take a little lap. Come back in a few minutes.

Nancy Irwin (00:50:36):

Do you want to?

Elio Colavito (00:50:39):

I'm going to get myself a coffee, personally.

Nancy Irwin (00:50:42):

I'm into my tea. Okay. Go ahead. Do I hit pause on the record? No?

Alisha Stranges (00:50:50):

You can. Maybe you should. I don't know what happens when you do that.

Nancy Irwin (00:50:55):

You know what, I won't.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:57):

I'm going to pause our recording, though.

Nancy Irwin (00:50:59):

Okay. You do that. I'll check my email.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:02):

Okay. Sounds good. Thanks, Nancy.

[recording paused]

Alisha Stranges (00:51:05):

Okay. We're good. We're back.

Nancy Irwin (00:51:07):

All right. Hang on a minute. Okay

Elio Colavito (00:51:12):

Thank you for your patience.

Nancy Irwin (00:51:14):

No problem.

Elio Colavito (00:51:15):

All right. So now we're going to get to exactly what you want to speak about. At 12:45 a.m., five men, all plainclothes police officers, enter the club, and stay about 90 minutes. Were you still in the Pussy Palace?

Nancy Irwin (00:51:30):

I was there until they left the third time. I was there before they came, when they left, when they came back, when they left, when they came back. When they left.

Elio Colavito (00:51:40):

Awesome. So, we're going to just walk through the whole thing, and we'll start with... What were you doing when the police arrived?

Alisha Stranges (00:51:48):

The first time.

Nancy Irwin (00:51:50):

The first time, I was in a private room. And what I recall is, women running through the place shouting something like, "Police are here. Police, police, police. Put your clothes on. Police. Stop what you're doing." Right? And when I say, "running through," I mean, whoever gave that first call, everybody else would have turned around and shouted, "Police." Right? It's no different then what used to happen in gay bars, when being gay was illegal. Right? The light switches would flash. People would shout, "Police." The men who were dancing with the men and the women who were dancing with the women would quickly switch partners. Right? When the police come, everybody participates in warning everybody.

Nancy Irwin (00:52:55):

And so, however it was that it happened, I was in a room. I heard the police were there. And so, I don't remember if my door was closed at the time. If I closed it to try to avoid the police, but then, you know, got too curious. But I know I left the room. I know that I gathered with friends. I remember going to... Ah! The

porn room. So, there. I never mentioned the porn room. Right? There was a room with a TV that had porn, and a group of us ended up in the porn room, and watched the police come through. I was on the second floor.

Elio Colavito (00:53:43):

Okay. And while you guys were kind of congregated in the porn room, do you remember what you were talking about? What you guys were feeling? How that felt to be in that room with your buddies?

Nancy Irwin (00:53:57):

Initially... Well, you see, as you pointed out, it's not like it was my first party. So, I didn't have the fear that some women had. There were women who were grabbing their stuff, and running, crying, kind of screaming in fear, and literally running out of the place. I'm really grateful that they were able to do that. We can talk about that. But my friends, we were pissed. But we also, you know... I was pissed that they were there. But I wasn't terribly afraid because... You see, there's a really important question, and I wrote that in an email: "Does your mother know?" Because if your mother doesn't know, you are not out. And if you're not out, then there's a whole lot you have to lose by being in a women's, sex, play space that's raided by the police. And historically, the police would gather the names and publish them. Julian Fantino did that in London [Ontario]. When he created a gay male porn ring, he published the names of all the gay men that they decided were part of a porn ring. They did the same thing when they raided the bathhouse parties. When they raided our party, I mean, many women were afraid.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:35):

I just want to be clear, for the record here. Julian Fantino was, at the time, the Chief of Police from Toronto police? If that's right. Right?

Nancy Irwin (00:55:45):

I believe so. He was the Chief of Police in London [Ontario]. He became the Chief of Police in Toronto. I ended up interviewing Bill Blair, who then became the Chief of Police. Julian Fantino ended up in Ottawa [Ontario], doing something or other. He was a big anti-marijuana person who now is involved in big business, making money on marijuana. Just saying. Okay? Anyway, I wasn't afraid. I made a living, at the time, writing for places like *Xtra*, the queer press, under my name. I also wrote for some kinky publications under my name, and I custom made latex clothing. I was running a small business. No one was going to fire me.

Elio Colavito (00:56:38):

Right.

Nancy Irwin (00:56:39):

Right? And my parents knew. The morning after, I phoned my mother. I was furious about what happened the night before, and I was kind of, like, friends with my mom. I phoned her up, and ranted about what happened the night before, and told her she could have got a phone call from me, from the police station saying, "I need bail."

Nancy Irwin (00:57:03):

"Well, what on earth would you be doing with that for?" Right? So, I told her, "Well, the party I was at, the women's bathhouse party... Last night, we got raided." So, if you're one of those women who couldn't tell

your mother that. If you had a job that you would get fired, like if you were a school teacher, childcare worker, all those jobs that women still right now today, are afraid of their personal lives coming out because of the moral code of their job, or whatever. Women who are from different ethnic backgrounds, where what they were doing was way less cool than other backgrounds.

Nancy Irwin (00:57:47):

Women were running out of the place. I wasn't. I was pissed. But I was irritated and annoyed that they were there. I was waiting for them to leave. And whatever I was doing, and whoever I was doing it with, the one thing I will tell you, was that nothing happened beyond that raid. We never went back to playing. Almost no one did. Three raids. But the first one, we thought they would leave. They were either going to bust us all. We were all going to be on our way in some paddy wagon, off to a police station, or we weren't. So, I was irritated. I was pissed.

Elio Colavito (00:58:46):

And at any point — between the cops leaving, and coming back, and leaving — did you speak to any of them?

Nancy Irwin (00:58:55):

I don't recall any speaking. What I do recall was watching them. I watched them going up and down the stairs. I watched the walking around the halls. I watched them... In particular, there was one room that was a large room. Like, a really large room. The women who were in there, stayed in there. They kept their door locked. They knew their rights. Because the police were banging on doors. Right? Saying, "Come out. Come out. Open up." Well, you actually didn't have to open a door. You actually could have just stayed hidden in your room, but then you're cowering. Then you're really scared. You can't see what's going on, and you know what, but these women kept playing. So, whoever they were, like, you know, thumbs up. They stayed in that a long, long time. I don't know when they finally opened the door, but it wasn't soon.

Alisha Stranges (01:00:00):

Were they patrons?

Nancy Irwin (01:00:02):

Who were in that room? Yes. Playing. They didn't open the door. They stayed, and they played. Not all of the doors opened in the first round. Women stayed in their rooms, but a lot of us came out. So, I got to watch the police. I got to watch them behaving exactly like men walking down the street. You know, if you're a woman and you walk by a construction site in the summer, right? And, all the men stop, and they stare at you. Well, actually it's not as bad anymore as it used to be. Maybe that's because I'm old. Maybe it's because I'm on the frigging construction site. Right? Working with the men. But it's not as bad as it used to be, walking down the street. But these cops, like they stared at... They were clearly looking at tits, and they were clearly looking for action.

Nancy Irwin (01:01:11):

I was under the impression that they wanted to find something to bust us for. I don't know if you know this, but in Canada, we have British law. Our laws are based on British law, and it's illegal to have sex, three people. It's illegal to have sex, two people in front of a third person who's a witness. And so, with laws like that, it wouldn't take much to be doing something illegal. But by then, sex between two women, it wasn't illegal anymore. So, the cops were walking around. It was the way they looked, the way they acted. They were

not polite. They were the opposite of polite. And so, I watched them looking. They had no right to see us in the state of dress that we were in. Because we weren't dressed in our street clothes.

Nancy Irwin (01:02:21):

Many of us weren't dressed in what we would be comfortable walking around the street in. Even though most women had clothes on, they might've worn those clothes in the backyard, in the kitchen, in the bedroom. But a lot of them were wearing outfits that they wouldn't be wearing walking down the street. So, the police didn't have a right to be in that space, and to see us in the way that they did. So, I was pissed. I was pissed because they ruined the party. They ruined the play that was going on. And it had a real effect on future parties.

Elio Colavito (01:03:14):

For sure. You've already mentioned that some women kind of left very frantically, very upset. How did the atmosphere change for those of you who kind of stuck it out, when they kind of realized that there was a police presence, a male presence in the space?

Nancy Irwin (01:03:33):

Well, everybody stopped doing what they were doing. But eventually, the police left. We were all basically sitting around, waiting for them to leave, when they weren't rounding us up. It's like, "Okay, well finally they left." And then the word went out. Basically, "The police are gone." Once we got that call, then it was like, "Well, what shall we do now? Whew. They're gone. Good. That was unpleasant. Now what?" Some of us started doing whatever it was that we'd been doing before. But a lot of us were, by then, sitting around. I mean, it was like someone threw cold water on our party. Right?

Nancy Irwin (01:04:35):

So, while some people went back to whatever it was they were doing, I would say that not that many did. It wasn't like it was before. I mean, a lot of people left, and I'm extremely grateful that they got to leave. Anyone who felt that level of fear, I'm really, really glad that they got out, and that there wasn't a bus outside capturing them, and getting ready to publish their names, and phone their parents, and their jobs and whatever. Because that's the level of fear. Right?

Alisha Stranges (01:05:20):

Can I just interject here? Because no one else has told us about this idea that they came and left a number of times. Can you clarify for us what that was about? We know they were there for 90 minutes. Is it that they were in and out during that 90-minute period?

Nancy Irwin (01:05:42):

They came for a long time. I mean, honestly, I'd have to look at my article to remember how long they were there for. But they left. I don't know now if they left for half an hour, but they left. We thought they were gone. So, we settled back down into our party. And then, we got another call: "The police are back." And so, after watching them walk around, and around, and around... Scrutinize with their eyes... They finally left, to come back again? That was really rude.

Alisha Stranges (01:06:33):

What would you think the purpose of that coming back several times would have been?

Nancy Irwin (01:06:37):

It was the same purpose of coming in the first place. These were straight men who wanted to see lesbians playing, and this was an opportunity. It's a pretty darn good opportunity. Right? You're a straight guy. You're a cop. That word, impunity. You're just like, "Hi, we're cops. We're here, and we want to come in, and we're coming in. Open that door." Right? They were there for one thing, which was to ogle the women. To watch the women. Just stare at the women. They expected a whole lot more than they got.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:19):

Right. Somebody told us that there was at least one cop who was wearing a wig, or some sort of disguise. Do you remember this?

Nancy Irwin (01:07:29):

There were two women, they came in first. My friend Terri [Robertson] saw them. I mean, I sent a handful of people, "Could they get in touch with you." These were poorly dressed women. Oddly dressed women. There were two women who looked weird. They were undercover cops. And so, they went in first as attendees, and then they left. My friend saw the, because she had to leave for some reason, so she left before it got busted. She walked up the street, and she saw these two oddly dressed women. So, the one with the wig, just standing, talking to cops in, I believe, an unmarked car that was a cop car.

Nancy Irwin (01:08:34):

And so, I got that information the next day, that those were undercover cops. We figured it out. Right? Just like in the 1981 bathhouse raid. The next day, when there was a street protest, there were two undercover cops in the front of the line, carrying the banner. Cops do this shit. You need to know it. If you go out to a Black Lives Matter protest right now, you need to be careful. Because cops will be infiltrating. Infiltrating means they come pretending to be one of you, and participate. Then they do bad shit, like try to incite a riot that then gets blamed on you. Not them.

Nancy Irwin (01:09:20):

This is our history. This is our experience. And so, yeah. Two women went in, got the lay of the land, saw what was going on. Because people weren't not doing anything because they were too oddly dressed. Odd-looking, uncomfortable-looking women. That didn't concern anyone. Right? They left. They told the men who were waiting outside, waiting to come in. And then those men came in. So, that was the first official intrusion. Even though prior to that, there were two female cops undercover. So, then we had the men come in. They stayed a long, long time. Then they left. Then they came back in again.

Nancy Irwin (01:10:14):

[Irwin trills lips] That was irritating, frustrating, annoying. Right? They didn't see what the women reported. Because by the time they got there, it wasn't happening anymore. Right? So, the two undercover cops would have seen all sorts of things that the men didn't see. So, they finally left, disappointed, waited a little bit, and then surprise, came back again. But the call went out. They came in the door. There's nothing really happening usually right at the door. And so, there's enough time for women to call and say, "Police are here again." And they did the thing again, going through. They didn't stay as long, and then they left. And then they came back a third time. By then, the party was effectively over. I mean, it had become a social party. Right? Those of us who weren't afraid, we were just hanging out with each other, and that's that. And then we left.

Elio Colavito (01:11:39):

Do you recall what time it was that you would have left?

Nancy Irwin (01:11:42):

I don't remember now. I mean, honestly, if I didn't write that article, I didn't keep notes. But I know that I stayed until after the third and final visit by police. And I know what I did the next day.

Alisha Stranges (01:12:02):

Which was?

Nancy Irwin (01:12:04):

Well, first I phoned my mother, and I probably then contacted the editor of *Siren* magazine that I wrote for, and would have phoned all my various friends who were there, and ranted. Made a decision to write an article about this and started interviewing my friends who were there, which is how I know who to call to say, "Are you willing to talk to these people who are doing a report on it? Because I know you were there," because either I remember... Because there are people I remember... You know, 20 years ago who was at a party that you were at? Well, 23, it doesn't count.

Elio Colavito (01:12:59):

I couldn't tell you.

Nancy Irwin (01:13:00):

But you know what? Like you don't remember who was, especially if you went to many of these parties and other parties. But I will tell you that the next party was completely different. The demographic never recovered. You know, there were women who never, ever went to another party.

Elio Colavito (01:13:22):

Yeah.

Nancy Irwin (01:13:23):

That wasn't my friends, like my close friends, my friends. I mean, the parties that we were having were way worse than those parties. My friends kept going. I don't know anybody who didn't, but a lot of people didn't. It's kind of like if you're out at Pride already, you know, if your picture has been in the paper, everyone knows you were there, then you don't have anything to hide. You can go out to a different queer gathering.

Nancy Irwin (01:13:59):

But the police effectively ruined it. After that they didn't sell beer anymore because the only charge the police could come up with... I can't remember, did it take them like four days to come up with a charge? It was something like that. They did this raid but then there were no charges laid. They couldn't come up with a charge, and I think it took four days for them to realize... It turned out they were selling beer up until two o'clock, but a special event permit, which they pointed out is for weddings and bat mitzvahs and things like that, those special event permits that never get raided... You were only allowed to sell until 1:00 a.m., even though at bars, you were allowed to sell until 2:00 a.m. Somebody hadn't read the fine print on the permit and the police noticed that beer was being sold between 1:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m. So, that tells you something. The

police were there between 1:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m., right? I don't know what time they arrived, but for sure they were there between 1:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m.

Nancy Irwin (01:15:16):

They ended up charging the person whose name was on the permit. I think there were two people who had to sign up on the permit, so they're the ones that got to deal with a very, very high level of stress for as long as it took to resolve it, the case. It's not fun being in that position. It's kind of like, you're a volunteer; you're trying to help make a party happen; and you probably had to go and schlep the beer and organize selling the beer. So, you weren't having a great time at the party. Well, you were having a fun night, but you were selling beer, right? The other people were partying and you were selling beer and the proceeds you donated to... You know, this is volunteer work.

Nancy Irwin (01:16:12):

Right? And now you've got a court case and one of the people I think was a university student potentially from another country, like the U.S. It causes a lot of stress. This wasn't good. And if you think about what the police just did... I participated in the report about Bruce MacArthur and the eight men who he killed. I knew two of them, and I knew a third, because that's my community. The memorial at The Black Eagle, the women who were part of my social circle, we also went to The Black Eagle. Dyke Day, guess where we all met after the Dyke March? Voom. The patio at The Black Eagle. Right? The police have not improved. I mean, maybe they improve today, but they didn't improve yesterday, and that report, I'm sure... Have you read that report?

Alisha Stranges (01:17:15):

Which one are you talking about? The one for the Pussy Palace or...?

Nancy Irwin (01:17:18):

No, it's called, "The Missing Persons Report," and I could send you a link to it. The report takes about four hours to read, and it came out about three weeks ago.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:31):

Okay. No, we have not read that.

Nancy Irwin (01:17:32):

Okay. It is about how the police dismissed members of the gay community who said that they thought there was a serial killer because, first one guy went missing, and then another one, and then another one, and the police were so dismissive. They said, well maybe he tried to straighten out his life. You know, go straight.

Elio Colavito (01:17:52):

Nice.

Nancy Irwin (01:17:53):

Like, leave the community. Queers were putting posters up on the street poles all around Church Street, "Missing person. Have you seen this?" The police were paying no attention. It wasn't until the white guy, Andrew [Kinsman], who used to be a bartender at The Eagle and then was most recently working at PWA

[Toronto People with AIDS Foundation]. So, he was very, very, very well known in the gay community. When he went missing... Well, he was very, very, very well known, but people were up to here with the police and their lack of response; but he was also white.

Nancy Irwin (01:18:34):

Two women died. One was trans. Two women died. One woman, her mother found her four days later in like a 300-foot radius of where she disappeared or something like that. The police didn't care. They don't care about us except to come and raid our bathhouse. Sorry, but you can't get one story without the other.

Elio Colavito (01:18:58):

I know. They're definitely linked.

Nancy Irwin (01:19:02):

They're linked.

Elio Colavito (01:19:03):

It's part of the story for sure.

Nancy Irwin (01:19:05):

Right. It's part of my story. When I speak about the missing and murdered men who are brown, who are gay and bisexual and mostly from the Middle East, you know, who the police didn't give a shit about, it's the same police. Right? I speak about the way the police treat and treated us. And I speak about my article about Cherry Beach. I speak about riding in Pride and how they watched us. You know, I speak about the Pussy Palace raid and the men's bathhouse raid. These things are all connected, and I'm angry. It's like every frigging day, it feels like, I turn on the news and then like I... Just today, another Black man has been knelt upon by a cop and killed. Not yesterday's, not last week's, not the one, you know... Like, on the frigging anniversary of the court case of George Floyd. It's like, it doesn't fucking stop. This is where abolish comes in. We do not need police to be doing all this shit. In fact, the police, it turns out, exist to protect property and persons of the colonizers. Really, right now we need a complete change because the police are doing way too much shit. They keep doing way too much shit. These stories keep repeating.

Nancy Irwin (01:20:51):

We need mental health services. We need some help with like traffic and parking violations. We're having COVID. I feel like I'm about to be one of those people standing in the street screaming, some days, because I'm so tired of the isolation. I'm tired of not being able to play with my playmates because we're all afraid of killing each other, and it's not an STD anymore, an STI. Now, it's a frigging virus, right? You know, the cops just come and kill you, especially if you're a person of colour, right? Like, they kill particularly Black people. Men. Just kill. And they get away with it. So, a little frigging raid on a women's bathhouse party, that's nothing. How about attending a funeral? Or, how about you get to be part of the prison industrial complex and you get like a 20-year sentence in the States and you get to be like a new slave because you're now working as free labour in the prison system? That's today. The same cops; the same militarized, mostly white men. Coming in to see a bunch of naked women playing is nothing. Ruining our parties, nothing.

Nancy Irwin (01:22:23):

I hope to see you out at the next protest for Black Lives and just know there's an organization called Surge that's doing a lot of work. Not Another Black Life, Black Lives Matter. Read the book *The Skin We're In* written by Desmond Cole. 2017, he wrote about something every month that happened. He's in Toronto. This shit, it doesn't stop. *The Skin We're In*.

Alisha Stranges (01:22:59):

Yes. Desmond Cole has kind of... We're both University of Toronto students, kind of in related, but disparate fields. We've sort of encountered his work in that context, and seen him speak. So, definitely we're familiar. I just want to kind of, we're kind of nearing the end here, and I wanted to give you an opportunity to sort of speak to anything else about your experience, that our questions haven't prompted you to talk about. If there's anything else that you want to share about, more particularly, if you can, about the night of the raid or the fallout of the raid?

Nancy Irwin (01:23:42):

The fallout from the raid, I think, is really important. That so many women left terrified is one thing. But if you ask about the next party that happened, everyone was afraid. Because for a lot of women, it was a big deal to go. People were afraid. Like, they were scared of this. We didn't know, what is this going to be, this bathhouse? So, it took a lot of courage to go. I mean, it took courage for me to go to my first party and my second party and my third. Not those parties, other parties. Right? And so, by the time these women's bathhouse parties happened, I was just excited. After the raid, there were so many women who just weren't going to go again.

Nancy Irwin (01:24:50):

It was like a full fire, and now it's down to a tiny flame. That's not to say that there wasn't a lot of fun at subsequent parties, but there was a sense of safety that was gone because you never knew when it was going to get raided again, even though the police lost a human rights case. Thankfully, somebody got the idea to charge the police with human rights violations. We were really lucky that Margaret Atwood spoke. Margaret Atwood, who Doug Ford didn't know existed when Rob Ford was trying to close libraries in Toronto. One of them had something to do with Margaret Atwood, and Doug Ford said, "Who's Margaret Atwood? What do we care about who Margaret Atwood is?" It's like, you don't know Canada's most famous author? She spoke out, and she said, "Well, I would not like it if the police came into my room when I was having a bath."

Nancy Irwin (01:26:11):

I'm not kidding. It was kind of like what she said, but what she did with that was everyone in the suburbs, you know, everyone everywhere... She kind of took the sex out of it and showed the vulnerability. Our politicians, Kyle Rae, a gay man. He spoke out at the police conference and the Chief of Police or the bosses of the guys who did all this. They said, "Well, we didn't know what they were doing that night. You know, they were just out doing their job on the beat." So, Kyle [Rae] called them "rogue cops." Then they charged him with like calling them a bad name. Actually, he got charged with it. Well, if they're not frigging rogue cops, then they did it under orders. Which one was it? But we were lucky because we had the press on our side. We had the politicians on our side. It could have gone the other way, easily. But yeah, it was never the same.

Nancy Irwin (01:27:20):

That's it. The end. Parties continued to happen, but it was never the same. Lots of women wouldn't go. We were always afraid, like how deep into whatever it is you're doing do you want to get, because you might have

to be pulling out and undoing what you're doing really quickly. The thing about sex or SM play is, that is a time that you're vulnerable. It's like taking a shit. You know, if you're sitting on the toilet with your pants down and all of a sudden there's a fire and you have to run, you're not in a good place. Right? If you're in the middle of having sex and, all of a sudden, the police are there and you have to run... Well, there is a vulnerability, a place of vulnerability that, to really enjoy sex, you can't be waiting for the police to show up.

Alisha Stranges (01:28:28):

Yeah.

Nancy Irwin (01:28:29):

They effectively ended the party. They ended the sense of safety.

Alisha Stranges (01:28:36):

Right.

Nancy Irwin (01:28:37):

That's what happened.

Alisha Stranges (01:28:38):

In that way then do you think that that is what the police were trying to do and then so they succeeded or...?

Nancy Irwin (01:28:47):

No. No. I rather doubt that. No, I think they wanted to... They wanted to have a fun night. They wanted to go and catch women and maybe they were going to do this big bust and maybe it was going to be a whole lot of fun and they were going to be titillated and they were going to tell all their buddies what they saw and then it was going to be big splash all over the news. Very exciting, lesbian sex. You know, "The Boys Bust Lesbian Sex Party." No, I don't think that they were thinking that far ahead that they would ruin future parties. No, no. It was entertainment for that night.

Alisha Stranges (01:29:29):

Very bizarre then to have sort of two women undercover cops helping to facilitate that. If that was the intent, do you think maybe the undercover women who police officers didn't know that that's what it was; that that's what the intent was for them, the men police officers?

Nancy Irwin (01:29:47):

Of course they knew.

Alisha Stranges (01:29:49):

So, they were helping them.

Nancy Irwin (01:29:50):

Absolutely. If they were two straight women who were on the team, and these pervert lesbians were having a sex party... Yeah. Are you kidding? Yeah, just being a woman doesn't... I mean, do you know how many straight women don't approve of-

Alisha Stranges (01:30:12):

I guess, I'm under the impression from some of the publishing around the undercover cops who were involved, that it's likely, they were actually part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Nancy Irwin (01:30:26):

I doubt that. You think those two women were part of the queer community?

Alisha Stranges (01:30:32):

Well, based on the research, it appears likely, but...

Nancy Irwin (01:30:36):

I would say it's extremely unlikely. Based on their outfits alone, they would have known better.

Alisha Stranges (01:30:43):

Hm, okay.

Nancy Irwin (01:30:44):

So, I mean, you wouldn't show up... It's just like the undercover cops who showed up in Port Dover at those biker events. I mean, they were dressed so badly. That's undercover cops, right? Like you could, you could pick them out. If somebody went to Pride and they looked absurd, they looked like they were dressed for like a carnival, of some like, strange... When someone really doesn't fit in, then think that maybe they're cops, dressed in their idea of undercover for the event.

Alisha Stranges (01:31:27):

Right, right.

Nancy Irwin (01:31:27):

Yeah. You know what, I don't know who those two women were, but there's enough people who don't, and 20 years ago, plenty of people who wouldn't have approved of a lesbian sex party.

Alisha Stranges (01:31:39):

I see.

Nancy Irwin (01:31:40):

Right. You might not understand now how the world was 20 years ago, but we were lucky that Margaret Atwood took our side and that a handful of politicians took our side and then it rolled that way. You know that even when they lost and they had to do queer sensitivity training, they didn't, and they put it off and put

it off and put it off, and they had to be taken back to the human rights and make them do it because they didn't do what they were supposed to do.

Alisha Stranges (01:32:19):

That would explain the gap, why it was settled in 2005, but the training didn't start until 2010.

Nancy Irwin (01:32:27):

Yeah. Yeah. That would explain that, would it?

Alisha Stranges (01:32:29):

Yeah.

Nancy Irwin (01:32:29):

Yeah, because they just weren't going to do it. The world is really different now. At that time, the police were trying to create a liaison committee with the queer community, but they came out with these rules. Like, you couldn't be part of the committee if you'd ever been busted. Well, all the sex workers who'd been busted then couldn't be a part of a joint committee, and then people didn't want to have this committee because of the rules that police were making. Then they went and busted this bathhouse party. That was what Bill Blair was concerned about because he wasn't the Chief of Police yet. He was working on the LGBTQ liaison committee, and he was pissed because these cops were ruining it for him.

Alisha Stranges (01:33:22):

Oh, I see.

Nancy Irwin (01:33:22):

Right? That was what that was about. Yeah. It sucked and the police are still doing bad shit today. The laws have changed, but it takes a long time for things to change. Like I said, gay marriage, you know, it happened. The trickledown effect of that is that we became normalized. But when we got the right to exist and not be like a psychiatric mental health problem, I think that was 1969. Before that, you know, we were suffering from mental health things. I know when I was 11 and I went and looked up homosexuality, and you don't need to ask me why I did that, but I went and looked up homosexuality at the library, and it directed me to the psychiatry section where I found the section on the illness of homosexuality. And I closed that book. You know, "We've come a long way, baby." But we are not where we need to be.

Alisha Stranges (01:34:46):

Well, listen, Nancy, we're going to have to close, but I just want to leave... Is there any sort of final point that you wanted to make before we close? Or do you feel you've said everything you want to say?

Nancy Irwin (01:35:02):

I think that's everything. I would be interested to know if, and we can do this off the record, if you've heard from any of my friends.

Alisha Stranges (01:35:12):

Yeah. We can close now and talk a little bit about that for sure.

Nancy Irwin (01:35:16):

Let's do that. Let my hit my... Let me figure out how to... All right. Boy, I have pause, play, save. I guess pause.