

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Janet Rowe
Conducted on June 13, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Faith Lapointe

Summary: Janet Rowe is a 61-year-old, queer dyke and white settler. Although Rowe grew up working-class, she now identifies as middle-class and as someone who lives with a progressive physical disability. At the time of the interview, Rowe was living in Toronto, Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is the Executive Director of PASAN (Prisoners with HIV/AIDS Support Action Network), a non-profit organization that supports and advocates with communities disproportionately affected by incarceration, focusing on prison health, harm reduction, HIV and Hepatitis C. The interview mostly concerns Rowe's experience as one of the founders of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee and a key organizer of the early Pussy Palace bathhouse events. Rowe discusses the origins of Pussy Palace, which evolved out of her work as the Women's Community Development Co-ordinator at the AIDS Committee of Toronto in the late-1990s. She shares her sense memories of being inside the Pussy Palace; her recollections of the September 14, 2000 bathhouse event, which was raided by Toronto police; her reflections on the community organizing that followed the police action; the experience of testifying on behalf of the volunteers accused of liquor license violations; the motivations behind filing the subsequent human rights case; and other topics. Toronto, Ontario is the only location mentioned.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; Queer; Lesbian; Dyke; Women; Bathhouse; HIV/AIDS; Police Raid; Activism; BIPOC; Trans-Inclusivity; Community Organizing; Human Rights; Consent.

Janet Rowe (00:00:04):

Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:05):

Perfect. So, my little spiel off the top here is that my name is Alisha Stranges, and I'm with the Pussy Palace Oral History Project. And I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Janet Rowe on June 13, 2021. Janet is also in Toronto and is going to tell us about the experience of being an organizer and patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse events. Janet, do I have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Janet Rowe (00:00:39):

Yes, you do.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:40):

Thank you. So, before we get into your experience with the Pussy Palace, I want to ask a couple of questions that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself. We're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold or categories you occupy, and maybe how, at least some of these might have changed or evolved over the past 20 years, so we'll see. To start simply, can you tell me your name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Janet Rowe (00:01:14):

I'm Janet Rowe, and I'm 61, and she/her are great pronouns.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:25):

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

Janet Rowe (00:01:32):

I would describe it as queer, also a dyke. I didn't really ever call myself a lesbian, unless, depending on the context. But that would be what I would describe my sexual identity as. My gender hasn't changed over time. That has been pretty static. But certainly, my understanding of gender over time, and certainly since the beginning of the Pussy Palace, changed quite a lot. We're much better informed than it was then.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:10):

Right. Would you use similar language, queer, dyke, around the time of the Pussy Palace and in 2000?

Janet Rowe (00:02:20):

Yeah. No, I would. Probably, less queer, more dyke. I mean, some of this is related, I think, to my age, but I would use queer more as an umbrella term. So as an identity, I think that that's different for different people. For me, it's still kind of an umbrella term. It describes that I'm queer. And that my understanding of that is that I'm a dyke, which might be different than somebody else's understanding of queer, which is just fine. But yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:57):

Can you say a little bit more about why dyke versus lesbian for you?

Janet Rowe (00:03:02):

Lesbian is really... Well, it's not really clinical, but it just sounds clinical to me. It doesn't really connect with how I see myself. Dyke is a little more challenging and sort of reclaims an identity, a word that has been derogatory. So, I think it's a more powerful word. It is a more powerful word, both in terms of how it makes me feel when I say it, as a dyke, as a queer woman. But also, I don't do it because it's shocking, but for a while it was, just like queer would be. When you'd say queer, people would be uncomfortable with that word. And really had to sit with why I might use the term versus lesbian. Because that's much more respectable or understandable to folks who identify as straight or people who don't actually engage with queer, gay, lesbian community much. But over time, it's just become easier to say queer, honestly. And much of it doesn't matter to me anymore at this age. I am who I am.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:25):

And what about racial, ethnic, cultural identity? How do you express-

Janet Rowe (00:04:32):

I'm white and a settler, a white settler and with a Francophone background. My family is Francophone. I would say I'm assimilated, in the sense that I would not claim that identity. So, I have white privilege. I have MS [Multiple Sclerosis] so I have a disability. This is something that has developed since, although I had MS [Multiple Sclerosis] when... I didn't know I had MS [Multiple Sclerosis] when I was organizing the Pussy Palace, but was diagnosed about 15, 16 years ago. So that's actually had probably the biggest impact in terms of identity over the last 16 years, is as someone that's living with a disability long time. I live with a disability that sometimes, or was not very visible. And certainly, have experienced quite a lot of either... How would you say? Like, folks don't really see it as discrimination, but more, it's like a lack of consideration because it's

not visible. I think that's a really common experience for people who have not visible disabilities. But even with visible disabilities, so that makes it a target in a different way. So, it's all quite layered, and that's something that evolves over time. And, actually, everybody's going to have to deal with when they get old. So, it's just that I'm dealing with that right now.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:20):

I see. Thank you for sharing that. What about your educational path, your class background? What can you share around these ideas?

Janet Rowe (00:06:31):

I grew up poor, I would say. For a period of time, I defined it as working-class and certainly that's true. Within working class though, I lived with my grandmother and my mother. But we didn't have housing of our own. We lived with my grandmother for many years. But I'm quite solidly middle-class now. I think that always, though, shapes how you see the world, if you've grown up with nothing much. And in terms of my education, I have not finished my post-secondary. So, I've gone on to university for a couple of years, but never ever finished my degree.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:22):

And what about other pathways to education? Maybe not in the traditional sense, in the traditional way we think about education. Have you sought other kinds of knowledge absorption?

Janet Rowe (00:07:37):

Well, I mean, I would say that I'm always seeking that and certainly a lot through activism or through what I learn. And early on, as a teenager, I was defined as a feminist socialist. And then I came out, and then that shifted. So, I actually have educated myself through either activism or my personal experience of various issues. So, through reading lots. I learn a lot through actually doing. So, that is really how I've done my learning for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:22):

I see. Maybe now would be a great time to hear more about the things that occupy your time professionally these days.

Janet Rowe (00:08:32):

So right now, I am the executive director of a small non-profit called PASAN. We work with prisoners and ex-prisoners living with, or at risk of acquiring HIV, Hep C. And we work with people who use drugs, and we have a harm reduction outreach program. So, I am the ED [Executive Director] there. But prior to that, for many, many years, I've done work in the gender-based violence sector, as well as, and certainly in HIV, but focused on women specifically. And that's where the Pussy Palace came from, was that work and my involvement in that work, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:24):

Yeah, and let's transition to that now then. Want to know about, specifically about the September 2000 Pussy Palace event. But very curious about the sort of founding of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. People cite you as one of the co-founders or the founder. Could you talk a bit about how and when the idea came into being?

Janet Rowe (00:09:51):

Well, this is when I was working at the AIDS Committee of Toronto. I was the Women's Community Development coordinator at the time. And had developed a campaign around HIV, and at that time it was called Women... I'd do it totally differently now, right? It's so funny when you go back and go, "Oh my goodness, what I didn't know then." But anyway, it was really focused on women who have sex with women, rather than identity. But really, the ways in which women who have sex with women may or may not identify as queer or as a dyke, but really are at risk of acquiring HIV in a number of ways.

Janet Rowe (00:10:38):

And so very typically those campaigns focused on very traditional, like really on oral sex between women. So, we actually developed this pretty good campaign, I think, on lots of levels and wanted to launch it. And we talked a lot about actually, how do we create spaces where we're launching something, but we're really wanting to create an empowering space for women to actually express themselves, sexually. And really just because, or to have a space that was just related to our sexual choices. And so, through that and through a number of conversations, we tried. We didn't launch it there, because it took a very long time to actually find a bathhouse, a men's bathhouse that would be willing to take us on.

Janet Rowe (00:11:31):

And it was through that, that we actually created a proposal and Carlyle [Jansen] and I actually met with a bathhouse owner at Club Toronto at the time. And were very surprised. Because we tried many other bathhouses that just wouldn't take us on, but he did. And the owners were actually really not sure that this was going to... Would there be 100 women? So, they were pretty blown away by how many women actually came to this space. So, that just then evolved and grew. But in order to organize it, it wasn't just going to be me and Carlyle [Jansen]. We actually pulled together a committee of women that were interested in being involved in organizing a bathhouse.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:34):

Yeah. How did you go about finding those other folks, or was it just that you and Carlyle [Jansen] knew each other and talked about it? How did it—?

Janet Rowe (00:12:45):

You know what? We knew each other, she kind of said, "Oh, so-and-so might be interested." It was really that. And actually, it was quite a large committee, I would say. Yeah, it was pretty big because lots of women, lots of people wanted to be involved in it and—

Alisha Stranges (00:13:04):

Big is like more than 10?

Janet Rowe (00:13:06):

Oh yeah. I mean, there was always a core group of people, and that grew to be fairly large over time as this developed. And it became quite an endeavour around how do we create safe space? So, there was a lot of discussion around what that space can look like? How do we create safe space? What do we want to do to facilitate folks feeling comfortable about having sex in a public space? We had a lot of activities going on. We had lots of volunteers. We were serving liquor, so we had to have a lot of... So, there was a lot going on and a lot that we needed to organize. So, quite a few people actually were part of that process.

Janet Rowe (00:14:00):

I think one of the things that really changed over time was, I would say that as a bathhouse committee, although trans women were welcome at bathhouses, there was lots of discussion about what that meant. And so, anything around gender, I think, over time really, the committee had to grapple with. And I would say we certainly made mistakes in that process, absolutely. And I left the committee, but I know that one of the pieces that happened was the change of the name. I don't know what it even changed the name to, but it was no longer the Pussy Palace, right?

Janet Rowe (00:14:41):

So, there's a lot of interesting stuff there, in terms of how that evolved over time. And with the bathhouse itself, it was a pretty radical act, I would say, to actually have a space that was explicitly for sex. And a pretty political act really because there haven't been many public... Although sex parties happen all the time, there wasn't really a public venue where this was happening. We didn't have the same money or access to money that men do. So, that in and of itself, I think, was pretty radical and very powerful, in that the first bathhouse, there were so many people that came to that bathhouse. Wide range in ages. I think it was 400 women throughout the night that came.

Janet Rowe (00:15:49):

And so, we just built on that. We started to kind of grow that and do underwear parties and more bathhouses, like three times a year. These things actually kind of grew. There's things that I would've done differently. I mean, it was a lot of work, but they were pretty popular, and folks looked forward to it. But it only happened once a year. And then with this particular bathhouse, the context was that men's bathhouses or sex spaces were actually being raided all the time, right? So, there was the Bijou, there's a number of places that had been... Not that the police are ever friendly, but at that period of time, there was a police chief that kind of supported this kind of approach to working, by criminalizing queers, gay men in particular.

Janet Rowe (00:16:55):

And so, we were certainly aware that that was... The longer that we went on in terms of the more bathhouses we had. And then the more folks that attended, who I think over time, I would say more BIPOC folks were coming too. I mean, there was a real effort actually, in terms of creating space, and still there's lots to learn about that, because I would say that it was a pretty white, cisgendered — in terms of who was organizing that space — certainly able-bodied. There was lots of attempts, but you need people to be in the leadership of developing any kind of piece of work, or if you're talking about any kind of space, you really have to hand that leadership over to other people.

Janet Rowe (00:17:57):

And in this case, certainly over to BIPOC folks. You can't actually organize a bathhouse for disabled folks without disabled people actually developing those ideas, what that would look like. And so, for me, I would say that as time went on and people did start to feel a little safer maybe, coming because nothing big happened. People went, had a good time, went home, and done. And so, we really did start to think and prepare for, what would happen? How do we make sure that people know that something might go down, and what would we do? And we certainly had a sense that something was about to go down, and we did inform people as they came in. But it's very different when it all then shakes down, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:18:57):

Yeah. Thank you. You've touched on a lot of the things I'm curious about. I guess I'll just ask, you sort of said at some point you stepped down from the committee, and then after that, there was a name change. When about did you step down from the committee?

Janet Rowe (00:19:13):

Well, I stepped down and stepped back. I mean, I did step down from the committee, I can't remember what year it was. I think I might have still been... I actually don't remember what year it was. So, it probably was maybe 2003, 2004, but then I came back for a bit. But I really stepped down a few years afterwards.

Alisha Stranges (00:19:44):

Is there something specific that prompted that?

Janet Rowe (00:19:48):

No, no. There was no issue about that. It was really more about my life and moving on in terms of what I was doing. I don't think I had the capacity to kind of continue volunteering in that way. And yeah, just decided it was time to let somebody else step in.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:10):

Yeah. So, I'm curious, sort of last question about your work with the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee. What intrigued you about this opportunity? Why was this kind of work you were doing important to you at the time?

Janet Rowe (00:20:27):

It was important to me because... So, to back up a little bit, when developing the campaign itself, was a bit of a challenge to really say out loud that queer women have sex with men, for example. Really talk about drug use and shared needle use as being a risk. And sort of saying that out loud and talking about our communities and addressing those very specific communities within any kind of HIV prevention campaign. So, in that sense, even though we all kind of know that, this was a really public campaign that was saying, "Yes, women who fuck women can also fuck men." And that is where the risk is. And so, we had a number of discussions around how there aren't publicly... Well, and also, I worked at the AIDS Committee of Toronto, and there was a Bathhouse Outreach Program. There was a lot of outreach that happened in men's bathhouses. And working with my colleagues and they suggested, "Well, why don't you actually think about having a bathhouse?" And when that opened up as an opportunity, we were like, "Yeah, why wouldn't we do that? Why wouldn't we want to create a space?" And women come or they don't come. But we actually create that space that is explicitly for sex. And to have whatever kind of sex you want, any form of sexual expression, as long as it's consenting, was fine. And we made sure that the space was set up that in mind too.

Janet Rowe (00:22:30):

And I think that it was kind of surprising in lots of ways about how that actually created a dialogue, pretty broadly in the community, around both gay men. Particularly bathhouse owners were [like], "Are you going to just even have sex? And how messy is it going to be? Is there going to be a lot of blood?" That kind of stuff. But also, this idea that women just aren't that sexual and aren't really going to do anything or very few were going to come. And it kind of blew that all out of the water. I think the other thing that I found interesting was... You know, I did have my own questions. How many women will come? Will it be the women that we actually might predict come? Not *the* women, but more what I'm trying to say is folks that

already feel very comfortable in their sexuality and expressing that, or are we going to have a pretty broad range of folks, who actually want new ways of expressing themselves? And in fact, that's what it was. And what I also found interesting was that for some folks, the choice to go to the bathhouse needed to be facilitated with a job. So, feeling comfortable enough to come by volunteering. For lots of folks, that was the case. And then other folks who would call. I get lots of calls from folks saying, "If I come, does that mean I have to have sex?" Which I also then found interesting about how some ideas around where if you walk through or to something that you lose the right to consent.

Janet Rowe (00:24:26):

So, there are a lot of things that came up, which was really in a broader way, I'd be fascinated to understand more from folks what those challenges, internally, were for them. And what was empowering about it? So, we were having those discussions as this was evolving. It wasn't like I knew this is what was going to happen. Nobody knew, nobody had any idea what was going to happen. We all were pretty confident folks would come, but we had no idea just how many folks would come. And I think it did lead to lots of discussions around sexuality, and sexual expression, and consent, and where we take care of each other as a community around how do we take care of folks if they're having difficulties emotionally, or they're triggered by something? There was a lot of care taken in how do we make sure that if people struggling, that we have some mechanism to support them? So, that kind of thing.

Alisha Stranges (00:25:41):

Yeah, that's very interesting. And I'm hoping that in some of the upcoming questions, there'll be opportunity to expand a bit. But I want to kind of shift focus a little bit more acutely now, to your experience as an organizer, and maybe partly at some point in the night, a patron of the September 2000 bathhouse event. How did you balance your role as an organizer with your experience as a patron? Did you kind of get to do both or just wearing one hat?

Janet Rowe (00:26:15):

No, sometimes I got to do both. Certainly. That evening, that was not the case. I was working that evening. I was there with a partner at the time, but really, I was much more focused on the evening itself and how that would go. And really making sure that folks were okay. Just aware that there could be something, that I needed to be focused on what was happening in the space. So no, I wasn't really there as a patron that night. I had been other times though.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:52):

Okay. What was your role that night? What sort of—?

Janet Rowe (00:27:00):

I don't remember; I don't know what shift I was on. I can't remember if I was working the front door or on the floor. I know I had a shift; I just don't remember what it was. And I know that I did actually flyer the line to talk to folks as they were coming in and hand out information. I was on, probably, the front door at some point in time. I really don't remember what my shift was. I wasn't on shift when the police arrived though.

Alisha Stranges (00:27:35):

Yeah, so can you talk a little bit about the space, your impressions of the space? You're inside Club Toronto, let's say at sort of the height of the party. What was the atmosphere like inside the club?

Janet Rowe (00:27:55):

Oh, it was great. There was lots of folks. Like, when you came into Club Toronto, it's very different than how it's laid out now. But you'd come in the side door and the dance floor was right there. So, you open the door, that's where the DJ was and where the dancing was. And then there were people that were out in the pool area, and there was lots of different spaces you could be in. There were more public spaces to have sex. There were also private rooms you can have sex in. I can't even remember... We had always had a "Temple Priestess" that did other kinds of ceremony. We had a lot of things. There were a lot of things happening in different rooms.

Janet Rowe (00:28:44):

That night, I don't know all of what that was. There was a hot tub. So, there were multiple layers. I think there were three... Yeah, one, two, three floors. Maybe it was even four. One, two, three, four, like from basement, first, second, and third floor. And so, it was a really great, people could be where they needed to be. So, throughout the evening, folks would wander through various spaces. If you wanted to go have sex and then you wanted to just hang out in the pool or you wanted to dance. Yeah, there was lots of that. There were places that you could just chat with people. It was a really great space.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:26):

How long was your shift that night?

Janet Rowe (00:29:29):

We only have like a few-hour shift. So probably, it was three hours or something like that, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:35):

And then would you be done for the night and you could go home? Or you--?

Janet Rowe (00:29:39):

Oh, no. You could stay, like everybody would just hang out. Usually, that was one way to be involved. Is to actually come and volunteer, and then you're in the space, and you get to see how everything goes down. You also get to check women out or check people out and that kind of thing. So it was, yeah. I mean, and all the committee did some shift, but there were many different volunteers for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:30:09):

Yeah. So, I want to get a sense of the impression the space made on your senses. So, I'm going to kind lead you through a bit of an exercise here. It's a contemplative exercise, and I'll do it with you. So just you follow me to the best of your ability, I suppose. So, I'll invite you to soften your gaze, you can even close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do that. Just breathe. Allowing the weight of your body to sink into the seat that you're sitting on, relaxing your jaw, if you can. And with each inhale and exhale, kind of re-inhabiting some or other location within the Pussy Palace, ideally on the night of September 2000. But any one that's coming to mind is fine, and any location is fine. And so, from this contemplative space and this particular location, look around and tell me what it is that you can see.

Janet Rowe (00:31:42):

The dance floor. So, I really spent quite a lot of time on the dance floor. So, I see lots of women dancing. Really unaware of anything going on. And yeah, a lot of folks dancing.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:05):

And if you could distil the space into a single colour, what might the colour of the space be?

Janet Rowe (00:32:13):

Red.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:15):

And what can you hear? What sounds are in the air?

Janet Rowe (00:32:20):

Lots of music, lots of music, laughter.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:29):

Any particular genre of music or style?

Janet Rowe (00:32:33):

That I don't remember.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:34):

Any lingering odours? What can you smell? What might the space have smelled like?

Janet Rowe (00:32:45):

A little chlorine because it was right beside the pool. You could smell a chlorine. But sex, the whole place, you could sort of smell sex.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:03):

And if some part of your body could reach out right now and brush up against some part of the space that you're describing, what are you touching and what are its textures?

Janet Rowe (00:33:18):

That I can't do. Don't really know how to do that. It would be skin.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:27):

Yeah.

Janet Rowe (00:33:28):

Someone's body.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:31):

Yeah, that's fair. And sort of last question, a bit of an odd one, but if somehow you could taste this space, what might its flavour be?

Janet Rowe (00:33:45):

Salty.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:48):

You can let that go, open your eyes if they've been closed. Thank you. So, we'll kind of get a little bit more into the aftermath of the raid. We know that at 12:45 a.m. five men, all plainclothes police officers, entered the club and stayed about 90 minutes. You said that you were not there when the police entered.

Janet Rowe (00:34:17):

No, I was there. I was there when they arrived? Yes, for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:20):

Just not on shift?

Janet Rowe (00:34:22):

Yeah. No, I was there the whole night. I just can't remember what my shift was that night. But I was there the whole night, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:29):

Okay. So how did you first become aware of their presence?

Janet Rowe (00:34:33):

I was dancing on the dance... I was actually standing, I wasn't really dancing, was standing on the side of the dance floor, and I looked over and there were a bunch of police officers coming in the door. And so, everything kicked into gear right then, which was then to go through the house and let folks know that cops were there and making sure that we weren't drinking in places we weren't supposed to drink and getting rid of stuff if we needed to. But mostly, it was really about warning folks that there were cops on site, so they could get dressed if they wanted to.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:20):

Right. So, did you sort of enter into that mode right away on your own or did you have to go through communicating...?

Janet Rowe (00:35:26):

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think we didn't put it on loud speaker, but we did have an already pretty informed... There was a security team, and any volunteer, like myself and others that actually just kicked into gear as soon as we saw the cops there and just went through the house as quickly as possible. So, that wasn't hard to do, we did it. And people responded really quickly in terms of getting their clothes on and that kind of thing.

Alisha Stranges (00:35:55):

Right. So, you saw the cops, but did you talk with them when they were in the Palace?

Janet Rowe (00:36:03):

Inside? No. I actually spoke to the cops when JP [Hornick] was standing out in the lobby area, trying to kind of talk to the cops. There were a couple cops there. I can't remember if she was, I think, really just trying to chat them up as much as possible. And I was standing there just watching a lot. And I think I asked a question. I can't even remember, but I remember he said to me, "What are you? Who are you?" And I said, "Well, I'm one of the organizers." And, "What are you doing here? Why are you here?" I said, "Well, I'm bearing witness to what's happening right now." And that's what my role was in that, is to make sure that there was somebody watching and listening to what went down between the cops and JP [Hornick], and anybody else that they were speaking to.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:02):

Right, yeah. Did the cop respond to your affirmation that "I'm standing here to bear witness?"

Janet Rowe (00:37:08):

Nope. He just kind of carried on. I mean, there wasn't much he could do, right?

Alisha Stranges (00:37:14):

Right. How did that atmosphere of the club change when folks realized?

Janet Rowe (00:37:18):

People poured out of it, like just poured out of it. And I think, and we talked about this afterwards, about how this particular bathhouse had probably the most BIPOC folks there in any bathhouse that we'd had. There were quite a few, relatively speaking, women and trans folks there, BIPOC folks there that night. And that really changed the nature of the bathhouse after that. Folks just got out of there. And there were a lot of folks there who had to get out of there because if they've had any relationship with the cops... Certainly black women left really quickly, trans folks left really quickly. Everybody left as quickly as they could get out, they left. And it was really frightening for folks because whether or not you actually have... If you've ever had to deal with the cops, they're dangerous. And so, folks really felt scared.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:33):

It's so interesting, I've read the transcripts from the initial court case, and police seem very sure that nobody left.

Janet Rowe (00:38:45):

Oh, really?

Alisha Stranges (00:38:46):

But so many people talk about—

Janet Rowe (00:38:49):

Just poured out, yeah. Left as quickly as possible, yeah. So funny.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:56):

We know there was about 350, 360 people there, like half left? Or trying to get a sense of—

Janet Rowe (00:39:03):

No, I think almost all left very quickly. I mean, they were there for what? Were there for an hour and a half, 45 minutes? I can't remember how long. It didn't take long for people to just get out. They really just got out very quickly. I mean, I couldn't tell you if everybody was gone, but it was pretty empty. It was pretty empty by the time they left, for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:39:28):

Right, so that must have really changed the vibe inside the space. I mean, did it go on as long?

Janet Rowe (00:39:35):

No, no, no, that pretty much ended the evening, for sure. That was the end of the evening, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:39:44):

All right. It's been reported that before the five plainclothes police officers entered the space, there were two women police officers, who attended undercover. How did it feel to learn later that there were outsiders in the space, surveilling everyone?

Janet Rowe (00:40:00):

I wasn't surprised. I mean, in terms of how it felt. I think we presumed that there would be cops there. On some level you have to kind of presume that there's probably been cops there every time. But you don't spend a lot of time thinking... There's not much you can do about that. But in this case, I wasn't shocked. I think what did shock me was, "What the fuck? Why are you bringing five big, burly cops into this space? That is clearly unnecessary." And so, that was shocking. That, I did not anticipate, although I probably should have. I didn't anticipate for sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:40:48):

Right. Some sources say that the committee was already aware about the possibility of a police presence at the Palace that night. How far in advance might you have learned about this and how did that kind of information reach the committee?

Janet Rowe (00:41:06):

Well, I think that we had some awareness that something might happen at some time. We weren't aware that they were going to be there that night. But what we became aware of was that that was a real possibility. And with each bathhouse that became our responsibility, as organizers, to let people know that in the event that anything happened, this is what to do. And that we had to not be naive and think, "Okay, they're not going to do anything with our bathhouse when in fact this is happening all over. Why would we be exempt from actually getting raided or having any kind of police harassment as a result?" This stuff always happens, and they use liquor license violations as a way to justify coming into the space. You don't bring five police

officers, if that's going to be the case. So, we really needed to plan for that, and that's what we did. Did it happen that time? It happened that time. But if it hadn't had, I think this would've continued, that this is how we need to prepare. So, if anything, I would say it was something we should have done from the very first bathhouse, to actually... Am I frozen?

Alisha Stranges (00:42:35):

It's going in and out, but I can still hear you clearly.

Janet Rowe (00:42:40):

Okay, yeah. So, this is not something we plan for at every bathhouse. I think if I had to say anything looking back, I'd say, "Well, that was really naive of us." And in fact, we should have always been prepared for that. We're an easy target. And certainly, there are some really vulnerable folks, more vulnerable than I would, per se, be. In terms of privilege, I am a white, cisgendered female, who is middle-class now, certainly older, don't get the kind of harassment that people of colour do, particularly Black folks and Indigenous folks. And it is a mistake of ours, not to actually think of that in advance. And certainly, further to me, when I look at that night, that's another piece that I think, if I look back, I would go, "Mm." Pretty much everybody that was leading the committee that evening were white. And I think if we started to be worried about the involvement of cops, it would've been really important for us to actually seek the leadership of BIPOC folks in terms of the preparation for that, or at least talk to folks and say, "This might happen," so that there was some knowledge going in. And these are the things that we do and what would you need? So that's the kind of stuff that I think about now, that we didn't think about then.

Alisha Stranges (00:44:29):

Right, yeah. I hear you. Reflecting later. I am curious, when we have heard about some of the things that you did try to do, what do you recall about the sort of strategies you used to prepare patrons that night in the event that police might be present?

Janet Rowe (00:44:46):

Well, we had flyer'd all of the people who were coming into the space. And I wish I could see the flyer, because I can't remember what it said. But we did let people know that that was a possibility, and I think we probably identified that we would be talking to the police, but these were their rights, this is what they needed to know. So, it was really more of informing people of what their rights are, should that happen. So, we made sure that folks knew when the police arrived, we went through the entire house and informed everybody. And as I said, that happened super quickly. I wonder if we did make an announcement. I can't remember, remember if we made an announcement or not, we may have. Because I was so focused on getting to the pool and letting everyone know, so that they could get their clothes on, picking up any kind of debris, like if there was alcohol in spaces there shouldn't be, that we were picking and cleaning that up. And ensuring that folks knew, we really wanted folks to know as quickly as possible. And that worked, I think that worked really well. I think we worked really well as a group, getting the word out to folks.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:15):

Yeah. We know that after the raid, after the night of the raid, there was a community discussion hosted at the 519 Community Centre. Do you recall what the purpose of that discussion would've been?

Janet Rowe (00:46:33):

First, the meeting that I remember going to, is this the fundraising meeting?

Alisha Stranges (00:46:38):

It might have been the fundraising meeting, yes.

Janet Rowe (00:46:40):

Yeah. So, there was a meeting, like we knew that we were going to... We didn't know what the charges were going to be until, I don't know when. Obviously, JP [Hornick] would know. So just to kind of give you some context, at that time, my mother was very ill. So, I was not as involved in the leading up to. Like, I was involved in kind of planning around how we were going to do communication and that kind of stuff. And I was volunteering, but the very next day my mother went in for major surgery, cancer surgery. So, my involvement was a bit split afterwards because I really had to focus on my mother. At the time, I do remember meeting afterwards as a committee to talk about like, we didn't even know what the charges were and what we were going to do and how we were going to respond.

Janet Rowe (00:47:37):

So once that was clear, that there were charges, that we were going to fight them, even though they were summary charges. They weren't criminal charges. But it didn't matter. This was not okay. And we found a lawyer, and we needed to raise some money. And that meeting was phenomenal, really, I have to say because it was packed. And because of what happened was, this wasn't nearly as violent as the bathhouse raids in '81, but gay men came out and supported us in a really significant way because this is yet another example. Certainly, it hearkened back to their experience. But also, there'd been multiple things that had been happening in the community at that time, in terms of raids in various bars. So, this was just another event that happened.

Janet Rowe (00:48:42):

So, the response was just incredible, I've got to say. It was wonderful to see how quickly people mobilized and how outraged. And I think the police had no idea that the community would respond in this way, and they did. So that meeting, I remember there were like hundreds, the auditorium was full at The 519. And I remember people speaking on a panel and certainly, we spoke on... But I think we also talked about the bathhouse raids. I think there was a lawyer, there was a panel, who was on the panel, I can't even remember. Probably, JP [Hornick] maybe. I can't remember, but Olivia Chow actually stood up and just said, "So who's going to give \$1,000? Who's going to give...?" So really through that, we raised so much money that night, just by one person who had enough, who was a politician, but also really committed to the community and knew how to do that. Knew how to ask people for money, and not just \$5, \$10, \$25, but really, we're going to need some significant cash. So, she did that. And then, the momentum around that was that then there were other actions. There was the action that was in front of the police station. So, there was a lot of publicity, like awareness around this going on. And that we were providing it was very, very significant.

Alisha Stranges (00:50:32):

Yeah, I'm curious, do you recall how you would've gotten Olivia Chow to speak and help fundraise?

Janet Rowe (00:50:40):

I think people came to us. Was Olivia Chow a councillor at that time?

Alisha Stranges (00:50:52):

I believe so. And then working with Bob Gallagher.

Janet Rowe (00:50:55):

Yeah, Bob Gallagher. It was through Bob Gallagher actually. Her office was very involved. So, it was through Bob Gallagher that we got to Olivia Chow.

Alisha Stranges (00:51:11):

Did you have more to add? Sorry. No, okay. Looking back on that time, speaking about the momentum of it, were there things that you think that the community activism could have done differently or was it sort of like all kind of unexpected and anything that happened was a good thing?

Janet Rowe (00:51:37):

Oh, I don't know that I can provide much comment on that, except that I do think that there was so much happening, that we always had some momentum. But I think that there were certainly moments about: "Who should be out front in this? How do we actually identify who should be speaking and how we organize?" Just going back to what I said around how we planned for the raid, or potential raid, and the involvement of BIPOC folks in terms of leading, same thing in terms of how we actually address that as a committee. I think we could have done that very differently. And again, I wasn't as involved in those pieces because my mother was very ill. But I certainly knew of some stuff that was going on that was difficult and challenging. I would say there were things that we could have made a little more... I think we could have involved other leaders within the community to help us kind of shape it and create a commentary on the criminalization of Black folks and Indigenous folks. And where you can use that political moment in terms of how... Whereby this is mild compared to what other communities deal with, but significant because we really need to... And the leadership of trans folks in this process too.

Janet Rowe (00:53:38):

I mean, if you look at the case too, where that became a focus, in terms of gender identity and how we organized around that, could have had trans folks in the lead or facilitated that in some way. But I think when I say that, I look back now and go, "Yes." You get carried away with what's going on but that doesn't mean you shouldn't learn and think about what you would do differently in the future. And I think when it came down to, what was the thing that I was asked to do? I can't remember what it was. There was something, and then with the human rights case. I was involved in that. But in terms of... There was something I was asked to do — I'll remember as we go along — that I couldn't do because there was a risk involved. I know what it was. Signing on in terms of the case itself. I couldn't sign onto things where I would have any financial responsibility. If, in fact, court costs if we lost, and then we had to pay costs. There were some challenges, legally, that just couldn't take that on at that moment in time. JP [Hornick] would remember. You can ask her what that was. But I did testify at the case and did get involved in the human rights case.

Alisha Stranges (00:55:27):

Yeah. And I wanted to ask a question about this experience of having to testify. What can you share about that experience? I mean, as I said, I read the court transcripts, and I feel like you were called as the first witness or maybe not. It doesn't matter. The point is that I can't even remember, and I read this three weeks ago, so I can only imagine. There was like a whole thing going on in the court transcripts, where it was like a very loud courtroom, where no one could ever hear. Do you recall anything like this?

Janet Rowe (00:56:07):

I don't remember it being loud. I just remember being very nervous and wanting to make sure that my testimony was relevant. It's easy when you actually have testified before in other situations. And the goal is to trip you up. I mean, it's easy to sit and talk to your own lawyer, and it was being cross-examined that I was

nervous about. So, it's always great when there's lots of witnesses because that one won't matter. But I was nervous and yeah, that's all I remember. I should read it because I have no memory of what I was asked, although we prepped before, I have no memory at all.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:03):

No, and it was a very long time ago. You sort of alluded to it a bit, but what are your thoughts on what you can recall from Frank Addario's defence strategy, the strategy that he used to win the initial court case?

Janet Rowe (00:57:20):

I thought Frank Addario was pretty brilliant in this and really committed. And if I can recall, I don't even remember his strategy to be perfectly honest. I don't think there's much I can comment on because all I can comment on is that I thought that he was spot on, and his team, around the strategy. However, if you asked me to articulate what that strategy was right now, I wouldn't be able to.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:51):

That's okay.

Janet Rowe (00:57:51):

Just because I don't remember.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:51):

Yeah, no problem. Do you know what prompted the decision for everyone to file this human rights complaint, the class action lawsuit? So why didn't it just end after the initial court case was—?

Janet Rowe (00:58:08):

Well, because it was a violation of our human rights. I mean, I think that it was outrageous what happened. And we wanted to make sure that there were some repercussions, other than just not going through this court case and all of the anxiety and stress in particular that it caused for JP [Hornick] and the other person that was charged. That was a lot of trauma for folks. It was traumatic in lots of different ways but it was also so wrong. It was completely wrong. And so, having another recourse was really important, I think, to be able to say, "You can't do this." And there really needs to be some action in terms of the police around how they work with trans communities and how they... I mean, when they are policing trans communities or when they're actually engaging with trans communities, how are they doing that? And what policies are in place that there are any repercussions? I mean, I think you've certainly seen that we won that case. And one of those pieces that was awarded was a strip search and detention policy, as well as training for the entire service.

Janet Rowe (00:59:48):

And that was great. And also having and an award of money, some of which actually was awarded to Maggie's [Toronto Sex Workers Action Project] and Bill 7 Award. But the piece that, in terms of the policy and the training, what we wanted was that there also be some clear transparency and repercussions for any violations of those policies. That there be a way to actually analyze and evaluate whether or not these changes— What kind of impact they were having for folks down the road. But like with any other system, it's a police system, so there's only so much you're going to get. And when you're developing the policies, you're actually developing policies with probably the best out of that system. So, people who actually aren't that resistant to this policy or aren't that resistant to the idea of training everyone. The people who were training, some of

them, we really liked quite a lot. But overall, it's the system itself, that there is no repercussions for it, and we see that. People get murdered on the street by a cop and there's no repercussion. So why would there be a repercussion if they're not following their search and detention policy of trans folks?

Janet Rowe (01:01:35):

Some things have changed since then and been a number of court cases and human rights cases. And certainly, around detention, when people are being detained. However, that became important to make that a really public statement, that the Human Rights Tribunal found that there was discrimination and that we did receive an award. And that was significant, I think, to hold the police service accountable in that way. You just can't have a lot of faith in whether or not... I mean, you just can't be as invested in, that's not going to be the long-term change at all, but that is one piece of the pie I suppose. Yes, no?

Alisha Stranges (01:02:27):

Yeah. Well, we're nearing the end here. My last set of questions focuses on the impact of the Pussy Palace as a community initiative. You talked a little bit about it already, but I'll just ask more pointedly. What's your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace, it's a reason for being?

Janet Rowe (01:02:49):

Well, I think it's just as I said, the reason for being was to have a space where women can actually express their sexuality in any way that they choose. And this is often denied us. This is not something that we've grown up with. Now, I have an adult daughter and a 12-year-old and times have changed. So, where there's a lot more openness around women's sexuality and a discussion around that, it was just starting. I mean, I think that that's the piece. Creating that space that really, that was empowering, that was whatever you want it to be. So, for example, you could have somebody in one room engaged in getting flogged. And then I walked into another room where there was a group of six women sitting, playing spin the bottle because that's what they felt comfortable with. And then there was another woman who was in her 70s, getting a lap dance. So, there were lap dancers, and erotic massage, and there was any range of what you might want in terms of... There was a place for fisting, there was just everything that didn't have to be connected to a romantic love or a formal date. It could just be sex for sex's sake. And for yourself, for your pleasure.

Janet Rowe (01:04:43):

So, the idea that women could just have sex for pleasure, without any strings attached to that, is pretty powerful. It certainly was powerful then, and I think it still is in lots of ways. Although, it's very interesting for me to engage in conversations with folks who are like... Dating apps actually make that really easy, it can be really super anonymous. You can hook up with whoever you want to, and you don't have to be super public about it. But there is a different level of permission, just by virtue of the fact that you can do this through a dating app. And those, those kinds of things have changed things a lot.

Janet Rowe (01:05:28):

I think it was a really great community for a period of time. Discussion. It was a really interesting way to come together as a community. I enjoyed the lead up to the first bathhouse and the energy that came with that. The bathhouse itself was mind blowing in terms of how many people were there, that we ran out of towels, that it was so hot inside that the sprinkler system went off. There was just this incredible... It felt historic when I was in it. When I left, I was like, "Wow, this was really a big deal." How? Why? But it was a big deal for so many folks and it was exciting. And it blew everything out of the water in terms of everyone's assumptions around our sexuality. And certainly, gay men's, that's for sure. That there was so many as assumptions about whether we'd have sex at all. Or, "People are going to really come? What do you think,

there're going to be 100 women there maybe, maybe less?" There was that sort of attitude. It was trivialized in some people's minds. And so, to have that many people come and then come again and come again. I think one of the things that happened after the raid is, we didn't have a liquor license anymore. I regret that. I think that it was like, you can be at a bar and have a beer. I think we played it really safe that way. But I think that certainly affected the energy too, at the bathhouse.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:30):

I can see that. I guess maybe I'll ask this. I don't know, I feel like you've already sort of answered it. But one of the often-cited goals when we read about what's been written about the Pussy Palace is that the committee is trying to address the invisibility of queer women's and trans folks' sexuality. But prior to the first Pussy Palace in 1998, what do you think it was that was contributing to this lack of visibility? Aside from not having been socialized into...

Janet Rowe (01:08:10):

I don't think it's just socialized. I think women's sexuality is always diminished, and there's a narrative, and has been a narrative, around that we're not as sexual as men. So, as in comparison to men, that our experiences of sexual violence have damaged our sexuality and our sexual desire, that sexual desire only, and particularly with the narrative around lesbians, that it has to be in a relationship, that it has to be all soft, that it isn't passionate. So, there's sort of multiple narratives going on. But I think that there is one general one, which is that we don't have the same sexual drive as men. One of the underlying narratives is we don't have that drive, we're not as driven. And so, it was always in comparison to male sexuality. How do you carve out that space in terms of defining, and not just defining actually...? I mean, you are defining it, but you are making visible what our sexuality is, and that act in itself actually is kind of...big deal. It was radical, but also within that, it shattered any notions around that there's only one way that we have sex, or that there's not a lot of passion, or that we can't have sex just because we want to have sex and it doesn't need to be tied to romantic love, and that kind of stuff.

Janet Rowe (01:09:51):

I don't know if that answers your question, but that was really the piece that I think was... I don't know if it was that there's any one thing around it, so that would be the piece that I would say was pretty core. In any response to us having a bathhouse, the number of times we got asked whether or not women would even want to have sex or even stay very long was fascinating to me. It was like, "Wow, you have no idea at all." So, if you create the space, women will take it up. Women and trans folks. But I think, back in '98, it was different than it was by 2000. Within two years, so much changed around trans visibility within the bathhouse space and needed to. So, day one, we got criticized in terms of how we created space and safe space for and included trans women, specifically in the planning and development of the bathhouse. And so that was always a dialogue that was going on. So, my apologies that you said women and trans visibility and I think that that's very true. But I would say that the trans visibility became much... That that was something that grew and changed over time. Certainly, by the second bathhouse, even though what we thought we were doing in the first bathhouse was trans-inclusive there were critiques around how it was not. And so, I would say if you're a trans woman who attended that first event, maybe you would have a different story than "this was such an empowering experience," that kind of thing.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:58):

Do you remember any specifics around the critique or just that you got critiqued?

Janet Rowe (01:12:05):

Oh, I would say I don't remember the specific critiques. I think what we did hear a lot of was, there wasn't trans inclusion in the development of it, so we weren't creating those spaces for women and there wasn't visibility that it was a trans-inclusive space, right? And I think that was one big piece. Also, how do we create safety when, what do we do if the people in attendance have a reaction to a trans woman's body? And were we prepared for that? Did we do our work, ensuring that people understand what trans inclusion means? And not about body. I think we made it clear that it was trans-inclusive and transphobia wasn't acceptable. But I think like with many situations, if you're not clear about what actions you're going to take or how you're going to work with folks to support them if something not great happens or discrimination happens, or they have a bad experience, I think that those are the other learnings. So over time, I think that shifted and changed. And even around language, and around language and calling it the Pussy Palace, there's some challenges around that, so that changed over time.

Alisha Stranges (01:13:54):

Right, yeah. Well, is there anything else about your tenure as part of the [Toronto Women's] Bathhouse Committee and in working with the Pussy Palace events that you wanted to share that maybe my questions didn't invite you speak to?

Janet Rowe (01:14:14):

No, I think you asked... No, I think I got a chance to just say... No, I'm good.

Alisha Stranges (01:14:18):

Okay. Well, thank you so much.