

Pussy Palace Oral History Project
Oral History Interview with Anna Willats
Conducted on May 20, 2021 via Zoom
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges on behalf of the
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)
Transcribed by Rev.com and Elio Colavito

Summary: Anna Willats is a 64-year-old white, cisgender, butch lesbian who was raised working-class poor but has since class ascended via her education and professional work history. At the time of the interview, Willats was in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, working as a community activist and as a coordinator and faculty member of the Assaulted Women's and Children's Counsellor/Advocate program at George Brown College. Although Willats discusses her experiences as a patron of the September 2000 Pussy Palace event, the interview mostly concerns the development of her 2005 report, "Recommendations from the Community Consultation on Policing and LGBT Communities." As a member of the Toronto Police Accountability Coalition (TPAC), a community advocacy group, Willats conducted this community consultation on behalf of the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, following the police raid of the Pussy Palace and the subsequent human rights complaint and class-action lawsuit settlement. Willats discusses her recollection of the Pussy Palace and events surrounding the raid; the political climate and the state of policing in Toronto in the late 1990s; her work as an activist in survivor advocacy and police de-tasking; the development, execution, results, and present-day reflections on her 2005 report; and other topics. In the interview, Toronto, Milton, and London, Ontario are mentioned. The date range discussed is 1955-2021, with 2000-2005 as the predominant focus.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Lesbian; Dyke; Butch; Police; Police Abolition; Police Reform; Sexual Violence; Activism; Julian Fantino; Toronto Police Accountability Coalition.

Anna Willats (00:00:01):

Find it here. There we go. Okay. Okay.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:07):

You're all good?

Anna Willats (00:00:08):

I think it's working.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:09):

Perfect. So, this is Alisha Stranges from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project and I'm here in Toronto, Ontario interviewing Anna Willats. Am I pronouncing that correctly?

Anna Willats (00:00:22):

Yes. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:23):

And it's May... Is it May?

Anna Willats (00:00:26):

Yes.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:27):

May 20th, 2021. Anna is also in Toronto and is going to tell us a bit about the experience of being involved in the community activism surrounding the 2000 Pussy Palace bathhouse raid, in particular with the 2005 Community Consultation on Policing and the LGBT+ Community. So, Anna, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Anna Willats (00:00:54):

Absolutely, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:56):

Thank you. Before we get into your experience surrounding the Pussy Palace, I just want to ask a few questions that invite you to tell me a little bit about yourself. In particular, we're trying to get a sense of the different aspects of identity that you hold, categories you occupy, and how at least some of these may have shifted or evolved over time. So, to start relatively simply, can you tell me your name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Anna Willats (00:01:25):

Okay. I'm Anna Willats, and I am 64 going to be 65 in August, and I use she/her pronouns.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:35):

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

Anna Willats (00:01:40):

I identify as a lesbian, a butch lesbian, and a cisgender, butch lesbian and grandmother.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:51):

Can you say a little bit more about what butch lesbian means for you?

Anna Willats (00:01:57):

I used to have a screensaver that said "butch by birth" on it. What does that mean for me? I don't know. It's so much me that I don't even think about that very much, to be honest. It's a way of being in the world. When I came out, it was what I identified with right away. And that was in 1982. Yeah, it's very hard for me to describe actually. It is a way I hold myself, it's the clothes I prefer and feel comfortable in. I know I'm seen as masculine and oh, it comes down to... I don't want to subscribe to stereotypes too much, but an early time when I felt at home in my body and at home in myself was driving car, arm across the back, my girlfriend at the time sitting with me, and just being in a certain position in the world, in the car, driving, kind of a control that I feel that goes with it. But I don't know if that's very enlightening, but yeah, it is so core to who I am. It's more core than just about anything else, I think. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:26):

I see. I see. And what about around the time in 2000? It sounds like this has been longstanding experience, but was there ever a time when it might've been different?

Anna Willats (00:03:39):

I'm going to say no. No. I think it's always been. Where it has been interesting for me is with younger... And I identify I think strongly with the word dyke as well. And that's been something since I came out I've identified strongly with, kind of goes with that. But I think if I was a younger person coming out now, I might identify myself a bit differently. I'd see myself probably as gender non-binary or maybe be more inclined to use "they" pronouns. Maybe, I don't know. I could consider that now. Just because I'm older wouldn't mean I wouldn't consider that. But in 2000, 2005, yes, definitely butch lesbian, definitely dyke. There were other parts of my identity have changed and morphed over the years but not that one.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:40):

I see. What about racial, ethnic, cultural identity? How do you express yourself through these categories?

Anna Willats (00:04:47):

Well, I consider myself a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant settler here in what we call Canada. And that has not always been true. So, that's an understanding of myself that's getting stronger and stronger or more defined, I guess. I am a daughter of a disabled man. My dad died when I was 15, and his disability and the ways that he was able to deal with that had an incredible impact on my family's life. So, I would say I identify that way. I am a working-class person — born working-class poor — who is now... I say middle-class, I am actually I think, if you look at the statistics, upper-middle-class. And I am in a long, long-term partnership with my love, Helen, and we just celebrated 25 years.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:49):

Congratulations.

Anna Willats (00:05:50):

Thank you. I'm a parent. I have two adult children and one grandchild and another one coming in November. So, I think that wasn't exactly what your question is, but whenever I'm asked to identify myself, probably the quickest thing that... It depends on the space, depends on the space I'm in. So certainly, in my classroom, I teach in a college, or I will be more focused on gender identity in terms of being cisgender, white settler, that kind of thing. But in a more personal context, that's where I'm more likely to be thinking of myself as a partner and a parent and a grandparent. And then class is something we don't talk about very much but that I am trying to include more often when I identify myself.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:39):

Well, I'll give you a little bit of an opportunity right now. I'd love to hear a little bit more about your educational and class background.

Anna Willats (00:06:49):

Sure. So, my parents moved to Milton, Ontario which was a very small town at that time in 1955, I think, I was born in '56. My father, as I said, had a disability that made it difficult for him to keep jobs because it was epilepsy, grand mal seizures, difficult for him to control. They both came from middle-class, very solidly

middle-class families. My grandparents on one side, accountant and homemaker. And on another side, an engineer, an aeronautical engineer. But my father's father, my grandfather, came from England with my dad and his wife, my dad's mom, to work with the Avro Arrow. And the Avro Arrow was a project of the Canadian government that was a supersonic airplane. It was the only one of its kind. Long story short, the prime minister at that time, John Diefenbaker, cancelled the project and they sank the prototypes of the plane in Lake Ontario actually due to American pressure.

Anna Willats (00:07:59):

And my father had got a job there with the help of his father, and he lost that job. They threw 15,000 people out of work at that time. And that had an incredible impact on my family because they had just bought a house and we became poor while they were probably looking forward to a very solid middle-class unionized lifestyle. And my father never could get another job like that from that time. His dad moved to the States to work with another airline firm designing. And so, my father was never able to keep work, worked out of our basement fixing TVs. My mom was a homemaker. Unfortunately, my dad's epilepsy was not controlled. Therefore, he couldn't take care of us. There were four of us, two quickly and then two more a few years later. And so yeah, it had an incredible impact on my family being working-class or poor. I think we were poor actually. But it was very different in the 50s and 60s, even into the 70s to be working-class than it is now. The gap, the inequality gap, was not what it is now.

Anna Willats (00:09:16):

I was the first one... Well, I wasn't the only one of my siblings, but certainly I got into university, Western Ontario, in the late 70s or mid-70s, and I got three years into a degree and didn't complete it. Well, I got the BA part, the three-year BA, but didn't complete the fourth year for a variety of reasons. And never felt at home, lived with very well-off students from the Bridle Path section of Toronto, very, very well off. Did not understand what the problems were, why I felt so out of place. Also, I think I was probably a lesbian and didn't know it at the time.

Anna Willats (00:10:01):

And so, university was... It was a lot of drinking, and I sort of stopped after the third year. Didn't really complete the third year, but did enough to pass. Didn't really like academia and drove a cab for a year in London, Ontario. Came home, worked in a factory. It's called the Canadian Meter Company. Worked there for a while. And then played baseball. I mean, my life has been in sort of outside of school really, baseball, softball with a whole bunch of women. We were called the Milton Mall Dolls, that was fun. And fell in love with someone, a straight woman there, as so many of us did. And decided to go back to school at one point, Sheridan College. My memory is not the greatest and I'll apologize for that right now because it is... But decided to go back to school to Sheridan College and take architectural drafting. And I did, and got a year of that done. And then fell in love.

Anna Willats (00:11:18):

It also was just as computers were coming, early 80s. And so, I was right at the end of all the people that would've done drafting at the table with a pencil and everything, and everybody after me would have been doing computers. So, it wasn't a great time for that. If I'd finished, I would have had to go back to school to learn it again. But I got very involved there with the women's centre that was at the school at Sheridan College in... I was at the Brampton campus. And I fell in love with a woman there who was coming in and doing sort of women getting back into... Like, bridging programs for women who had been out of school for a long time and out of employment. And she worked with the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre. And I decided to get involved with the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre and met a couple of people from there.

Anna Willats (00:12:14):

And then, so school ended shortly after that because that's not where my heart was. And I came to Toronto and was... Long story short, but I'm a survivor of sexual violence as well. Got my political and my healing work done at the Rape Crisis Centre and stayed as a volunteer and staff member for 17 years until 2000. Wonderful, wonderful place. I continue to identify as working-class in that context. We were collective, everybody got paid the same. It was not a place to get rich by any means. But I gradually got involved in teaching at George Brown College where I am now. In 2000, I started there and had a series of precarious contracts. Was a contract faculty for 18 years and just did every contract that I could. Just kept saying yes. "Yes, yes, yes. Whatever you need me to do. Yep, I'll do that." And patched that all together into a good income by the time I finished that, and my union worked with me to have them transition me into full-time, recognizing that I had been equivalent to full-time for a long time. And so that happened in 2019.

Anna Willats (00:13:35):

And so, I don't know when in there I would say that I crossed the class lines, that's hard to do. But certainly, the last 10 years I've made enough. And maybe even longer than that, I have made enough. And as my children left home, and as one finished university, my responsibilities have lessened, but my income has gone up. I'm in a very comfortable position. I think we're probably, Helen and I, are probably top 10% for sure in terms of income in the country, maybe more. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:18):

Wow. Thank you.

Anna Willats (00:14:21):

A whirlwind trip.

Alisha Stranges (00:14:23):

Yes, and I was very happy to go along the trip with you. Did you want to say any more about the sort of activities that occupy your time these days, professionally?

Anna Willats (00:14:36):

Well, so interestingly and I'm not complaining, but a full-time position means that I have less control over my day to day. So, one thing about contract work is that I felt less obliged to be findable during the day. And if I wanted to go to a demonstration or if I wanted to participate in something like this or if I wanted to go give a deputation at City Hall. So, I am very involved in activist politics and have been for a very long time, all my time actually since I came out. I didn't feel like I needed to tell somebody about that or get that okayed, I just needed to manage my time in a way that I also met all of my obligations. So, paid work and volunteer work for me have never been this clear line, that almost never has been the case for me.

Anna Willats (00:15:32):

And I did work in a collective where we didn't have any boss. We were accountable to each other and to our board of directors, of course, but that was like 17, 18 years. So, that meant that I could do a lot of things in the day-to-day that I now feel a little more difficult to squeeze in. I'm a coordinator as well as a faculty member of the Assaulted Women's and Children's Counsellor/Advocate program at George Brown. That's the program I've been with for years and years. But in that position, I am less able to kind of just take off in the middle of the day or go do something for the afternoon than I used to be. But my time is... So, during

the day, during the week, mostly I am at George Brown College. Mostly at home right now, but that's what I'm doing, teaching coordinating, meeting with students, participating in different activities with the college.

Anna Willats (00:16:36):

In my out-of-paid-work time, I'm a member of the Toronto Police Accountability Coalition and have been for many years, 21, 22 years now, I think. No, 21 years, goes with the year 2021. I have also been, since 2013, a member of a group called Groundswell Community Justice Fund. And I'm a trustee and have been with them since 2013. Groundswell is a group... We raise money from individuals that have extra, and we put that towards small and sometimes large grants, every few years, large grants, every year, small grants for groups that cannot get mainstream funding or do not want to get mainstream funding. So, these are groups, movement work. These are groups doing meaningful social change work and groups that traditional funders would not take a chance on or see the value in their work. Often, they're groups that are directly challenging traditional funders, particularly governments. So, activist work.

Anna Willats (00:17:43):

So, that is something I've been doing and we just made all our decisions last weekend actually, and I just wrote a whole bunch of cheques and we're going to get ready to send those out. So, we're done for the year and we'll start back up in September. I am a member of different kinds of sort of mutual aid, I guess you would call them. Community defence type of listservs and groups. So, I'm not as involved as I would love to. Once I retire, I can get more involved. But right now, I'm on listservs or on signal groups and try to respond in the ways that I can. I am an ally with a whole bunch of different groups and try to support those groups like Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Workers [Support Network] group, a support group. What else? I publish a weekly e-newsletter called "RISE UP! News & Events," and that goes out to about 1500 subscribers each week on a Sunday evening. And a friend named Vera Szoke helps me with that. And yeah, I just kind of try to pitch in and get involved in things as I can.

Anna Willats (00:19:02):

So, often those are kind of short, you know, we need a letter or "please show up and do a deputation." Or, I've been around a long time, and people will often ask me to get involved in something because I can bring a certain kind of perspective. And for a couple of years, I was involved in organizing an abolition convergence that was set to take place last May and of course had to be postponed, but we have been continuing on in that in different ways. So yeah, involved in quite a few things, sometimes stretch myself a bit thin, but I have serious FOMO, and I don't have hobbies. So, I mean, activism, demos, trying to support and connect people, that's kind of what my hobby is. So yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:20:00):

What is it about activism in whatever form it's taking on whatever day, what is it about activism that so ignites you?

Anna Willats (00:20:10):

It is connection. So, I think human beings when we lose connections, we get into trouble. And my understanding and my experience has been that when I feel not connected to my community, whatever communities, that's when I mentally don't do well, spiritually don't do well, emotionally don't do well, even physically don't do well. So certainly, it is for my self-preservation. It's very selfish. It's how I feel seen. It's how I feel important or that I'm having an impact. There's nothing better than seeing a change that you have worked with other people to help make happen, nothing better in the world. I think a lot of it is because there

is so much that's wrong. I mean, like I said, my family would have... I don't know if we would've survived now. I don't know what we would've done, and it's very different now.

Anna Willats (00:21:16):

And the older I get, the more I understand how racism, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, but all forms of racism have shaped me and how I see the world and are fucking people over. It just makes me mad. So, rather than just kind of rant and rave and be mad about it, I would like to do something about it. And I was never a very good counsellor at the Rape Crisis Centre. I couldn't sit with people in their feelings very well. It was kind of, "What do you want to do? What do you want to do about that?" And so that's just always been my orientation in terms of dealing with things that are happening.

Anna Willats (00:22:03):

Yeah. So, I really want things to change. I don't want my grandchildren growing up... Well, I want them to be able to grow up, number one, in terms of mother earth, and I want them to be able to thrive and just make space for everyone. So yeah, it has to do with that. I truly do believe the personal is political. Everything we do is political. So, if I don't do things, that's a political statement on my part. You don't get to opt out in my opinion. And I'd much rather actually deal with people who are making conscious choices, even if they're the ones that are opposite from the ones that I would make. At least they're acknowledging. You can't be neutral in this, right? Not in the world as we have it right now, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:22:54):

Thank you for clarifying that unplanned question, but was just inspired to ask it. Is there anything else that you think would be important for the listener to know about how you understand the different identities you hold?

Anna Willats (00:23:14):

Well, we'll get into it. I mean, the policing issue and abolition, I think, if we were to say how are things transforming or changing, I think an identity I would probably... I don't know if I can claim it because I don't know if I truly think I fully understand it, but an abolitionist and really understanding what that is. Some days when I learn more about abolition in the fullest sense, I think, "Oh, yes, I've always been that." Sometimes you find the words that describe what has always been so, right? Certainly, being a lesbian, coming out as a lesbian, it was like, "Oh, for heaven sakes, that's what it was." Other times it's just discovering and discovering. A Black colleague feminist. And I do identify as a feminist and I...

Anna Willats (00:24:03):

Again, that's just so intrinsic I forget to say it, but I do identify that way. Although I know that's so problematic in many ways in terms of who feminists can be. But yeah, a Black colleague, she just said something, we were in conversation about our teaching and some of the problems that come up at the college in our cohorts. And she just said something the other day and it was just like, ugh. You know? Just discovering the whiteness and discovering the privilege and discovering the assumption that I make. This place where I do think people will like me generally. I do. I have a confidence in that. I know they sometimes, "Are you a man or a woman," or there's that kind of stuff, but I do have that assumption. I don't need to assume people don't like me, but I need to understand better what that means about how I've grown up and what I've been able to assume, and I'm just unpacking it. That's incredible.

Anna Willats (00:25:12):

I guess the other thing I'm going to be a senior. I'm starting to get letters from the government telling me of things that I qualify for soon. Senior's not a word that I identify with, but I am older. Elder is another word that I think maybe people need to give me rather than me take it on myself, but I am older, and that is something that is... I don't even know all of what that means. I mean, I know physically what it means. I know there's lots of ways that I understand the changes I'm going through, for sure, but I think that'll be the next adventure, for sure. So, yeah, I'll definitely say that.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:02):

Thank you. I'm going to transition a bit now and invite you to travel back in time to the fall of 2000 when the Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies which was the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. So, I'm curious, prior to the media coverage of the bathhouse raid, how familiar were you with the Pussy Palace events?

Anna Willats (00:26:31):

Very, because Janet Rowe is a good friend and has been... We were at the Rape Crisis Centre together since like '82. So, I've known her for a very, very long time. Carol Thames as well, I had known for almost as long, for sure, just from community, doing dances together, all sorts of things. So, I was very familiar with the events and what they were doing probably from inception. Janet [Rowe], and not just with me, but in our circle, would talk about the work that they were doing and what they wanted to do. Thought that was fabulous. Wonderful, wonderful idea. I'd have to ask Helen, because like I said, I don't think... I'm trying to think if we had attended any prior to the 2000 one. We might've been at one prior to that. I hadn't been to too many of them, or, yeah, maybe one, but I was at the one on the 2000. I was at that one. We were at that one. So, I was very familiar.

Anna Willats (00:27:35):

It's so funny, we, I think, left by coincidence, had left. Sorry, I'm going to go all over the place, but we were out on that little pool deck carrying a drink out there, which you weren't supposed to do. I felt badly about that after because I felt badly about thinking, "Oh, I know it's not my fault, but it contributed to whatever charges may come out of that." Anyways, we had been in the pool, we were wandering around, we were in the pool deck and these two fully-clothed, very stereotypically dykey-looking white women came walking through. And by that, I just mean short hair and kind of shirts and whatever, but they were fully-clothed. And I remember thinking at the time, "That's odd. You look either like you don't fit or you're not sure why you're here," or whatever. They left, and I believe afterwards, my understanding is that a couple of cops did come in ahead of time scoping out the place and then left and then the rest of the cops came in. But we left shortly after that. We tended to come to things early and leave earlier than lots of folks would. We weren't folks to stay for a long, long time, and we left early so it was the next day that I had heard what happened. Did Twitter exist then? I'm not absolutely sure.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:04):

I don't think so.

Anna Willats (00:29:06):

I wasn't on that group of people that would be called to come out to something or something like that, so we found out about it the next day.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:13):

Right. So, I didn't realize that you had been present. I just have a couple of questions about your experience. You're saying that you left before the plainclothes police officers entered.

Anna Willats (00:29:26):

Well, I think, so I'm assuming that I actually did see two plainclothes female officer. I could be wrong. It just, they were so out of place. We had wandered around the entire place and saw lots. We didn't spend time in private rooms or anything, but we saw the layout, chatted with folks, spent most of our time by the pool, and they were the only two people I saw, like I say, fully clothed, very directly walking through, not friendly looking. And afterwards, in hindsight, I think, "Huh, I wonder if they were cops." But I don't know that. And yeah, I think we left at around 11:00 p.m.-ish, and I believe it was after that that they came in.

Alisha Stranges (00:30:09):

Right. During your time in the Palace, can you speak a little bit about the atmosphere of the night at the time you were there?

Anna Willats (00:30:24):

It was great. It was fun. It was relaxed. It was lots and lots of people. Like I say, we were there early, so it wasn't as crowded as it probably does get later on, but that's partly why we used to go to things early, so that we could grab a seat and be comfortable. But yeah, it was just relaxed, people in the pool chatting, calm. It wasn't how sometimes parties can be tons and tons of drinking and people a little bit out of control. It wasn't like that. It was fun. It was very, very lovely, respectful. Didn't feel any pressure. Sorry, I'm just going to close my door. Excuse me.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:13):

Sure.

Anna Willats (00:31:19):

Just my partner works from home as well and chats on the phone lots.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:24):

I feel that. I'm in the same situation too.

Anna Willats (00:31:27):

So, hard to do this at this time. So, I mean, saw some people we knew, lots of people we didn't know. I know a couple of colleagues who were profs, professors were kind of like, "Am I going to run into one of my students," kind of thing? So, there was a little bit of that, but yeah, it felt safe, it felt nice. It was lovely.

Alisha Stranges (00:31:50):

I've just lost my train of thought. What parts, besides the pool area, were there any other parts of the space that you gravitated towards?

Anna Willats (00:32:05):

Not very much. Not very much, no. Wandered through and saw all of the different parts but didn't really spend any time. So, I don't have much of a memory of inside actually, to be honest. I think, I don't know if there were sort of change areas or change rooms so we would have used those, I think. I think picked up a towel, probably something like that, but, and wherever the bar was, but otherwise didn't spend too much time elsewhere, no.

Alisha Stranges (00:32:33):

And what was it about the pool area that was where you wanted to be?

Anna Willats (00:32:39):

Oh, well it was a beautiful night as I recall. So, it was warm, it's fun to swim naked, so that was a lot of fun. It was just, we're both, I think, reserved people so we weren't going to be going wild anywhere or anything like that. So, that felt comfortable for the kind of time that we wanted to have.

Alisha Stranges (00:33:09):

One thing that we've been curious about for folks who were there on the night is the sense memories that remain. I'm just curious about, if you can put yourself back sitting by the pool side or in the pool or somewhere around there and allowing your body to re-inhabit that space and maybe looking around, tell me what it is you can see.

Anna Willats (00:33:37):

I can see folks chatting. I can see people just sitting or lounging. People with, I think they had little floats and things that you can hang out on in the pool. I felt sexy. I felt relaxed. A lot of people I don't know, which is fun, just not really recognizing very many people, but yeah, focused on Helen and having a nice time with her in the pool, just floating. It was lovely.

Alisha Stranges (00:34:24):

What's the sound of this space? What are the things you're hearing?

Anna Willats (00:34:28):

That low murmur of people chatting, probably the sounds of the city. I mean, it was right downtown. So, I think it's like an oasis, right? Like you're in the middle of so much going on, you know is going on because you know the city and you're in this little desert island, or what do you call that? In the middle of a desert? What's it called? It begins with M. Not a mirage. Oasis, yeah. That's the word? It was just like this little oasis. Like palm trees, but of course there weren't any palm trees, I don't think so anyways. I've been to that space outside of being at a Pussy Palace, and it felt and looked more glamorous than it actually is. I used to bike by that place every day on my way to work and home. It's a hole in the wall really when you see it in the light of day. But at that time, it was romantic, it was... Oh, just really lovely, low lights and just felt like the best place to be in the world. It was.

Anna Willats (00:35:41):

I'd been to other kind of spaces long ago that were somewhat similar. Well, not similar, but group spaces where people were going to be sexual together. And so that wasn't as new for me, but yeah, it was just like, just try to be here and just relax and have a good time. It was lovely.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:07):

Might there be any lingering odours around you?

Anna Willats (00:36:15):

No. No, I really honestly, I'd be pretending. No. Maybe chlorine, I suppose.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:25):

Well, thank you for going on that little experiment of sense memory for me. So, where am I here?

Anna Willats (00:36:35):

I think there was music, actually. There must have been music. Yeah, there must have been music.

Alisha Stranges (00:36:44):

Any particular genre?

Anna Willats (00:36:46):

I'm going to guess. I mean, it's conjuring up as like R&B and soul and just not easy listening, because easy listening's boring, but just sexy.

Alisha Stranges (00:37:04):

That's amazing. I'm so glad to hear a little bit about your experience on the night. You say you learned that the event had been rated the next day. How did you come to learn about that?

Anna Willats (00:37:21):

Where was I in 2000? So, in 2000 I was at the YWCA for a bit and working George Brown. I was juggling a bunch of things. It would have come through email, I expect. I didn't get a chance before we chatted, but I will. I don't know if it's possible for me to go back through my email. I have the same email address as I've had forever. No idea if it would go back, but I'm going to go take a look and see if I can find anything. It probably would have been through Janet [Rowe] or Carol [Thames], could have been a phone call. I'll be honest, I don't really remember. All I know is that everybody was buzz, buzz, buzz with it. I can't remember what the ways were that we let each other know about things, probably listservs and things like that. So, yes, I heard about it. I was not integrally involved or anything. And I'll be honest, I can't remember, I know there were actions and like, "Let's get together," and I'm sure, community meetings, and I expect I attended them, but I don't have any memory of that. So, unfortunately that's gone for me.

Alisha Stranges (00:38:36):

That's okay. Do you recall anything about how you may have felt when you learned that the event had been raided?

Anna Willats (00:38:44):

Pissed off. Pissed off. I've been involved in police accountability. Well, that's interesting, 2000. I'm just thinking, trying to put timelines together in my head because TPAC began in 2000, and I'm not sure if TPAC, Toronto Police Accountability Coalition, would have been starting right around that time, actually. John

Sewell is the coordinator of it and was bringing people together, not because of the Pussy Palace, but because that was one of many egregious and awful things that police had been doing. I had been a member of another group called the Committee to Stop Targeted Policing in the late 90s and we were organizing around the targeting of homeless people in parks. I won't go on and on about it, but it was an initiative that came in, Mayor Mel Lastman, even a little bit I think the year before him. It was an initiative that they called Community Action Policing that eventually morphed into becoming what was called TAVIS, Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy. Anyways, through all of that, it involved cops in little gangs, frankly, of four or five wandering, going through parks in targeted neighbourhoods, which are always the same neighbourhoods, Black, low-income, racialized neighbourhoods, targeting people, "Why are you here? What are you doing?" Especially in the parks, moving people along, harassment. That was happening in the late 90s. Of course, racialized folks and Black folks were being targeted and killed and Indigenous people. So those things were happening. The Black Action Defense Committee and many others. I had been involved in some responses to police killings, a boy named Jeffrey Reodica in the 90s, a man named Otto Vass, which was in, I think, August of 1999. So, I mean, there was just, there had just been thing, after thing, after thing.

Anna Willats (00:41:06):

Their budget continued to grow and to grow and to grow. And some of why police do these... When crime goes down, and when there is less and less reason to have policing at the level that it is, they invent things for themselves to do, right? So, hence the Community Action Policing and on and on. There had been other, I think, targeting of LGBTQ clubs and bathhouses and that harassment continued. So, there was lots going on, and this was just yet more of. And had [Julian] Fantino come in? I think [Julian] Fantino was the chief then. So sorry, I'll try to keep them short stories. But so, you know of Jane Doe. Of course, the Jane Doe who was a victim of a serial rapist in 1986. I don't know if you know that story.

Alisha Stranges (00:42:06):

I don't think I know that story, no.

Anna Willats (00:42:07):

Well, so Jane Doe was one of six women who were raped by a serial rapist known as the Balcony Rapist in the 80s. In the mid '80s, I was at the Rape Crisis Centre. We were very involved in that. Jane Doe was an activist, is and was an activist prior to the rape and after. She waged a 12-year battle because the police were found in that case to have been using women as bait. They weren't warning women in the neighbourhood where this guy was operating. He had a very specific MO, a very specific, as in first and second floor balconies in a very small part of downtown where that bathhouse was happening, right in that area, Maitland Street. A very particular type of woman he was targeting. And the same time of the month, every month.

Anna Willats (00:43:07):

So, you could easily have crafted warnings for women in that area, and they weren't because they wanted to catch him. And they wanted to catch him in the act. That's their stated purpose. And they didn't want women to get hysterical. So, these are tropes and these are common. Jane Doe, in doing her own investigation found out about this, sued the police. 12 years later, in the mid-90s was awarded \$250,000. It's worth reading about and looking up, because it's not the same, but it's analogous. In that case, the courts found that her right to equal protection under the law based on her gender had been violated. And in that case, money, similarly, didn't go for a report, but it went to an audit. So, the city auditor, City of Toronto auditor did an audit of the police investigations of sexual assaults, the sexual assault squad, and as a result, a committee was struck that was carrying out the audit or making sure that the recommendations of the audit were carried out.

Anna Willats (00:44:23):

And that was happening throughout the 90s, with more or less success. I mean, I'm not suggesting that before [Julian] Fantino it was all going really, really well, but when [Julian] Fantino came in as chief, I mean, a horrible, horrible person and police chief, and he had a history, as you know, of targeting gay men in London, Ontario back in the day, just horrible. Anyways, so in my work life, and as part of the feminist community, and working with Jane Doe's leadership, we were waging our own battles with [Julian] Fantino to take it seriously, the recommendations and to make that happen and facing a lot of pushback. And then this happens shortly after he becomes chief. That can't be unrelated, the fact that cops felt emboldened to go in and raid this lesbian bathhouse or lesbian and trans bathhouse once he became chief. And so, yeah, there was just so much going on that it was one more awful, disgusting event that called for action against policing generally. This was one more. So, this wasn't my entry point to this. It was the entry point for lots and lots of people. And so, yeah, so we were getting involved with TPAC at that time. Not sure where I started there, but some...

Alisha Stranges (00:46:01):

That's wonderful.

Anna Willats (00:46:01):

...all of those things happening at the same time. There was a riot on Yonge Street, what they called a riot on Yonge Street, after yet more police killings of Black men in the mid-90s. I think there had been the report by Stephen Lewis and Alvin Curling into the root causes of youth crime, because of course what was happening was police again were using shootings, public shootings, as an excuse to harass and stop young Black men, primarily, not only. So, there was just so much going on in terms of policing.

Alisha Stranges (00:46:44):

Did you have a sense, after learning about the raid, knowing from your previous observation and involvement that this was one in a long line of actions that were following a similar path? Did you know early on that maybe the police were unjustified in what they were doing? What was your sense?

Anna Willats (00:47:18):

It was my presumption that they were unjustified. So again, I may be coming at it a little different, not from the core group of organizers, et cetera. I mean, these were all folks who had been involved in this for a long time and understood all of the problems with policing, but certainly for some of the young people, it would have been their wake-up call. Especially white, young people, I should say that. The average baby queer coming out of whatever, white queer coming out of... Maybe a kind of a trust in the police.

Anna Willats (00:48:03):

This would have been perhaps the first time for lots of folks to realize, "Oh my goodness, they're not our friends." Just like the G20, 10 years later was the wake up for a lot of people. But for most of us who had been around and been involved in politics in Toronto for any length of time, this was not surprising but it was enraging. Don't forget, this is the time of Mike Harris and horrible, horrible oppression of poor people and homeless people. Harris' first act was to take \$37 a month away from pregnant women on social assistance saying that they were just spending it on beer. I mean, this was the time, and the police were increasingly used as an arm of the state. I mean, they always have been, again, this is not news to Indigenous people, certainly, not news to most Black folks in the city, but for a lot of people, it was a growing realization and just a cementing of the fact that the police are... Their purpose was to uphold the state and to act absolutely unaccountably without any checks and balances.

Anna Willats (00:49:26):

So, for Black and Indigenous folks, it's been since forever, for women and survivors of gender-based violence, it's been forever, but in the 90s and 2000s it was different communities kind of going, "Holy, shit." Certainly, queer women, in that case, and trans folks who maybe had some trust in the cops. Working-class and poor people on social assistance knew it in all of those years leading up. And then it culminates. I'm using air quotes. Oh, you can see me, right? We had a, "progressive police chief," a guy by the name of [David] Boothby prior, then we get [Julian] Fantino, it's like this, "Whoa." And [Julian] Fantino very much was of the time in terms of the Harris government, and the cruelty. It was just cruel.

Anna Willats (00:50:23):

And when you do that to people, you're going to get more uprising, you're going to get people... If you marginalize folks so that they have nothing left to lose, then they will act like they have nothing left to lose. Often that gets turned in towards themselves and their own communities, but it will also get aimed outwards, and what do you need then? You need a heavier-handed police force to keep that under control. And it's a, what do you call? A hamster wheel; it just keeps going around and it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. And that was the time. I think, for people, this was shocking in that it was so egregious, it was just so, "Why? Why would you do that?" And then we found out why, it was a little peep show for them, right?

Anna Willats (00:51:12):

It was because they could. Because they assumed there'd be protests, and they'd police those protests, and they figured it would stop there. You let a group of people have that kind of power and act that unaccountably for the years and years that they'd been allowed to do that and you will get this kind of behaviour. And we continue to see that right to this day, just shocking behaviour like we're seeing in the [Bruce] MacArthur Report now. "Oh, he says, he got mixed signals, that's not rough sex." And a man's trying to tell him that he's being choked and they're like, "What, do you want me to investigate that?" So, it was an eye-opener that way. And we continue to have these eye-openers, and it should not be an eye-opener anymore.

Alisha Stranges (00:52:11):

I'm curious about the process through which you eventually started to become part of the larger story surrounding the raid. I've read your November 2005 report where you were citing recommendations from the community consultation on policing and the LGBT+ community. Can you tell me a little bit more about the Toronto Police Accountability Coalition, how and when it came into being, for example?

Anna Willats (00:52:42):

So, it was convened in 2000, and I don't remember the exact time of year, but John Sewell, who was a former mayor of Toronto in the late 70s, just a one-term mayor but a great ally to the LGBTQ community. John [Sewell]'s a very progressive person. And John [Sewell] has been involved in thinking about and exploring policing for a long time, he's written a couple of books on it. He also was very involved in Citizens for Local Democracy, which was a group that was formed as when the Harris government amalgamated Toronto in an attempt to forestall that. Anyways, John [Sewell] got in touch with as many people who had been involved in policing from sort of mainstream accountability efforts to kind of more radical efforts, invited folks to a meeting at city hall, a series of meetings and out of that came a core group, a small group of people, myself included, I'm talking six to 10 people, I think at the beginning, maybe up to 15 folks who met regularly to tackle police accountability issues.

Anna Willats (00:53:59):

I would call us kind of a think tank. We're not an activist organization. We're not organizers but we, for many years, the pandemic has kind of slowed us down, but for many years met monthly, talked about the issues of the day. And most of our responses were around going to the Toronto Police Services Board, pulling together deputations, speaking to the issues, sometimes bringing in allies like the Canadian Civil Liberties Association or allies in other sectors to speak to a variety of issues. Sometimes initiating on issues. One of our members felt very strongly about police needing to wear name badges, for example, and really took it upon himself to kind of press for that and indeed, that did end up happening. They take them off, so every step forward with policing is definitely one and a half steps back and often worse.

Anna Willats (00:55:03):

So yeah, the group has just met for years and years. We put out a monthly bulletin, sometimes bimonthly bulletin, that's a compendium of issues that people can find, I think all of them at tpac.ca, on a wide variety of issues. We'll try to get meetings with board members, especially with new board members to try to bring forward positions. We have worked very doggedly at a number of issues such as strip searches and trying to get the Toronto police to act in accordance with a very famous decision called the Golden Decision that severely limits strip searches and been very hard. Police in schools. So, that was a particular interest of mine so I've gone with that, "Don't ask, don't tell" policies. Trying to get Toronto police not to share info with the Canada Border Services Agency and on and on and on. So, many issues over the years.

Anna Willats (00:56:06):

Our membership has dwindled a bit, a couple of losses, people who have passed on, people getting sick, all of us getting older because 20 years later, so I was 45 when that started or 44. But we continue to publish the newsletter and continue to speak to the board and just recently did some consultation with the city auditor who's about to look into some aspects of policing. So, we're on the policy side of things, trying to get the police services board to do what they're supposed to do, that kind of thing.

Alisha Stranges (00:56:46):

Right. And the membership, it's changed just because folks have dropped out or new folks have come on or?

Anna Willats (00:56:55):

So, we don't do sort of membership calls, that's where it's kind of like a think tank. It's not by invitation necessarily, but if someone expresses interest in the group and they'll usually write to John [Sewell] or to the info@tpac.ca address. John [Sewell] will do a little kind of, "Tell us more about yourself," et cetera, bring that to the group, we'll meet with that person and invite them to join the group and some people have hung on and stayed in there, a lot of folks it's not been exactly what they're looking for. I love it; I enjoy a table to sit around and just try out ideas. We've got very passionate folks, lots of interesting skills at the table. But like I say, it's not an open group, and it's more a think tank. I think of it as a think tank.

Alisha Stranges (00:57:57):

All of you are volunteering your time?

Anna Willats (00:57:59):

Yes, no budget. None whatsoever actually.

Alisha Stranges (00:58:03):

Right.

Anna Willats (00:58:03):

We got some money once to do research and so money got spent on... One of our members was able to devote his time to researching on Pre-Charge Screening. So, it can go from what sounds very dry but is actually very important to more kind of interesting issues such as defunding, de-tasking the police, which is something we've been involved in lately.

Alisha Stranges (00:58:29):

And how did the Pussy Palace stuff fold into the work that the coalition was doing?

Anna Willats (00:58:35):

It didn't fold into it directly; I think it's because I'm a common denominator there. And because I have been involved in a wide variety of activist endeavours over the years, so I think it was just the fact that I was with TPAC kind of went towards why I'd be a good person to engage in doing this work on the report. At the time I was juggling a little bit of teaching, a part-time job over here, and trying to do some consulting type of work, I had my own little small business in 2005. So, that was the kind of work I was doing and folks, I assume, JP [Hornick] and Janet [Rowe], their friends, like I say, knew me and knew of me and I assume the committee had some conversation about different people they might approach to take this on, and my bio kind of has that police accountability bit, it has that consulting bit, and has gender-based violence and long-time queer.

Alisha Stranges (00:59:49):

Were you conducting the community consultation via the coalition or was it something the Bathhouse Committee proposed that you oversee?

Anna Willats (01:00:01):

Yeah. "Would you take this on as a member of TPAC?" And I went to TPAC and I said, "I've been asked to take this on in conjunction with my membership in TPAC." And the group was very much for that. But I mean, TPAC was not involved in developing how will we do this consultation, that was more I took that away, much in the way that Harvey [fellow TPAC member] took away the name badges and kind of built up a little group of people to speak to that, et cetera. So, kind of like that. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:00:29):

I see. Can you walk me through the process of organizing the consultation?

Anna Willats (01:00:35):

I will do my best but my memory is, unfortunately, a little not what it could be. I've been involved before in trying to find out from community members, and I mean, the best research always does put community at the lead, right? In terms of what they wanted to see, I would have originally worked with the committee to develop the questions and make sure... I would develop those and send them to them, "Is this what you're looking for? And this is what I'm thinking based on what you've told me you want the results of this to be. This is what I'm thinking makes sense to ask people and..." Like an RFP [Request For Proposal]. I would've filled it out kind of like an RFP, I believe.

Anna Willats (01:01:25):

And then I needed their help, and I was trying to think, so the outreach piece, and I would have gone through The 519. I think the person who was with the anti-violence program there. I believe at that time, I would've got their help to reach out because I wasn't very familiar with bar owners and bathhouse owners, this was not an area I was very familiar with at all. And so, I just called on gay men that I knew in the community to assist me with identifying key informants, people that would make sure that this survey gets into their hands. I dropped off, I don't know if we had a flyer or if I had paper surveys, very different times then, but I would have dropped off information to, I'm pretty sure, I went around to the bathhouses and just said, "I want to leave this with the owner." I would have got information from folks, "Who's the bar owner? Who runs this place? Who runs that place?" And reached out to them in that way.

Anna Willats (01:02:45):

In 2005, I was doing my RISE UP! Newsletter. And I don't know if I have from back then, I'm going to see if I do, but I probably advertised it there as well and did outreach there. "If you know anyone, please come to this meeting." I can't remember the date of it but, "We were having a consult on this." So, I'll look for that after we're finished talking and see what I can find and send it to you. I think the Pussy Palace Committee would have assisted me with communications with a variety of people in terms of bringing them on board and making sure that I talked with them and invited them to the consultant and had interviews with them. I know the committee helped me with the sort of note takers and people who assisted by sitting at tables and facilitating different conversations around tables and taking notes. And I don't have a precise and good memory of all of what was involved in doing that. Maybe I'll start dreaming about it, it'll come back to me.

Alisha Stranges (01:03:56):

Yeah. Let's imagine that somebody doesn't get to read your report. Can you sort of speak about the different parts that made it up? You sort of are gesturing towards reaching out to business owners but also community members. What was the report trying to do?

Anna Willats (01:04:17):

It was trying to get at three sort of separate but linked, obviously, things. And that was interesting for me because some of it was about the police training and what they currently do and what do you as a member of the community want and think that they should include in their training? Their training at the time was 120 minutes and through the life of an officer, maybe they would come back, and I think it was generally acknowledged that, that's totally inadequate. And so, part of the report, and this would be more for the general queer public, was what do you think should be in their training? What are your thoughts about that? And it would be getting into conversation about just what would make the police more responsive and work better on behalf of and with the LGBTQ Two-spirited community. So, that was one piece. And that was a piece probably I had my most preformed ideas around and had been thinking about lots personally, myself.

Anna Willats (01:05:21):

The other part was strip search policy with trans and, at the time, we didn't use non-binary, so transgender, transsexual, and intersex people. And so that was a separate little piece that I assume came out of the court case and out of the settlement process that the committee thought, which was great, thought to include that this process needed to be improved and changed. So, that was a whole piece. And that was really talking with transgender individuals and transsexual individuals, self-identified, and intersex people about what their expectations and wishes and recommendations would be around that. And so that was really through talking primarily through the trans programs and Two-spirit programs at The 519, Church Street Community Centre.

Anna Willats (01:06:29):

And the third part. The general, the this... And then, was how the police were involved in and enforcing the Liquor License Act. And I did not know anything about that prior to the consult, but it became clear in doing that, that under [Julian] Fantino, increasingly cops were using the Liquor License Control Act as a way to insert themselves into bars, restaurants, clubs, particularly at around Pride each year. And using those as a way to harass and curtail and limit LGBTQ events. And that was really eye-opening for me. So, if somebody hasn't read the report, that was the other piece was, how was that happening? To what extent was it happening? And what did people, and this was very specific really to event planners, bar owners and managers and bathhouse managers, what are your recommendations around that?

Alisha Stranges (01:07:46):

Mm-hmm (affirmative), I see.

Anna Willats (01:07:48):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:07:49):

What was your impression of the community's response to this initiative?

Anna Willats (01:07:55):

It was enthusiastic. There was people wanting to talk about it. I think there was a little surprise that the Pussy Palace action had led to something that was actually involving gay men, trans folks, male identified. It was beyond the original people that used the Pussy Palace, that were involved in that raid, right? It was interesting in talking with folks, some people I talked with had a real strong reaction to the use of the word queer and the older, I'll say, white gay men in particular, didn't like that word, didn't have good associations with that word. I found it a little off-putting because I believed it was put out a queer community consultation. So, that was interesting to me.

Anna Willats (01:08:55):

I wish I had notes. Maybe I do. Again, I have to look back through, I have a feeling it's on floppy disks or something somewhere. But on how many people were spoken to, I mean, looking at the report I can say "Oh my goodness, it needs to have much more information there," but I'll have to go through my file drawers and see what I can find. But it had pretty good participation. I remember at The 519 in particular, the night that we all sat in that hot room in the auditorium, that every table was filled. There were lots of people there, lots of enthusiasm for responding. Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:09:38):

So, remind me, did it all happen, did the consultation itself, happen all on the same evening or...?

Anna Willats (01:09:45):

That was sort of the public consult happened. But I also met separately with folks who use trans programs there it's called the meal... I can't remember the name of it, but they've had a meal program for trans folks, like, a drop in for a long time. I believe that I talked on the phone. Like, I shared the questionnaire in different ways with people, through email and different ways like that. So, I would have got information back via email from individuals. And I'm pretty sure that I met separately with two or three, say, bar owners or

event planners as well. I think we had a different night for folks to speak to the Liquor Control Act stuff. I'm going to see what I can find out; I can't remember for sure but it wasn't just one community consultation, I believe that there was more than one. And there was also just targeted individual conversations with people.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:04):

And from sort of the inception, your early preparations, through to writing the report, about how long of a time span was that?

Anna Willats (01:11:17):

Aye-yai-yai. I don't know, about a year, maybe? No, it wouldn't have been that long. It would have been a few months. I think they asked me to do it probably in the winter, like January/February, and I think it was wrapped up by the summer. But again, I apologize. I've got a poor, poor memory.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:38):

No, it's a difficult detail to recall for such a long time ago.

Anna Willats (01:11:42):

No, it's too much marijuana. Kids, do not smoke too much marijuana from a young age; it's bad for your brain cells.

Alisha Stranges (01:11:49):

Can you provide a little bit of just sort of general sense of the key findings and maybe speak to anything that may have surprised you that the community was expressing?

Anna Willats (01:12:02):

I would say that nothing really surprised me about what the community was expressing. Like I say, the things that surprised me were a little bit, the differences between older, more established gay men that I was speaking to, and not all older gay men, but some of them, in terms of some of the terminology I was using.

Alisha Stranges (01:12:29):

Right.

Anna Willats (01:12:29):

Comfortability with the topic. But I had been around and talked with enough people to know that there's some people very supportive of the police, and there's other people that really are invested in policing. There were some people who thought the police were there doing fairly fine. Bad apple stuff, you know? That it was just really, "This was out of character, blah, blah, blah," so that didn't surprise me at all. And the recommendations, I was reading through the report again, and the recommendations were pretty typical of people, some of whom who've thought about policing for a while, and other people who were pretty new to thinking about policing, so I can see... When you look at policing, when you're new to it, the recommendations, like they need to live in the communities where they're policing, we need more queer people as police officers, that kind of stuff. Training is going to improve things. That's pretty typical for folks who are new to thinking about this, and that was, by and large, the feedback that I was getting.

Anna Willats (01:13:49):

And I'm not surprised because it was 2005. I'd be surprised if I got the same feedback now because I think people now understand that actually it doesn't really matter if more of them are queer. It doesn't really matter if they live in your neighbourhood or have training up the yin yang. It doesn't really matter. It doesn't really make that much difference. I think I'd get more of that, although there'd be people who think that as well.

Anna Willats (01:14:18):

The recommendations around strip search, I was not surprised by that either, and they make sense to me as a way going forward. I think that it was important, it was very interesting... You know, trans-identified folks had many more actual, being detained, actual carceral experiences with police than the general public one, so they weren't speaking theoretically the way general public was. They were speaking, "Okay, if you're going to search me, it needs to happen this way." And it's always surprising to me that folks... It's not surprising. I mean, we were asking them, "What's the best way to do this?" So, we weren't getting a lot of, "Don't ever do it." Right? "Don't do it". There's an acceptance on the part of the oppressed that the oppression is going to keep happening, but I was happy that people were articulating that any cavity search is a sexual assault because that needs to be said over and over and over again. Like, strip searching inherently is assaultive; it's sexual violence. And that came out from what people responded, and I'm glad that it did.

Anna Willats (01:15:51):

And around the bar owner stuff, again, it's all very practical. Very, "We accept that we need to be accountable to the Liquor Control Board Act." They were pissed. Those folks were pissed off, though, at the interference in their business because, I'm interpreting now, but they're invested in capitalism. They're invested in all of this stuff, right? They're business owners, and a lot of them aren't even queer particularly, and it's like, "What the hell is going on here? Why is this happening to us?" So, that was interesting, but I'm not surprised by anything that came forward, no.

Alisha Stranges (01:16:32):

Well, I'm noticing we're coming to the 90-minute mark, so I do have a couple more questions, but I want to be respectful of your time. Do you have a little bit of extra time?

Anna Willats (01:16:43):

I could take another half hour, sure.

Alisha Stranges (01:16:45):

Okay, let's see what we can do in the next 15 minutes here. I'm just curious, nothing surprised you, what you were hearing, and were you aligned with what was coming out, or you're just documenting it?

Anna Willats (01:17:03):

So that's so interesting, Alicia and I... Alicia, right? Not Alisha?

Alisha Stranges (01:17:09):

Alisha, yeah.

Anna Willats (01:17:09):

Alisha, sorry. That's so interesting, Alisha, because reading through the report, I was having to remind myself, this is what people told you, Anna, so it's not your opinion. And I trying to think, in 2005, what my opinion would have been. I don't think I would have been as invested, like I say. I think I had an analysis at that point that more training isn't going to do it, and having more LGBTQ officers isn't going to do it, and... And, and, and, right? So, I think that my analysis at that time would have been more, for lack of a better word, radical. It would have been more on the abolition. Towards that.

Anna Willats (01:17:55):

Having said that, yeah, I can't say that for certain. It is possible that I also still believed at that point in time that we need to beef up the training. I don't think, I can't remember what the recommendation said, two days of training? And there was stuff in there about... Unlearning oppressive stuff is a lifelong piece. That might've been Anna feeding some information in there to get people considering that. That may be a little bit of me inserted there. And like I say, how I'd answer that now, where I'm at now is, I don't even know if I would have participated in this now, to be honest, Alisha. I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I did participate in a consultation the other day, so I might be talking out of my hat.

Anna Willats (01:18:54):

I mean, I've always believed you work inside, you work outside, right? To change things. There's value in working inside, and there's value in working outside. Certainly, if we're stuck with it, let's make sure it's working as best as we can get it. But around policing, I don't know. I don't know if it's worth putting any energy into that from the inside, honestly. So, I don't think I thought that at that time, but I was close. When did Slut Walk happen? No, that was 2011, I think. Was it after?

Alisha Stranges (01:19:34):

I don't know where it happened in relation to the Take Back the Dyke march.

Anna Willats (01:19:42):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:42):

It was 2011, I think. We're both failing here.

Anna Willats (01:19:47):

Anyways, so yeah, sorry, I can't remember where we started.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:54):

I'm just curious, so you were saying that—

Anna Willats (01:19:57):

What part of me, yeah, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:59):

Right.

Anna Willats (01:20:00):

Where was I at that time? So, like I say, I don't think that I would have put any stock in some of those recommendations from the general public. The stuff around strip search and the liquor control board stuff, that was learning for me, and I had opinions, but I would totally agree with all of those, and I'm not sure that I can think of what else should happen, other than building in consequences. The thing often where we do reports and studies is that we make recommendations, but we don't talk about implementation, and we don't talk about consequences if those recommendations aren't followed, so that would be a piece that could be added and could have been asked, right? It wasn't asked.

Anna Willats (01:20:48):

But the general consult, I don't think that reflected so much where I was at, and if I was answering those questions, I probably would have said, around the training, I'm trying to think when I first... Yeah, I might've been more, "No, none of this is going to work," but I don't know if I would have had a lot of formed ideas around what would work, and I have more thoughts about that now, in terms of training, and things like disarming. And I can think of questions that we could have asked that would have got at different aspects of this, but I was following the direction of the folks who hired me. You know, just about the power to detain and search and community direction, lots of different things, disarming police, all sorts of stuff, but yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:21:55):

What became of the report after you wrote it? Who did you submit it to? What were you hoping the response—?

Anna Willats (01:22:02):

It went to the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee. I don't recall getting a lot of feedback. I believe the part that really got followed up on was the strip search policy for trans individuals. I'm pretty sure that that did lead to change in policy, or a cementing or embedding of policy. I think that the claims around policy were that they did some of what is recommended, but I don't think that was actually happening, so I'm pretty sure that that got followed up on pretty thoroughly.

Anna Willats (01:22:39):

Yeah, I believe that it informed the LGBTQ... I'm not sure when that committee... You know, the police board has several subcommittees, and I think, I hope other people have better memory and timelines, certainly there was a lot of back and forth in the community about that LGBTQ Liaison Committee and what its purpose was, the LGBTQ officer, liaison officer, and I'm not sure if that stuff proceeded all this, or if that stuff came out of this, and I hope people with better memories than I can tell you that. Whenever you make recommendations it's up to the chief of the day to implement them, and like I say, we had [Julian] Fantino for a while, so I'm not sure what got picked up on and implemented.

Alisha Stranges (01:23:40):

So, do you know, if the report was going to the [Toronto Women's Bathhouse] Committee, was it to help the Bathhouse Committee in the finalization or settlement of the human rights complaint/class-action lawsuit?

Anna Willats (01:23:57):

I'm making assumptions, and I'm assuming that part of that settlement was that this consultation and report would be done, and that would be given to the police, and the assumption would have been that the police would implement those recommendations.

Alisha Stranges (01:24:12):

I see.

Anna Willats (01:24:13):

And it's definitely worth looking at police board meetings at the time, and I'll go through the TPAC, actually, I'll go through the bulletin and see if it's been picked up on the bulletin. Because we do have an archive of all of the bulletins that TPAC has done, so I can take a look for that. Is it okay if I share links and things like that with you, or things that I find?

Alisha Stranges (01:24:35):

Yeah, absolutely, I'd love to.

Anna Willats (01:24:37):

Okay, yeah.

Alisha Stranges (01:24:39):

So, last main question here is around your involvement with TPAC, it sounds like it's continuing on, but I'm also hearing you talk about a more firming up of your politics around abolition, and I'm just wondering how you navigate those two things, working with the coalition, and also these politics around abolition?

Anna Willats (01:25:05):

Well, it's a work in progress, Alisha, so it's a great question. I'm old enough and been around enough that the navigating is not too difficult. In TPAC, it's fine. We've always been a table where we can disagree, where we can push each other. John [Sewell] will do the initial legwork. He's retired; he's 80 now. He'll do the legwork on putting together a bulletin and send it out, and we'll all chime in, and I tend to, probably my role often is to strengthen language around something, or to bring in, I wouldn't call it abolition, but definitely bring in more of an anti-oppressive politic, and make sure that that's there, and how is this impacting Black and Indigenous folks, and stuff like that.

Anna Willats (01:25:55):

And there's an openness to that, we've got a member who's quite a researcher and shares all sorts of information that also informs how that's put together. We'll debate, who should we bring in on this conversation and that conversation? So that's always been fine, and I think we would acknowledge, going around the table, we're all agreed that defunding... Well, we're all agreed that de-tasking is something we want to happen with policing, that they have inserted themselves way too much into social work, into traffic, into guarding potholes and construction sites. There's many different areas of policing that we could take that out of their hands and pass that to other bodies, response to mental health calls, all sorts of stuff. Even many, many domestic violence and sexual violence calls do not have to involve police officers, frontline armed officers, because it's a myth that they're going into dangerous situations all the time, it's just not true.

Anna Willats (01:27:10):

And so, we're all agreed around the table, and that that will lead to defunding. Right? By definition, that will bring the budget down. We also are very, very aware of the powerful collective bargaining that their union does, their association. I think where I might go off is, I don't think police officers should be able to be unionized and collectively bargain in that way. There's a whole movement around "police aren't workers" because they enforce the state. They are an arm of the state. So, I don't think John [Sewell] or some of the other members would go there. That would not be something they would take on. So, it's okay. That's fine, we all have our own things that we do. It's harder to navigate when I'm in abolitionists circles, actually, because abolitionist circles, I don't think there's a lot of appetite for working to... Like, reform is a dirty word. It's like, "Don't say that word. Reform is not possible."

Anna Willats (01:28:16):

I agree that reform is not possible, I absolutely agree. I still, if I get a call from the city auditor and they say, "We're about to do this and we'd like your opinion on what we want to make sure to address," I still see the value in having that meeting, and talking and bringing that de-task/defund abolitionist perspective. Because if you don't, they won't think of it. Am I going to spend a lot of my time and a lot of energy doing that? No, no, I'm not. There's just no point, there's no use. One of my colleagues in AWCCA, we were talking again the other day, it was such a great conversation, and we were talking about, "Are we preparing students to work in these systems?" You know, CAS [Children's Aid Society]? Or, to work with survivors who are dealing with the legal system, the carceral system, the CAS system? Well, yes, we are, and they need to know legislation, et cetera.

Anna Willats (01:29:16):

But what do we know is that a minuscule number of survivors, a tiny percentage of survivors, are involved with the legal justice system, and so we need to teach our students to work with all of the majority of survivors who never go near the police, never go near any kind of reporting mechanism because that's more likely who you're going to be dealing with. And so how did she put it? Oh, shoot, see short-term, long-term memory, doesn't matter, there's just not fire in there. I'll think of it at midnight tonight, and I'll yell it and hopefully you'll pick up on it. But anyways, we basically got folks who are documented, or in the system, and then all of the folks outside of the system. She said it so much better, so I will find it and remember it.

Anna Willats (01:30:13):

But it's like that. So, I'll put this much of my energy into the system as it exists in the hope to call it out, to insert an abolitionist perspective, to remind whoever's working on improving that system, because that is where all the money goes, that you actually are only dealing with a minority of the people here, and I will put the most of my energy into the vast majority, which is folks who are trying to survive, and dealing with the harmful impacts of policing, but in fact don't want them, don't use them, don't need them, you know what I mean? So, I don't know if that's clear, but I think that's the way I navigate it, is just to make sure I'm not spending a ton, a ton of time trying to reform something that is irredeemable. It's just not reformable. Because it's based in settler colonialism. It's based on white supremacy. That's its origins. It's based in property, women as property, so you can't reform that, you have to invent something else.

Anna Willats (01:31:25):

We all need to be equipped to hold each other and ourselves accountable, and to learn how to be together collectively and navigate the problems, the difficulties, the disputes, the conflicts that come up, which is the bulk of policing. The stuff on TV and movies, it's where all the money goes and all the attention, but it's not what they do. The average officer arrests, I think John [Sewell]'s got all the stats, but it's like one, or certainly fewer than five people a year, Alisha. It's all myth. They don't do much. They drive around in their cars.

Honestly, that's what they do all day, and then they harass people because it's a cruddy job. It's set up to be the worst job ever, and that causes an incredible amount of harm. So, yeah. Sorry, off on a tangent.

Alisha Stranges (01:32:37):

No, no, I appreciate the tangent. I'll just leave a little space here, is there anything else that you wanted to speak to about, I guess more so TPAC and the Pussy Palace, and the consultation, that my questions didn't invite you to speak to?

Anna Willats (01:33:00):

No, except that I think that the Pussy Palace committee, the Women's Bathhouse Committee, was always also more radical than all of this, if that makes sense. In other words, they also used a system, the institution as it is available for redress, but just knowing the people who were on that committee, and again, knowing their politics at the time, I don't think they were fooled into thinking that this was a reformable institution either. It's just that you use whatever tools that you've got to hold them accountable because you cannot let this pass. Right? They cannot get away with that shit, so you've got to use the tools that are available to you to hold them accountable.

Anna Willats (01:33:49):

But I'm assuming you're looking at also since 2005, what that committee did. Like for example, when the cops, a couple of years ago, under [Mark] Saunders, offered up an apology, a so-called apology, because it wasn't, to the LGBTQ community, and they were fabulous in terms of just, "No, we're not buying into that." So, I think the report, my work, everybody's work on this reflects the constraints of the system as it existed at that time, and I'd love to hear, I look forward to hearing what they would say about where they're at now, and where the time was spent, and the value of that and what they were thinking at the time, I'll look forward to hearing more about that.

Alisha Stranges (01:34:46):

Well, thank you so, so much, Anna, this was just a wonderful conversation, and I so appreciate you taking the time to journey back and remember whatever fragments you can, and it was quite detailed, despite your attestation that you couldn't remember anything, so thank you.

Anna Willats (01:35:03):

Thank you. I always enjoy the chance to share what I know, and what I've experienced, and I'm hopeful that it'll tweak some other stuff, and if it's okay I'll definitely send on other things as I recall, or as I find them, yeah. And thanks for doing this, it's great you're doing it.