

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Sabrina Olender
Conducted on May 12, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Elio Colavito on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Sabrina is a white, queer cis-woman from a working-class background in Toronto, Ontario. At the time of the interview in 2021, Sabrina was 44 years old. She was in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview mostly concerns her experiences as a Pussy Palace patron from 1998-2000. She discusses her life in the women's leather and S&M communities; her experience as a patron of the Pussy Palace; her account of the Pussy Palace raid on September 14, 2000; her involvement as a witness in *Her Majesty the Queen v. J. Hornick and R. Aitcheson*, and other topics. The interview covers the time period from about 1998-2002. Toronto, Ontario, is the only location mentioned.

Keywords: Queer; Pussy Palace; Play Parties; Kink; Bathhouse; Police; Raid; Sex; Trans.

Elio Colavito (00:00):

Record. Beautiful, we're recording. Okay. So, I kind of have a little spiel off the top that I have to do. This is Elio Colavito from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project, and I am here in Toronto, Ontario, interviewing Sabrina Olender on May 12, 2021. Sabrina Olender's also in Toronto. Sabrina is going to tell us about their experiences as a patron of the Pussy Palace Bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. Sabrina, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Sabrina Olender (00:35):

Yes, you do.

Elio Colavito (00:36):

Awesome. So, before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, I'm just going ask you a few questions that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself, in particular to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold or the categories that you occupy and how these may have shifted or evolved over time. So, we're going to start relatively simply. Just tell me your full name, your age and your preferred gender pronouns.

Sabrina Olender (01:00):

So, Sabrina Olender, 44, she/her.

Elio Colavito (01:05):

Awesome. All right. How would you describe your gender and sexual identity today in 2021?

Sabrina Olender (01:12):

So, I identify as a woman, as a cis woman. I identify mainly using the term queer.

Elio Colavito (01:24):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (01:25):

Which, for me, encompasses a lot of different things. It encompasses the fact that I am in poly relationships, I date people of all genders and persuasions. So, for me, sort of queer covers all of that. And, in addition to, I'm involved in the kinky community, as well.

Elio Colavito (01:51):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Awesome. And what about in 2000? How would you have described your gender and sexuality in 2000 when the Night of the 2000 Pussies would have happened?

Sabrina Olender (02:02):

Yeah, so back then I would have identified more differently. I looked very different. I had a shaved head; I was much more androgynous looking. I think I would have used the word "boi" within a kinky context. I more identified in the dyke community, leather dyke community. So, I think I would have used that word, to use one word, "leather dyke."

Elio Colavito (02:34):

Yeah. Just for the record, can you explain what you mean by "boi" or by a "leather dyke."

Sabrina Olender (02:36):

Yeah. "Boi" meaning sort of a younger, bottom person who is more on the androgynous, or perhaps masculine, looking type person. And "leather dykes" sort of meaning being involved in the women... At the time, 20 years ago, it was called the Women's Community, whereas now that would encompass not just women but trans people and what not language and what not evolves.

Elio Colavito (03:12):

Right.

Sabrina Olender (03:12):

But, the women's S&M community.

Elio Colavito (03:16):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And what about racial, ethnic and cultural identity? How do you express yourself through these categories?

Sabrina Olender (03:23):

I would say I'm a white Canadian. I don't identify with any other cultural groups.

Elio Colavito (03:32):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And what about your educational and class backgrounds?

Sabrina Olender (03:36):

Class, I mean I grew up very working class, perhaps even less than working class, poverty class. But I do have a university education.

Elio Colavito (03:49):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). How does your current education or social class compare to who you were in 2000?

Sabrina Olender (03:57):

In 2000, I guess I would have just finished university. Certainly, was in a different socio-economic class than I was now. Back then, I was just finished university, I was figuring out what I'm going to do, who I'm going to be and what not. And was, you know, just living with roommates and—

Elio Colavito (04:22):

Yeah.

Sabrina Olender (04:24):

Some job.

Elio Colavito (04:26):

Typical early mid-twenties type of stuff.

Sabrina Olender (04:28):

Yeah, exactly.

Elio Colavito (04:29):

And what kind of activities occupy your time these days?

Sabrina Olender (04:35):

Well, not a lot with COVID. I do a lot of... Let's pretend it's not COVID. I do a lot of traveling, I do a lot of crafting, reading, other solo activities a lot. Socializing with friends. I spend time with the women's community as a social activity... So, the women's leather community, I specify that.

Elio Colavito (05:11):

Do you feel comfortable sharing a bit more about what that entails in that specific leather scene?

Sabrina Olender (05:17):

Yeah. So, pre-COVID, there was social activities, brunches and munches, which are just meeting events at bars or what have you. Certainly, Pride was a huge one. There was always a group of leather folks that would march together in the Dyke March and spent time together over the weekend. Yeah, a lot of social activities, and the play parties. Play parties would be organized, play weekends in various cities in Canada.

Elio Colavito (05:58):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And how might the things that occupy your time today be different than what you were up to in 2000?

Sabrina Olender (06:10):

I mean, for the most part, a lot of them are similar. I have known some of the folks who I went to Pussy Palace with over the years and I'm still friends with them. So, the community has been very, sort of, stable and the same over those years, which has been amazing. Just truly an amazing gift to still know those folks. Maybe I'm not spending... Maybe they're not my closest people, but it is a community of people that I can rely on seeing at these types of events and social engagements.

Elio Colavito (06:48):

And what role does religion or spirituality play in your life currently?

Sabrina Olender (06:52):

Very, very little, if none.

Elio Colavito (06:55):

Yeah. How about in 2000?

Sabrina Olender (06:57):

Same.

Elio Colavito (06:59):

You'd be surprised at how often that's the answer of these interviews. Is there anything else that you think would be important for me to know about how you understand the different identities that you hold today as compared to 20 years ago?

Sabrina Olender (07:13):

No, I think I've summed it up. I hope I have.

Elio Colavito (07:16):

Yeah, beautiful. All right, so now we're going to get into the nitty gritty of things. I want to invite you to travel back in time to the fall of 2000. The Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host The Night of 2000 Pussies, which was the fourth installment of the Pussy Palace, a series of exclusive bathhouse events for lesbian women, queer women and trans folk in Toronto. How did you first learn about The Night of 2000 Pussies event?

Sabrina Olender (07:44):

It would have been through the leather community. That was large part of my social circle, so it would have been through them. I can't say for certain, but I can't think of any other way I would have. That was where I was getting my information on events.

Elio Colavito (08:05):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And, had you ever been to a Pussy Palace event or other public sex event before?

Sabrina Olender (08:11):

Yes. Both.

Elio Colavito (08:14):

Do want to tell me a bit about other events you had been to and your experiences at them?

Sabrina Olender (08:22):

I had been to quite a number of S&M-focused events, both women and trans focused, and, at the time, the term “pansexual community” was used a lot, so with mixed gendered folk. So, whenever those were happening, which, you know, were not that frequent, I would try to attend because they were wonderful and not always happening.

Elio Colavito (08:59):

Right. So, was there anything different about the Pussy Palace events or this one in particular that kind of intrigued you?

Sabrina Olender (09:08):

Well, all of the women’s events intrigued me the most. I wanted to go to all of them, all the time. So, it was just very exciting that someone was organizing these things that were women focused. We were so excited to be in a gay male bathhouse, in a space that normally we do not have access to.

Elio Colavito (09:32):

Right.

Sabrina Olender (09:33):

So, that was very exciting. And, especially because, at the time, that location was very different than it is now. The physical location was, it’s been renovated since.

Elio Colavito (09:49):

Right. Yeah, we’ve heard. Is there anything you want to speak about and what’s different about it?

Sabrina Olender (09:56):

So, back then, it was dirty, gross men’s bathhouse. It was tiny rooms throughout this huge mansion on Carlson near Jarvis. You can only imagine what went on when we were not there. I think some it was carpeted, which was like...

Elio Colavito (10:22):

Every narrator remembers that it was carpeted.

Sabrina Olender (10:24):

Because it's so gross.

Elio Colavito (10:24):

Yeah, it was gross.

Sabrina Olender (10:25):

Why would you carpet somewhere with so much fluid? There was a shower room. It was dirty and back-alley, which was very exciting, very, very exciting. And then they renovated it to, I guess, attract a different kind of clientele. It attracts different people now, it's not exclusively gay folk. And still, they cleaned it up, and they opened it up, and it's nice. Oasis is nice and certainly I'm glad to have such a facility in our town. But, it's not the dirty back-alley bathhouse that it was.

Elio Colavito (11:05):

Yeah. For sure.

Sabrina Olender (11:07):

It's a nice sex club now.

Elio Colavito (11:10):

Sounds like it's aged well. I'm curious about the space and time during which you went from being someone who decided to attend this event and someone who becomes an official patron of the event. So, I'm wondering where you may have been before you made your way to Club Toronto.

Sabrina Olender (11:32):

I can't remember where I was before we went there. I might have been at a friend's house or might have come straight from home. I probably went to someone's house because I have a lot of social anxiety and those events were just off-the-charts terrifying. So, I definitely arrived there with people, so we must have met somewhere before. Maybe we went to a bar on Church before.

Elio Colavito (12:00):

Do you know how you would have gotten there in terms of a mode of transportation?

Sabrina Olender (12:04):

We would have just used public transit. We were cheap queers.

Elio Colavito (12:12):

What time would you have been planning to arrive at a party like this?

Sabrina Olender (12:17):

10:00 p.m., maybe. 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m.

Elio Colavito (12:21):

And, did you have a time you were planning on leaving, or a duration you planned on staying?

Sabrina Olender (12:30):

No, I think we were just going and going to see what was going to happen.

Elio Colavito (12:33):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Sabrina Olender (12:35):

Hopefully, we were staying late because we were having so much fun.

Elio Colavito (12:41):

Who were you with?

Sabrina Olender (12:43):

I was with my girlfriend at the time. At the time, she would have identified as my girlfriend. Now, she would identify differently. And some friends, some very good friends.

Elio Colavito (13:03):

How would you have been feeling in the moments leading up to becoming a patron?

Sabrina Olender (13:08):

Terrified and excited all rolled in together.

Elio Colavito (13:16):

This is a bit of an odd question but if you could freeze this moment in time where you were just about to become a patron of the Pussy Palace and express it sonically, what is the sound of this moment?

Sabrina Olender (13:29):

That's a great question. I feel like the sound I would use now would not have been the same sound I would use back then. Now, I think the sound would be "Yeaaaah. Ahhh" But, back then, it probably would have been "Mew. Okay. We're going in."

Elio Colavito (13:55):

Awesome. What was the look that you would have been going for that evening? What kind of thing would you have worn to an event like this?

Sabrina Olender (14:09):

I cannot remember what I was wearing, but I would have been wearing something very boyish, probably some sort of tank top, probably a black tank top and some underwear, some boys' underwear and some boots. That's probably what I was wearing.

Elio Colavito (14:31):

You mentioned taking the TTC. Is it something that you would have worn on route to the club or something you would have changed into?

Sabrina Olender (14:37):

Would have changed there, or just taken off our jeans or whatever there.

Elio Colavito (14:43):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And how did you go about choosing what you would wear? What were you trying to feel, what were you trying to communicate to other people with your outfit?

Sabrina Olender (14:57):

I can't remember exactly what I was thinking back then, but I'm confident it would be the same as now going to any of those events. I just want to not look like a doofus. I want to look like someone's going to find me attractive. Am I looking okay? These things are always a little bit terrifying. Do I look okay? Are people going to want to talk to me? Do I look hot? Those types of things.

Elio Colavito (15:32):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You arrive at Club Toronto. Describe the scene outside the club.

Sabrina Olender (15:38):

I can't remember. There might have been a line up. Certainly, everyone was just sort of buzzing with excitement. It was like this excited tension.

Elio Colavito (15:54):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (15:54):

What's going to happen tonight?

Elio Colavito (15:59):

Do you recall how you felt while you were standing in line?

Sabrina Olender (16:03):

No, but I'm pretty sure I was both, like I said, excited and buzzing but also just that social anxiety, like, am I going to get up to anything? Is anyone going to want to get up to anything with me?

Elio Colavito (16:20):

Do you recall more or less how long you may have waited to get inside?

Sabrina Olender (16:24):

No, I'm sorry, I don't.

Elio Colavito (16:26):

That's okay. Don't apologize for not having the right memories. There's no such thing as the right memory. Whatever comes to you, comes to you and whatever doesn't, doesn't. What do you recall about the process of being admitted into the bathhouse?

Sabrina Olender (16:46):

I can't differentiate it back then from what it's like now when you go to the same space. So, I can't... There must have been a check-in of something. I think we probably had to pay a cover. I don't know how extensive it was. Now, you have to sign in on a computer. I'm sure that's not what we did.

Elio Colavito (17:03):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (17:05):

Maybe our names were on the list. I don't know. I can't remember.

Elio Colavito (17:10):

It's completely okay. Do you want to talk a little bit more about what the process has looked like even now, just for the record?

Sabrina Olender (17:19):

Yeah. Now, you show up, there's sort of a waiting vestibule, and they sort of visually look at you and they buzz you in.

Elio Colavito (17:28):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (17:31):

Which I can only assume is from a safety point of view. Great. You check in on a computer, you pay the cover fee. And, more recently, they go over the rules, like how to comport yourself at a bathhouse and here's how not to be a creepo.

Elio Colavito (17:49):

Yeah, that seems like a good idea.

Sabrina Olender (17:53):

So, back then, I'm almost certain there would have been a list of rules that you had to sort of be pointed to. Like, don't bleed on anything and don't... Whatever the rules would have been for the night.

Elio Colavito (18:12):

Yeah. So, you finally get inside. How do you describe the space itself?

Sabrina Olender (18:19):

I remember it was loud, there was music playing, I think. And, it's dirty. It's a dirty bathhouse. One thing that always struck me about the bathhouse is that women and people who are socialized female approach sex a lot differently than I think gay men do. So, there was quite a bit of socializing. So, certainly on the first floor when you went in, there was social area. And a lot of people were in that area.

Elio Colavito (19:06):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (19:07):

At the beginning, talking and feeling each other out.

Elio Colavito (19:15):

It's interesting that you say that. So, I want to ask more about that process of socializing, feeling each other out, so to speak. What does that typically look like in the women's bathhouse spaces from arriving, socializing and then what?

Sabrina Olender (19:32):

So, I think every women-and-trans sex party that I've been to, not just at the bathhouse, there's always this beginning part of socializing where there needs to be some talking and there needs to be some hanging out and hugging and "Hey, how are you? What have you been up to?" Like a connecting point.

Elio Colavito (19:59):

Right.

Sabrina Olender (20:01):

I think sometimes in our minds, when you think about what's going to happen and you're going to go there and you think about bathhouses and stuff, you think you're just going to arrive and you're going to grab someone and you're just going to go shove them in a corner. And that would be great, but that's not really the way you get a date.

Elio Colavito (20:20):

Right. I can imagine. So, in that case then, what's the atmosphere like in the club amongst all the chatter?

Sabrina Olender (20:29):

So, it's friendly, but there is this undercurrent of tension, of sexiness, of something's going to happen. People are talking, but they're also looking around. "Who's here? Who am I going to follow? Who's looking at me? Is anyone looking at me?" You know, that.

Elio Colavito (20:55):

And what parts of the space did you gravitate towards?

Sabrina Olender (21:02):

There was so many rooms. The spaces that really stick out for me was, there was a shower room. All tiled and kind of dirty grout and stuff. There was a porno room where they were playing porn. Those two in particular stick out in my mind a lot.

Elio Colavito (21:34):

I'm curious about the porno room. What kinds of porn would they have been playing? How was this set up? What does that look like?

Sabrina Olender (21:43):

I don't remember what they played. I'm sure it just lesbian porn or something, I don't know. It was set up similar to it is now. It's just a tiny room with a bench with some padding and a big TV. It was pretty bare; it wasn't a done-up room. It was kind of just here's a bench and some porn room.

Elio Colavito (22:06):

What else do you need?

Sabrina Olender (22:07):

Exactly.

Elio Colavito (22:10):

What kinds of activities did you take part in specifically?

Sabrina Olender (22:15):

So, this is where I can't remember at that Pussy Palace versus other Pussy Palaces. There are activities that stick out very, very clearly in my mind that I did, but I cannot remember if they were at that specific one. What I do remember at that specific one was having interaction with the police because that's where that happened. But as for the other sexy activities, I couldn't tell you if it was this one or other ones.

Elio Colavito (22:42):

If you feel comfortable, you can share what you remember from all of them. This is kind of like a weird one where you can just be more general about the kinds of spaces and activities you would have occupied on any given night at a Pussy Palace.

Sabrina Olender (22:58):

Do you want specific details?

Elio Colavito (23:00):

If you're comfortable. It's up to you.

Sabrina Olender (23:04):

One activity that I think many people remember, and that I remember so clearly... There was one room that was a larger room, and it had mirrors, and it had enough room to set up a number of chairs. But it was closed off. There was a door that you had to go in and leave. So, if someone was standing there, you couldn't really see inside unless they let you. So, a bunch of us decided it would be great fun to create a fuck line where you were blindfolded, someone led you into the room, there were five chairs and, every two minutes, you're going to be moved from chair to chair and during the two minutes, someone that you don't know because you are blindfolded is just going to fuck you. And then the bell's going to ring, and you go down the line. And then someone is going to shove you out the door, and you're not going to know who any of the people were in the room. So, it ended up being a very popular space for the time that we were there.

Elio Colavito (24:12):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). We've heard similar stories of things like that.

Sabrina Olender (24:17):

So, that was certainly a highlight.

Elio Colavito (24:20):

We've also heard that there was a photo room where patrons could take Polaroids of themselves--

Sabrina Olender (24:25):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elio Colavito (24:26):

Documenting their night at the bathhouse, take it home kind of thing. Do you recall spending any time in the photo room?

Sabrina Olender (24:31):

I don't. I can't remember if I did. I'm sure I did. I'm sure I went into every room and looked at everything. But I can't remember that, and I don't have a Polaroid, or I don't know if anyone took one of me.

Elio Colavito (24:43):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (24:44):

They might have, I just don't have one.

Elio Colavito (24:46):

That's okay. I really want to get a sense of the impression that the space made on your senses. So, I'm going to invite you to soften your gaze, or if you feel comfortable, you can close your eyes, just breathe. With each inhale, allow your body to re-inhabit a specific location within the Pussy Palace. And from this contemplative space, I want you to tell me, when you look around what you're seeing.

Sabrina Olender (25:20):

Just so much hotness. Everyone and everything just seems so hot. The whole thing was just hot, hot, hot. And I'm not sure at the time I would say it in these words. But I think everyone felt it, that what was happening was sort of unique and precious. This was not something that was going to happen all the time. And who knows how long? So, I think this feeling of just wanting to grab this moment and this event and, despite any anxiety or trepidation, just wanting to just jump in and just be in it.

Elio Colavito (26:09):

Mm-hmm (affirmative) And if you could distill the space into a single colour, what would it be?

Sabrina Olender (26:21):

Dark purple comes to mind.

Elio Colavito (26:25):

Yeah. And if the space had a sound, what would it sound like?

Sabrina Olender (26:35):

I think it would sound like music, throbbing music interspersed with heavy breathing and muffled sex sounds.

Elio Colavito (26:52):

What does it smell like? What lingering odours do you recall?

Sabrina Olender (27:00):

The place is so old, there was an oldness smell to it, like an old building. But I'm sure that smell was just the gross carpet.

Elio Colavito (27:18):

Probably. If you could reach out and touch this space and hold it in your hands, what does it feel like?

Sabrina Olender (27:26):

I think it feels hard and sharp.

Elio Colavito (27:36):

And if you could taste it, what would its flavour be?

Sabrina Olender (27:39):

Ew, I don't want to taste it. I don't know. I don't want to put my lips anywhere on it. I do, but I don't.

Elio Colavito (27:50):

And is there anything else that you want to tell me about the way the club looked, tasted, smelled, sounded or felt like that you didn't get to say already.

Sabrina Olender (28:01):

No, no I don't think so.

Elio Colavito (28:03):

Okay. You can let this exercise go. Thank you for going there with me. It's always one of the best parts of the interview. I'm curious about who else was there and the next set of questions is going to focus on your perception of the crowd. How many people would you say were in the Palace that night?

Sabrina Olender (28:25):

It seemed like it was packed. Packed. I want to say hundreds, but could the space hold that many people? I don't know. It was crowded.

Elio Colavito (28:36):

And this crowd... How would you describe it in terms of race, gender, culture, sexuality? How were people represented there?

Sabrina Olender (28:50):

Race-wise, the leather community, as I've experienced it here, is predominantly white. I think that's changed over the years. But, if I think back, I think it's definitely predominantly white. All different genders, people identifying differently. Trans folk, although, I can't say how many... Trans was not something that was as common back then. People didn't identify that way as much.

Elio Colavito (29:37):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (29:43):

So, not to say that they weren't there, but I just think people weren't identifying that way.

Elio Colavito (29:47):

Right.

Sabrina Olender (29:47):

It was more like this butch identification or femme... top/bottom, bois/girls. It was a real mix. It seemed like a real mix.

Elio Colavito (30:00):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). The Pussy Palace has been described as a place that was publicly inclusive of lesbian women, queer cis women, trans folks... What was your impression of the relationship of these differently gendered groups at the Pussy Palace the night that you were there?

Sabrina Olender (30:17):

In what way? How do you mean?

Elio Colavito (30:20):

However you want to interpret it.

Sabrina Olender (30:32):

At the time, it felt inclusive. Whether it really was or not, I'm not sure I can say. But it felt like it was.

Elio Colavito (30:45):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (30:50):

And it felt like everyone was really happy to be there with everyone else.

Elio Colavito (31:00):

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

Sabrina Olender (31:07):

It felt great. It felt really exciting.

Elio Colavito (31:12):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). At 12:45 a.m., five men, all plainclothes police officers, entered the club and stayed about 90 minutes. Were you still in the Palace when the police raided?

Sabrina Olender (31:26):

I was.

Elio Colavito (31:29):

Do you recall what you were doing the moment the police arrived?

Sabrina Olender (31:36):

I wasn't doing anything. I wasn't involved in an activity. I was with my girlfriend, and we were probably watching something, checking out what was happening. But I remember we weren't doing anything. Because, very quickly, when they arrived, the word spread very fast. Everyone just ran around and said "The police are here. The police are here." And so, everyone just sort of stopped.

Elio Colavito (32:04):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Was there anything that you remember really vividly about that moment or those few minutes in the beginning of figuring out that there were police in the building?

Sabrina Olender (32:17):

Disbelief. "What do you mean the police are here? What the fuck?"

Elio Colavito (32:22):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (32:22):

Yeah.

Elio Colavito (32:23):

And the from disbelief, how did your feelings change after the reality set in?

Sabrina Olender (32:38):

Anxiety, because what's going to happen? Why are they here? Your mind goes to famous historical raids that have happened. Is that what's going to happen here? Are we going to be arrested? I remember thinking: Should we stay? Should we go? What should we do? And just being rooted in the spot and thinking: Well, we have to stay because what if we have to help do something?

Elio Colavito (33:11):

Did you see or talk to any of the police officers?

Sabrina Olender (33:17):

I did. My girlfriend and I were in the porno room; hence I remember that room. And the police came through, and there was a verbal interaction that was very brief. I can't remember exactly what they said. It was nothing, just something like "Hey, you. What are you doing?" It felt very, like, police positioning. They wanted to be "Yeah, we're here. We're seeing you." They're not even doing anything. They just want to make their presence known.

Elio Colavito (33:59):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (34:00):
And then he left the room.

Elio Colavito (34:04):
Was it just you and your girlfriend in the room?

Sabrina Olender (34:06):
Yeah.

Elio Colavito (34:07):
Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you recall what your girlfriend may or may not have responded with?

Sabrina Olender (34:13):
No, I don't.

Elio Colavito (34:18):
Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you remember how you felt being actually faced with that police presence?

Sabrina Olender (34:26):
Yeah, I was scared. We had no idea what was going to happen. Fear. Just not knowing.

Elio Colavito (34:36):
Mm-hmm (affirmative). And this fear, I want you to tell me what exactly you were afraid of.

Sabrina Olender (34:45):
Were we going to be arrested? Was someone going to get hurt? Were they going to be violent? Mainly, those sort of immediate fears of "Is everyone going to be okay?"

Elio Colavito (35:06):
How did you feel about the male presence in the space?

Sabrina Olender (35:10):
Angry. Angry.

Elio Colavito (35:17):
Did you have any sense for the why the police would have been there?

Sabrina Olender (35:24):
No. No. What was the reasoning? We had had Pussy Palaces before. Why now? Why would they come now?

Elio Colavito (35:35):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you recall jumping to any conclusions in your own mind about why they would have been in the space?

Sabrina Olender (35:45):

Because they're assholes who like to harass queers.

Elio Colavito (35:53):

That's like—

Sabrina Olender (35:53):

That's my only conclusion. They just want to... I don't know. They're assholes. They want to look at some tits. They want to say they were the police that got to raid the Pussy Palace. I don't know.

Elio Colavito (36:07):

Yeah. How did the atmosphere change after the cops left?

Sabrina Olender (36:13):

Oh, we must have left soon after. The whole thing just completely... It tanked, the whole atmosphere. Everyone is just outraged, and it's fear and upset, like, boner killer. All those things are. And certainly people, I'm sure, had very legitimate reasons to be freaking terrified of the police. I'm pretty sure we left not long after that.

Elio Colavito (36:52):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And do you remember amongst some of your friends what some of those very legitimate reasons to be afraid of the police would have been.

Sabrina Olender (37:04):

From being harassed by the police in just day to day settings. Or not being able to rely on the police should they need to use them for anything because the police, historically, in Toronto have not always been very kind or understanding.

Elio Colavito (37:27):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). It was later revealed that before the plainclothes police officers entered the club that there were two women police officers attending the event undercover. How did it feel to learn later that there were outsiders in the space surveilling you?

Sabrina Olender (37:47):

That's certainly made me feel really angry, as well.

Elio Colavito (37:53):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And we know that the day after the raid, there was kind of a community action at the 519. Did you attend that protest/gathering situation?

Sabrina Olender (38:13):

I can't remember, but I think I did not.

Elio Colavito (38:18):

What do you know about the legal proceedings that unfolded following the raid?

Sabrina Olender (38:23):

So, my memory of this, even though I actually participated, is a lot hazier for whatever reason. They had a call out for people to help testify against the police who had interactions, even if brief. And I remember doing that and my participation in that, in the trial, was also very brief. I think I was only in there for five minutes, and they asked me how I felt. They focused on my feelings, like "How did you feel when the police were there?"

Elio Colavito (39:08):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (39:13):

And that's sort of all I remember about that whole proceeding.

Elio Colavito (39:19):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And who examined you in the trial? Frank Addario or the Crown?

Sabrina Olender (39:25):

I can't remember.

Elio Colavito (39:26):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (39:27):

I'm sorry.

Elio Colavito (39:27):

No, that's okay. Do you recall what you had said you felt with the police in the trial? Do you recall some of the things that you may have said?

Sabrina Olender (39:39):

I remember focusing on telling them that we felt intimidated and fearful. Those being the main.

Elio Colavito (39:52):

I just want to clarify. Who initially reached out to you to be a part of this process?

Sabrina Olender (40:00):

I can't remember. I can't remember who.

Elio Colavito (40:01):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (40:02):

Or how.

Elio Colavito (40:05):

Is it safe to say that it was the defense, the Addario team, representing the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, the ones representing the two that were charged?

Sabrina Olender (40:19):

It probably was.

Elio Colavito (40:21):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (40:23):

Through the committee, I'm trying to think, was it the Pussy Palace committee that called out for people to volunteer, to be part of it? I can't remember.

Elio Colavito (40:39):

We know that there were also some fundraisers, things like that, that the folks put on more events to kind of raise money for the legal fees. Did you attend any of those?

Sabrina Olender (40:53):

Maybe. Do you have the names of any of them?

Elio Colavito (40:56):

We know one was called Pussies Bite Back and it would have happened in November of 2000. From what we know about it, there were some stage performance—

Sabrina Olender (41:08):

That sounds very familiar.

Elio Colavito (41:11):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (41:12):

Yeah, I probably did.

Elio Colavito (41:14):

Mm-hmm (affirmative) Just in general, do you recall this being a topic of conversation in the community, in your friend group, after the fact? What kinds of things were being floated and being said about the raid and the legal action and all of that stuff?

Sabrina Olender (41:34):

We certainly would have talked about it but I can't... It's very hazy, it's too hazy. I can't bring up any more specifics on that.

Elio Colavito (41:51):

When you made the decision to attend the event, what were you hoping to experience?

Sabrina Olender (42:03):

I think I want to say I was hoping to experience something clever and enlightened. But I think I just wanted to get my rocks off, and I wanted to see some hotness, and I just wanted to rub up against a lot of other hot queers in this dirty, dirty space.

Elio Colavito (42:25):

Yeah. How did your expectations for the night compare with your lived experience of it?

Sabrina Olender (42:33):

I think they matched. I was hoping something would happen and stuff happened.

Elio Colavito (42:39):

For sure.

Sabrina Olender (42:41):

Perfect.

Elio Colavito (42:44):

We're nearing the end, and this last set of questions focuses on the impact of the Pussy Palace as a community initiative. What's your impression for the intent behind the Pussy Palace, its reason for being, in general?

Sabrina Olender (43:05):

I don't know if I know the right answer for that, but I think just wanting to create more space for women and trans and queer folk to be together, to find each other. 20 years ago, it was so different. We didn't have the internet and social media. You had to leave the house to find people, and it was hard. It could be scary to participate and seek out subcultures. So, I think one of their goals was to just create a space that was welcoming but hot at the same time, too.

Elio Colavito (43:54):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (43:54):

To find each other and be with each other.

Elio Colavito (44:00):

In what ways did the Pussy Palace succeed in delivering on those intentions?

Sabrina Olender (44:08):

They created it; they created that environment. They put in that work, and people showed up, and I think a lot of the people who were there feel, certainly I do, feel really, really lucky to have been there. It was a really unique experience. I haven't been to anything quite the same here since.

Elio Colavito (44:32):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Have you been to anything quite like it anywhere else?

Sabrina Olender (44:39):

No. No, I haven't. That's not to say there isn't in other cities. I just haven't been part of it in those places. So, no.

Elio Colavito (44:51):

What ways do you think that the Pussy Palace failed in delivering on some of those intentions?

Sabrina Olender (45:03):

I can't think of any. I don't think those kinds of things are ever failures. People put in their time and their energy and their emotions to creating these events, and that in itself could never be a failure, I don't think. You're trying to create some space for people and that's amazing. I know that it doesn't always feel that way for everyone who attends them.

Elio Colavito (45:33):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (45:37):

And there are issues of inclusivity that not everyone agrees on. But, I think, people just putting in the work to do it is in itself something amazing.

Elio Colavito (45:53):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). You mentioned some people who maybe didn't feel included. Do you want to speak on maybe some of the folks that maybe weren't included in the space?

Sabrina Olender (46:10):

It's difficult as a white person, and especially someone who hasn't necessarily been involved in a lot of activism for other non-white people.

Elio Colavito (46:19):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (46:21):

I don't want to speak on their behalf. But I have heard through more recent events that people of colour and especially Black people don't always feel welcome in these types of spaces for a host of reasons. So, I think maybe at the time that was probably true then.

Elio Colavito (46:43):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. One oft-cited goal of the event organizers were ways to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. Prior to the first Palace event in '98, would you agree that queer women's sexuality was somewhat invisible in the public sphere?

Sabrina Olender (47:05):

Yeah. I think in ways it still is.

Elio Colavito (47:10):

What contributes to that lack of visibility then?

Sabrina Olender (47:22):

Well, that's a big question.

Elio Colavito (47:24):

Take your time.

Sabrina Olender (47:36):

Unless you visibly look queer in the stereotypical way, there's always a base level of invisibility. Certainly, I would say that now, as someone who looks more feminine and identifies as a cis female, I think people don't, unless I'm wearing a t-shirt and you can see my tattoos and stuff, femme women aren't always seen. And the media doesn't... Back then, certainly there wasn't a lot of queer stuff in the mainstream.

Elio Colavito (48:25):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (48:27):

Shows and whatnot. It seemed it was just underground. I don't know. There's huge cultural answers, I guess, as to why that is. And it just being a different time where you had to go out to meet people. You couldn't go online to find to stuff easily. You had to seek out things. Like, shops and stores and newspapers, and unless they were promoting things, then you just would never see them.

Elio Colavito (49:12):
Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Sabrina Olender (49:16):

I don't know if that answers the questions very well.

Elio Colavito (49:19):

For sure. You mentioned in your answer that in a lot of the way, things have changed but, in some ways, things are the same. Do you want to describe in more detail how things may be different but also similar?

Sabrina Olender (49:35):

I mean they're different in that, certainly, the internet is just a revolution. It's changed everyone's lives. You can find people. But there are still the issues of space. Queers don't have a lot of physical spaces. And maybe that's a function of my age now where a lot of the spaces that we had are no longer here. But maybe it doesn't matter. The bars aren't here anymore, and the nights and stuff aren't here. And that's probably an older person's nostalgia thing.

Elio Colavito (50:31):
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (50:38):

But I think that's one thing that is the same. Just having a physical space that's designated for a group: women or trans or queers or whatever. Outside of gay men. They have lots of space—

Elio Colavito (50:53):
Right.

Sabrina Olender (50:54):

And money and time and everything.

Elio Colavito (50:58):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Have you seen any changes in that physical space, in this context, for queer women specifically?

Sabrina Olender (51:11):

Well, the changes have all been, like, the spaces have been leaving.

Elio Colavito (51:15):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (51:16):

There aren't as many spaces.

Elio Colavito (51:19):

Why do you think that is?

Sabrina Olender (51:23):

I think it's a function of a few things. I think one is money. Certainly, women and trans people and queers don't have as much money as gay men to create these spaces.

Elio Colavito (51:38):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (51:39):

It's more grassroots stuff. Especially in a big city where it's very, very expensive. I think now it's different with the internet. You don't need to have a physical dedicated space to things. You can find people and meet in other ways. You can find people and say, "Let's meet in a park" and whatever. In some ways, it's less scary now.

Elio Colavito (52:09):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (52:10):

In a way, queers are more visible and, I don't want to say the word accepted, but you can be queer in a big town now, and it's better than it was 20 years ago.

Elio Colavito (52:29):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sabrina Olender (52:31):

Certainly not perfect and not always safe but better.

Elio Colavito (52:35):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). What are your thoughts on the name of the event, the Pussy Palace? Did it feel fitting?

Sabrina Olender (52:47):

At the time, I think it did. I think now, maybe not so much.

Elio Colavito (52:52):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (52:53):

Not everyone has a pussy—

Elio Colavito (52:55):

Right.

Sabrina Olender (52:57):

But may identify in all sorts of different ways.

Elio Colavito (53:03):

You said that it did kind of feel fitting for you at the time. How so?

Sabrina Olender (53:11):

It was a name that seemed... I was young, I was 21 or whatever how old I was. I was just figuring out things and, certainly, there wasn't the conversations and dialogues that I've had for the past 20 years about inclusivity and stuff. I don't know, it just felt... It felt hot, it felt appropriate for a women's event.

Elio Colavito (53:45):

At some point, the name of the series was actually changed from the Pussy Palace to the Pleasure Palace. Were you aware of the shift?

Sabrina Olender (53:55):

As you said it, I was like "Oh yeah." But I don't think I would have remembered that without the prompting.

Elio Colavito (54:01):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Fair enough. Do you know what would have prompted that shift or when that shift was prompted?

Sabrina Olender (54:09):

I don't remember when, but I can only think it was prompted due to being a more inclusive event.

Elio Colavito (54:16):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (54:16):

For people of different genders and expressions.

Elio Colavito (54:21):

How do you think the Pussy Palace has impacted lesbian, queer women's, and trans sexual culture in Toronto?

Sabrina Olender (54:28):

I don't know how it's impacted. It certainly has contributed to a history of events in Toronto. A fun, wonderful history. Would have something else similar come along, I don't know. I'm hoping it prompted other things, other events. I don't have a better answer than that. I'm sorry.

Elio Colavito (55:21):

That's okay. Do you think that the legal case has impacted lesbian, queer women's, and trans sexual culture in Toronto in any way?

Sabrina Olender (55:33):

I think so. I think... I hope it's shown that the queers aren't just going to sit down and take it. Those things are not acceptable and they're going to fight back.

Elio Colavito (55:49):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay.

Sabrina Olender (55:53):

I remember there being support from the gay men, as well, around that.

Elio Colavito (56:01):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do you want to speak a little bit more about what that support looked like?

Sabrina Olender (56:09):

I just remember them talking about... Part of it is unfortunate, but them seeing it as sort of a solidarity moment where they're like, "Well, now you know what it's like for us to be raided at bathhouses" and stuff. Which is a weird way to—

Elio Colavito (56:34):

Yeah.

Sabrina Olender (56:36):

But I remember those discussions happening, now that I'm thinking back. And that, "Yeah, now you're part of the raided club" sort of thing.

Elio Colavito (56:49):

Do you remember how you felt about it at the time, the way that that message was maybe presented?

Sabrina Olender (57:02):

I wasn't spending a lot of time with gay men, so I don't know. I didn't spend too much time thinking about it—

Elio Colavito (57:08):

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sabrina Olender (57:10):

At the time.

Elio Colavito (57:11):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). This is my final question. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience that my questions didn't allow you to speak to?

Sabrina Olender (57:23):

No, I can't think of anything. But I want to send a huge thank you for doing this. This is really important. And a friend of mine prompted me to... Well, she shamed a bunch of us—

Elio Colavito (57:44):

Nancy [Irwin], right?

Sabrina Olender (57:44):

Nancy [Irwin] sent a shaming email saying, "Have you all responded to this yet?" And I said was shy because I was worried about my memory. But after her shaming second email, I was "You know what? This is very important." So, I reached out.

Elio Colavito (58:04):

It's funny that you say that because I think it's on our end as the people doing the project, we feel like having your stories on record are the important part. So, thank you so much for taking the time to share your account of the night, the space, your lived experience. And all of the things you did and didn't remember in between. It's all incredibly valuable, and we're very, very grateful that Nancy [Irwin] was able to shame into agreeing to do this. It was great. I'm going to stop recording if you want to do that on your end, as well.