

**Pussy Palace Oral History Project**  
Oral History Interview with Robin Woodward  
Conducted on May 13, 2021 via Zoom  
Interviewed by Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito on behalf of the  
LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory (Elspeth Brown, Director)  
Transcribed by Rev.com and Alisha Stranges

Summary: Robin Woodward is a 50-year-old, queer, Canadian woman with Scottish heritage. At the time of the interview, Woodward was in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, living and working in Toronto, Ontario. After briefly pursuing a career in education, Woodward shifted her focus to interdisciplinary, creative arts. For the past 20 years, she has been a self-employed and mostly self-taught, creative professional, running an accessories and garment decorating company with her wife. The interview concerns her experiences as a patron of the Pussy Palace on September 14, 2000. She discusses her bathhouse attire, the process of being admitted to the bathhouse and the rules around consent, her sense memories of the physical space, her recollection of the bathhouse raid and questioning by police, her witnessing of the legal trial, her later involvement as a plaintiff in the class action lawsuit that followed the raid, and other topics. In the interview, Toronto and London, Ontario are mentioned, as well as Michigan, USA. The date range discussed spans from the late-1990s to 2003.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Lesbian; Femme; Trans; Police Raid; Bathhouse; Julian Fantino; Legal; Class Action.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:00):

...great, and so are we. This is Alisha Stranges and Elio Colavito from the Pussy Palace Oral History Project. And we're here in Toronto, Ontario, interviewing Robin Woodward on May 13, 2021. Robin, are you also in Toronto?

Robin Woodward (00:00:20):

Yes, I am in Toronto.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:21):

Robin's also in Toronto and is going to tell us about the experience of being a patron of the Pussy Palace bathhouse event on the night of September 14, 2000. Robin, do we have your permission to record this oral history interview?

Robin Woodward (00:00:35):

Yes.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:36):

Perfect. Before we kind of get into your experiences with the Pussy Palace, I'm just going to... [indistinct noise] Is that you, Elio [Colavito]?

Elio Colavito (00:00:43):

It's somebody outside of my apartment, I apologize.

Alisha Stranges (00:00:48):

It's okay. I'm just going to ask a few questions that invite you to tell us a little bit about yourself, in particular, trying to get a sense of different categories of identity that you occupy, and how, at least, maybe some of these have shifted in the 20 years since the bathhouse raid. To start relatively simply, can you tell us your full name, your age, and your preferred gender pronouns?

Robin Woodward (00:01:16):

Robin Woodward. I just turned 50. And I'm she/her.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:21):

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

Robin Woodward (00:01:29):

Queer woman.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:32):

Would you have described it any differently back in 2000?

Robin Woodward (00:01:37):

No, I probably would have preferentially used the term queer. I mean, I also identify as lesbian, but I just like queer better. I find it's more expansive and fun.

Alisha Stranges (00:01:49):

And can you unpack a little bit about what queer means for you and in what ways it's expansive?

Robin Woodward (00:01:56):

Well, it means essentially outside of straight, which I define as being both heterosexual and narrow in that sense of excluding all other possibilities for sexuality. So, queer is the inclusiveness of almost everything, almost. Sorry, there was a second part to that question, wasn't there?

Alisha Stranges (00:02:24):

No, I think you answered it beautifully. Thank you. What about racial, ethnic, cultural identity, how do you express yourself through these types of categories?

Robin Woodward (00:02:34):

I was born in Canada, and I have parents that... One was born in Canada and one was born in Scotland, so we're just Anglo-Canadian types.

Alisha Stranges (00:02:46):

And what about your educational and class background, what can you tell us about that?

Robin Woodward (00:02:54):

I would identify as being raised middle-class, and I'm... I would say that I would be sort of... How do you call it? Artistically... Raised middle-class. I don't probably have a middle-class income exactly. But I graduated from university with an Honours BA in English and History. Intended to go to teacher's college and then decided I did not want to be a teacher, so formal education ended there.

Alisha Stranges (00:03:29):

And so, what direction did you go in? What kind of activities occupy your time these days professionally?

Robin Woodward (00:03:36):

I went in a more creative direction, which truth be told, is probably what I should have done at the beginning, but I thought teacher sounded practical. I'm self-employed along with my wife, and we have an accessories and now garment decorating company. We just kind of move around and do all sorts of stuff. You can see some creative things behind me. We're in my studio. We've been working together for about 20 years, making handmade pop culture influenced accessories, and gifts, and décor, and now textiles.

Alisha Stranges (00:04:15):

Can you say a little bit more about garment decorating?

Robin Woodward (00:04:18):

Basically, a T-shirt line. But then once you start, we figured a couple of years ago, as an addition to what we already know how to do, which is all essentially self-taught, just being creative people and, "Hey, what happens if you put this in this, and if you combine these layers in this thing that..." Lots of glitter has always been a calling card of ours, and now we started using heat transfer vinyl and a cutter so we can do custom made T-shirts, for example. That's a thing that we really focus on, is... Especially influenced by music fans and people that love something and want to share it and display it in a really personalized way. That's kind of where we started. And then as soon as you decide you want to do T-shirts, then you have to do tank shirts, and then you find sweatshirts. And we found these great sweatpants. And so, it just keeps going and going, and there's more and more you can do with it. You just have to reign in the supply buying.

Alisha Stranges (00:05:21):

Right. I'm sure there's a... Glitter is very hard to clean up.

Robin Woodward (00:05:26):

Oh, yes. There's a very glittery floor in here, and there was one point, two years ago, I think. It was right after a long weekend, I think it was Labour Day. And we walked in and there's shelves all up above here, and the shelves had collapsed. They had just come right out of the wall. This is an old building and probably there's some vibration or something with all the condo construction nearby, and glitter was everywhere. Huge bags of glitter all over.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:00):

I'm sure you were cleaning up for years.

Robin Woodward (00:06:02):

A little bit, but that's why we need to have a studio that we can make a mess in.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:06):

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for sort of encapsulating that for us. Is there anything else about how you understand the different identities you hold today as compared to 20 years ago that you want us to know about?

Robin Woodward (00:06:20):

There's not a great deal of change in my identity in the last 20 years, just maybe a solidification.

Alisha Stranges (00:06:30):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Did you want to say more about that?

Robin Woodward (00:06:33):

I feel like I'm not particularly complicated in that realm. I've never questioned my gender identity beyond, "Is this what I...? Yeah. Yeah." For me, it's pretty straight forward as being the sex I was assigned at birth, always felt like the right one for me. I probably lean into the femme identity maybe a little bit less than I would have 20 years ago when it felt like a newer thing. Now, that's just kind of how I am, and I don't think about it as much. But I definitely have a femme presentation and expression in the way I dress and express myself physically. I just kind of stayed the course with some changes for fashion along the way.

Alisha Stranges (00:07:32):

Thank you. I'm going to ask you to travel back in time now to the fall of 2000. The Toronto Women's Bathhouse Committee, as you know, was preparing to host the Night of 2000 Pussies, which was the fourth instalment of the Pussy Palace. How did you first learn about that particular event in the series?

Robin Woodward (00:07:51):

That's a good question. How did we learn about stuff at the time? There was probably an ad in *Xtra* or maybe an article. I always read *Xtra*, the paper copy, when it existed. There was probably flyers, like paper flyers that you would see when you were out. And just word-of-mouth. I had been to, I believe, three of the previous ones. No, maybe there was two that I'd been to. I know there's one that I hadn't gone to. So, I was familiar with the event, and I don't know, maybe it was on an email list. I don't even know.

Alisha Stranges (00:08:29):

What intrigued you about, maybe not that specific event, but the Pussy Palace more generally?

Robin Woodward (00:08:36):

Well, I mean, it was a space for queer women to be sexual. It didn't exist anywhere else. And we had long sort of, in my group of friends, bemoaned the fact that the gay men had access to casual sex culture, and the back rooms and things we were like, "Oh, can you imagine?" I mean, queer women, generally, it's hard even to keep a bar open, let alone a space that's specifically designated for sexual activity. I think it's just that sort of freedom and that, not so much titillating, but kind of exciting, just wanting to be in a space with queer women that felt sort of open and free.

Alisha Stranges (00:09:28):

Yeah. Well, we're curious also about the space and time in which someone goes from being a person who's decided that they're going to attend the event to actually becoming an official patron. So, some of the things we're curious about are kind of the moments, all the things involved in the moments leading up to actually entering the club. Can you journey back and sort of recall where you might have been before you made your way to the club, mode of transportation to get there?

Robin Woodward (00:10:01):

I think we probably took maybe a taxi or maybe the TTC [Toronto Transit Commission]. We wouldn't have driven, and I know we didn't have our bicycles that night, which is how we often get around town. We were living on Queen Street East at the time, so yeah, best guess is either the TTC or a taxi. I probably just went with Ange [Beever]. I don't think we met up with anyone else. No, we didn't meet up with anyone before we went in, but we knew that we would see a bunch of friends there. There'd been a great deal of discussion about who was going in our social group.

Alisha Stranges (00:10:37):

Yeah. Do you recall what time you may have been planning to arrive at, fashionably late, early?

Robin Woodward (00:10:44):

Knowing me, it would have been... Let's say if it started at 7:00 p.m., we probably would have got there around 8:00 p.m./8:30 p.m. I'm totally guessing, but it wouldn't... It wasn't late and it wasn't right at the beginning; somewhere in between.

Alisha Stranges (00:11:01):

And did you sort of have in your minds, "Oh, we'll stay for X amount of time," or...?

Robin Woodward (00:11:08):

No, I don't think so. I think it was just, "See where the night takes us."

Alisha Stranges (00:11:13):

Yeah. Yeah. How were you feeling about that night, like, what might happen that night?

Robin Woodward (00:11:20):

I think there was a little bit of... A little extra nervous energy, partially because of the event itself and being in a sexy space with other women, maybe something extra fun would happen. But also, there had been rumours in the community that there was... A raid was a very distinct possibility from the TPS [Toronto Police Service] because of other things that had been happening in the community. I know they had raided The Bijou and the Black Eagle, I believe. Some of the gay men's sexual spaces had been raided around that time, and there was a pretty clear understanding that the event might have been targeted for something similar.

Alisha Stranges (00:12:08):

Yeah, I'm curious. So, you still decided that you would go. What was involved in that deliberation for you there?

Robin Woodward (00:12:16):

I don't know. I imagine it was probably like, "Our friends are going, and it'll be fun." We had the privilege of not feeling too scared of police involvement. Neither one of us had a criminal record or anything that would make an interaction with the police particularly, like absolutely, a problem. There was no reason for us to be particularly afraid. So, I don't remember. I remember being aware of it, but I don't remember having any specific feelings beyond, "Those bastards."

Alisha Stranges (00:13:02):

Right. Okay.

Robin Woodward (00:13:05):

Actually, well, I guess defiance would be a mood.

Alisha Stranges (00:13:12):

I see. So, last question for me in this little section here is, it's a bit of an odd one, but if you could freeze this moment in time where you're just about to become a patron of the Pussy Palace for the third time, and if you could express it sonically, if it was a sound, what's the sound of that moment?

Robin Woodward (00:13:32):

Ooh!

Alisha Stranges (00:13:35):

Thank you. Thank you. Elio [Colavito], I'll pass it over to you.

Elio Colavito (00:13:41):

Yes, all right. I was leaving some space maybe to say more. Some people do, some people just make a noise and then that's the end of it. You never know what you're going to get. I'm curious about the look. What was the look that you were going for that evening? And what do you recall about what you wore and might have worn at an event like this, Pussy Palace?

Robin Woodward (00:14:01):

Now, this one I actually do remember very specifically. I was wearing... I don't remember what I put on top to get to the event, but my outfit once I was there — because there were lockers to leave other things in — so what my outfit for the event was, was a black bra. It may or may not have been PVC, that part I don't remember. A pair of black, knee-high boots, and a vintage pink satin and garter belt. [interviewer whistles] Was I wearing...? I don't think I was wearing stockings with the garter belt; I think I was just kind of wearing it as a very, very tiny skirt.

Elio Colavito (00:14:41):

And what were you trying to feel in this outfit? What were you trying to communicate to other people with this outfit?

Robin Woodward (00:14:49):

Well, sexy, femme, a little bit tough, the sort of mix of current and vintage. And I mean, it was the new millennium, so it was still a little late 90s vibe. Yeah, I think a little bit sexy, a little bit sweet, a little bit tough kind of mixture.

Elio Colavito (00:15:14):

And was there any way that you tried to kind of coordinate your outfit with Ange [Beever]'s?

Robin Woodward (00:15:18):

I don't remember, but probably we would have gotten dressed together, so it would have been a, "What do you think about this?" And she was wearing black mostly. Chaps. Leather vest. So, you know, I think there was definitely a little bit of sex club chic in our minds as we got dressed, at least our version of it at the time.

Elio Colavito (00:15:42):

Right. So, you arrive at the club; describe the scene outside of it.

Robin Woodward (00:15:50):

I don't remember. I think there was a little bit of a line. I mean, I can picture the entrance on... Is it Maitland [Street]?

Elio Colavito (00:15:56):

Yeah.

Alisha Stranges (00:15:58):

Mutual Street.

Elio Colavito (00:15:58):

Mutual.

Robin Woodward (00:15:59):

Mutual. Thank you. And it had kind of a low brick arch. I think there may have been a few people outside. What I do remember is once... There was a point when we got inside, I think, the little vestibule. And at that point, and I hope I'm not anticipating another question, but there were some organizers that were handing out flyers that had kind of "know your rights" information. And they indicated that they suspected there would be some police intervention, and they wanted to give the patrons ample notice of what maybe could be expected and what our rights were if there was police presence.

Elio Colavito (00:16:47):

And what was happening for you internally throughout this entire process of going from standing in this short line to receiving this information and being admitted into the bathhouse?

Robin Woodward (00:16:59):

Probably the same kind of excitement, maybe the teeniest bit of nervousness, but mostly just looking forward to a fun night with that lingering idea that there might be something that was not going to be the fun and sexy part.

Elio Colavito (00:17:17):

And can you take us through the process of being admitted in this vestibule area and what that actually looked like?

Robin Woodward (00:17:24):

Let's see. I believe that there were certainly posters both that had the information about what rights... About wanting to versus needing to give your name and identification, et cetera. There would have been some small posters or printed sheets regarding bathhouse etiquette and rules about consent. I remember that stuff being around. I think it's just kind of the... Getting in was always just that sort of nervous energy of, you've gotten there, but you're not quite in yet. And so there would have been a part where you'd pay your ticket, I suppose. You showed your ID, I suppose.

Robin Woodward (00:18:12):

And then you go down into a space, and I think there... And I can't remember if we were assigned lockers or you just go to find your locker. I've been in this space that became Oasis Aqualounge many years later. So, I've always tried to, when I was in the renovated space that that was Oasis, I remember several times trying to kind of place myself and, "Wait, what room was this before? Is this where the lockers were?" Because it did change quite a bit, but it was in the same building, so there was certain parts of it that felt really familiar and other parts that I could never quite imagine. Sometimes the memories are kind of laid on top of one another, so I'm not always super sure about those bits.

Elio Colavito (00:19:01):

You mentioned bathhouse etiquette, I'm interested in what that entailed.

Robin Woodward (00:19:08):

There was definitely some... There would have been information around: some people will be nude or unclothed, and I believe that this sort of... How did they phrase it? You know, I may even have some paper at home. I'll look through our archives slash giant chest full of paper. I'm trying to remember the specific things because, at the time, there had been a few other events we'd gone to that had similar sorts of things, that when you were entering a space where there was going to be sexual activity allowed, there was always information about consent.

Robin Woodward (00:19:50):

I don't remember exactly how it was worded at the time, but it was clearly making it plain that you had to consent to sexual... Or you had to receive consent from a person. And if they did not give you consent, then you were expected to leave them alone. And that harassment would not be tolerated. And any sort of unwanted sexual touching was completely forbidden. And I believe that they instructed you, if you were having a problem or you needed assistance, that the volunteers of the bathhouse and the people who were staffing at that night should be contacted if you required help.



Elio Colavito (00:20:42):

And once you were inside, how would you describe the space itself?

Robin Woodward (00:20:46):

It's a big, old, Victorian house that's been subdivided many, many times. At the time of 2000, it was Club Toronto. It was a gay men's bathhouse, so it was set up for those uses. There was a whirlpool, like a big, hot tub whirlpool on the lower level. There was several different staircases. I think there was two main staircases. And there were lockers on a couple of different floors. There was a whole bunch of tiny, tiny rooms, the private rooms that were pretty bare bones that were generally used for sex. And I think that there were linens? I feel like there were kind of vinyl covered mattresses in a lot of those rooms, but there were sheets available. And there was an outdoor pool which was the very best part of it. So, it was an outside pool that you would access mostly from the lower level, but you could get to it from upper floors as well, I believe. Again, having been in this space after a renovation, I'm not quite entirely sure what was where. But the outdoor pool had a big concrete patio around it.

Elio Colavito (00:22:05):

Hmm. Interesting. Okay. So, what—

Robin Woodward (00:22:09):

Oh, the steam room. I think there must have been a steam room as well, or a sauna type thing.

Elio Colavito (00:22:16):

Yeah, I think we've heard a bit about something similar with a gross carpet. We've heard a lot of stuff.

Robin Woodward (00:22:25):

Yes. I also remember lattice being in that sort of lower level that you kind of came into. Maybe there was a bar there, but there was... I definitely remember there being like fake grass carpeting and some white plastic lattice. Weird that, that's what I remember. Anyway.

Elio Colavito (00:22:46):

Memory is a funny thing. What parts of the space did you gravitate towards?

Robin Woodward (00:22:50):

Definitely the pool. It was a warm night, and I mean, the opportunity to swim naked outdoors in Downtown Toronto is not something that I ever took lightly. And that was often a big reason for wanting to go to that space when it was available to us for this special women's bathhouse events. For sure we would have hung out at the pool. There was a bar that was set up in one of the sort of, I think, middle floors.

Robin Woodward (00:23:22):

Like I said, the space had been divided so many times. There weren't a lot of large rooms, but this was sort of... It felt like a big, almost a hallway. I'm sure it was someone's lovely drawing room at some point, but it was a bigger open space that had other smaller spaces going off it, if I remember. And there was a temporary bar set up there. And at least at one point, one of our friends was one of the volunteer bartenders. So, probably would have spent a little time at the bar.

Robin Woodward (00:23:54):

I'm sure we wandered around. And I know that in the upper floors, where it starts to get... I remember the sloped ceilings. There was probably a photo booth up there and there was probably a lap dance room. I remember being there, I think, at a different — in one of the lap dance rooms — I believe it was a different night and not that particular one. I did get a lap dance.

Elio Colavito (00:24:22):

And what kinds of activities did you take part in that evening?

Robin Woodward (00:24:27):

That particular evening, I remember dancing and drinking and partying with friends. I expect I would have gone swimming, although I don't have any really strong memories of it, so maybe I didn't that particular night. I remember being around the pool and I remember looking at the pool, but I don't fully remember being in it that particular night. So, who knows? Maybe I didn't want to mess up my outfit.

Elio Colavito (00:24:53):

Yeah. And it's funny that you mentioned the photo room because our next question asks about this. Did you spend any time in the photo room that evening?

Robin Woodward (00:25:02):

I don't think so. I know I have participated on other occasions, but I don't think we did that, that particular night.

Elio Colavito (00:25:13):

And on the other occasions, what is going on in the photos that you have?

Robin Woodward (00:25:21):

It's four of us and we are... I believe there is two of our butch friends and then myself and another femme-presenting friend, we were doing a little mock oral sex business with "the boys." But it was silly, goofy, sexy stuff.

Elio Colavito (00:25:43):

What feeling would you say that, that photo captures?

Robin Woodward (00:25:46):

Playful. Maybe a little horny.

Alisha Stranges (00:25:53):

I want to get a sense also, before we kind of move into the talking about the raid more specifically, the sense of the impression that the space made on your senses. I'm going to do a little bit of an exercise, experiment here, and just go with me to the best of your ability. And I'll do it with you. So, if you could just sort of in your chair kind of get comfortable. If it's possible placing your kind of feet firmly on the floor, relaxing your

arms and hands on your lap, soften your gaze, or you can even close your eyes if you'd like to, and just take a couple breaths in and out.

Alisha Stranges (00:26:41):

And with each inhale, allow your body to re-inhabit some or other location within the Pussy Palace that night. And don't worry too much about which space is coming to mind. Whichever space comes is the perfect one to sort of focus on. Just really breathing yourself way back in time into that space. And from this contemplative space, as you look around, can you describe for us what it is you're seeing, whatever flashes before you?

Robin Woodward (00:27:26):

Lots of women, crowds almost. Small spaces, lots of bodies. Many dressed in something sexy. There was lots of lingerie, lots of bare-breasted women with towels wrapped around their waist. There were probably a few that were fully nude, but I seem to remember the towel around the waist as being the... Probably the dominant outfit. I remember the smell of chlorine. I remember the excitement and that the humidity, and the feeling of being in a warm, close space that was damp. With the pool and steam. It felt like you would expect a bathhouse to feel. Also, the stairs creak a lot. It's a big, old, Victorian house, so the building itself seemed to make a lot of noise and was maybe not in the best repair, but it was there for fun.

Alisha Stranges (00:28:42):

Yeah. And if you could potentially, magically, distil this image you're describing into a single colour, what might the colour be?

Robin Woodward (00:28:58):

I think a really, really deep dark pink.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:05):

And besides sort of chlorine, humidity, is there sort of any lingering, other lingering odours in the air?

Robin Woodward (00:29:17):

I want to guess patchouli, but I don't recall for sure. Maybe beer, probably some beer.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:25):

Yeah. And if you could somehow taste the space, what would its flavour be?

Robin Woodward (00:29:35):

Salty, like sweat.

Alisha Stranges (00:29:39):

If some part of your body were to just sort of reach out right now and brush up against something in the space around you, what are you touching, what are its textures?

Robin Woodward (00:29:51):

Probably a painted, wood doorframe because most of the spaces were small or you were... It felt like the space was full of doorways to another space. So, I often remember kind of pushing through or up against other people as you were navigating the space and moving from one particular room to another.

Alisha Stranges (00:30:23):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Just take one final breath in and out and let that go. And you can open your eyes or return to the camera, if not already. Thank you.

Elio Colavito (00:30:39):

Awesome. So, I'm curious about who else was there. And the next set of questions is going to focus on your perception of the crowd. How many people would you say were there roughly?

Robin Woodward (00:30:52):

Hundreds. Probably, it would have felt like... I mean, some of the things I became aware of later on, but I would say it felt busy. It felt like there was probably a couple of hundred women there.

Elio Colavito (00:31:09):

And how would you describe the composition of the crowd along the lines of gender, sexuality, race?

Robin Woodward (00:31:17):

Queer. Definitely women who fit my idea of what queer women looked like at the time. Lots of piercings, lots of tattoos, lots of women with much shorter hair, and also women with long hair and with very femme presentations. Lots of androgynous and more masculine presentations as well. I remember having a couple of friends who were trans that were there, that very much were trans men and were identifying as such, and were dressed as such.

Robin Woodward (00:32:00):

There was certainly a lot of people that I did not know. And I think one of the things that was always kind of interesting about it is that like, "Who are these people? I've never seen them before." When you feel like you're part of a community, and you feel like you know a good deal of the community, there's certainly people you don't necessarily know, but you've seen their face before out at a bar or a party or something. So, there were definitely strangers.

Robin Woodward (00:32:25):

But I would say, I don't remember being particularly focused on race or ethnicity, but I imagine the makeup was probably predominantly white, but with a downtown mix of other races and ethnicities. Yeah. I honestly don't remember; I'm just sort of guessing about who I remember from the community at the time.

Elio Colavito (00:32:52):

Yeah. It's interesting that you said you knew some trans men that were there. The Pussy Palace has been described as a place that was publicly inclusive of lesbian women, queer cis women, and trans folks. And what was your impression of the relationship between these differently gendered groups at the Pussy Palace that night?

Robin Woodward (00:33:13):

At the time, I believe it was kind of like anyone who has the experience of being female in our society, whether they were treated as female and didn't feel they were such, or were becoming female in a way that maybe it hadn't been reflected back at them. But I remember having probably a fairly rudimentary understanding of trans at the time, but just knowing that we all sort of fell under this umbrella. There had been discussion in the queer press, in *Xtra*, about trans identities and their inclusion at the Pussy Palace. And, for example, it was very much a stated political goal to be inclusive and not exclusive like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which ultimately kind of died as a result of their trans exclusionary policies. And the people that I was friends with who were really involved in that community at the time felt very passionately about the inclusion of our trans siblings as part of the... What the Pussy Palace was trying to provide was a space for all of us to come together and play, and basically everyone but cis men.

Elio Colavito (00:34:45):

Right. So, at—

[crosstalk]

Elio Colavito (00:34:47):

Sorry, go ahead.

Robin Woodward (00:34:48):

No, no, that was it.

Elio Colavito (00:34:49):

So, at 12:45 a.m., five men, all plainclothes police officers, enter the club and stay about 90 minutes. Were you still in the palace?

Robin Woodward (00:34:58):

Yes.

Elio Colavito (00:34:59):

All righty. Do you remember what you were doing when the police arrived?

Robin Woodward (00:35:05):

Very clearly. That actually is one of my most vivid memories of the night because, like I said, we all kind of knew and there was this sort of... There was a bit of a tension, but I think we had relaxed. We had some drinks; we were having a good time. Ange [Beever] and I were on a fire escape, and it was very high up. I think it was the third or fourth floor. It was a peaked roof, and we had walked out to this little fire escape. We were standing there with a stranger. I believe we were smoking a joint. And we were just looking down at the women that were swimming. There's all these, like, naked ladies swimming in the pool, people having a good time.

Robin Woodward (00:35:47):

And then, a volunteer... Like, we were high enough, you couldn't hear exactly what was happening other than splashing, but it looked calm and relaxed. And then a volunteer came out of the main building and probably walked really, really fast or ran right to the pool, said something, everyone just shot out of the pool. So, it was instantaneous, and we all look at each other, we're like, "The cops are here." We just knew what it meant, instantly, because the vibe changed in that second. And the person behind us said, "I can't be found here." And what they did for work, I think Ange [Beever] reminded me that they were a corrections officer, but it was someone whose job would likely have been in jeopardy or they felt would have been in jeopardy if they had been a found-in at this event.

Elio Colavito (00:36:46):

So, you find out, you know immediately that this is... The police are here. What are you feeling at that moment?

Robin Woodward (00:36:57):

Probably defiant. Probably, "Those fuckers." We knew they were going to do this, they're here to fuck with us.

Elio Colavito (00:37:08):

And then what? People start scattering, the vibe is completely different and you're on this fire escape, what happens next?

Robin Woodward (00:37:16):

We probably finished the joint. And this other third person, I think, left immediately, went back inside. I think you could, theoretically, go down the stairs, but I think we entered the building again through the balcony door or whatever that we'd come through. You could just sense that there was, not exactly panic, but I'm sure that there was sort of individual panic. But there was a new anxiety that was now... Like, the confirmation of the things that we had been afraid of before: "Okay, this is happening." Still don't know exactly what is going to happen and what it really means, but we knew that there were men in the space. So, everyone that I recall immediately went to lockers, got dressed, put on towels or whatever, if they had been in a state of undress. There were definitely people who immediately left.

Elio Colavito (00:38:19):

So, did you stay on this fire escape then?

Robin Woodward (00:38:22):

I don't recall specifically, but I imagine we probably, like I said, finished our joint and went back inside at some point. We didn't have that, "We got to go," impulse. So, we were going to stick around and see what happened, and see if we can salvage a party.

Elio Colavito (00:38:42):

Yeah. And then since you guys were some of the brave ones, did you end up seeing the police or talking to them at all?

Robin Woodward (00:38:50):

Yes, yes. We probably had more interaction with them than many others. So, what happened was, as much as I can be defiant and mouthy now, Ange [Beever] was a little bit more so and was feeling... Combative is probably the wrong word, but close enough, where I think she kind of wanted to, you know, "Let's go see. Let's go see what's happening," like as if, "I'm going to find the cops and give them a piece of my mind." I'm not exactly sure what she was planning to do. That made me nervous though because I did not want her to get arrested or... The idea of interacting with the police made me nervous.

Robin Woodward (00:39:43):

What I remember is that we just kept kind of walking through the space. And of course, all bar service shutdown, so I feel like we were just kind of seeing what was going on and kind of walking through, and Ange [Beever] was like, "Where are the cops? Let's go find them. Let's go find them." There was a point earlier in the evening, before the party got ruined, where... There's a sling room in Club Toronto that was... I don't know. It's probably not a very large room, but it was square, it's fairly dark, and there was a big frame setup that had, I think it was a leather or a rubber sling that had four harness points. And that room had been busy earlier, and in fact there had been like a little crowd around the doorway watching whatever was happening in the room. So, we had noticed that, that room was very busy earlier, at least a couple of times we'd gone by, and then after the police's arrival, I noticed that, that room was empty and the door was open. And my self-preservation strategy was, just in case Ange [Beever] is feeling particularly feisty, and I knew she was, I'll just distract her. I was like, "Hey, let's go in here."

Robin Woodward (00:41:00):

So, I sat down in the sling; we left the door open. We were just kind of swinging. And I don't know exactly how long we were in there, but I know that several times volunteers dropped by and the message was consistently, "There are still men in the building. The police are still here. There are men in the building." We were like, "Yeah, yeah, no problem." And I think that three or so people told us that. So, I also remember feeling kind of taken care of by the people who were running the event. They were trying to share information and make sure that everyone knew what was happening still.

Robin Woodward (00:41:39):

One of the volunteers closed the door. So, then we were like, "Well, maybe we'll fool around a little." So, we took advantage of the space that we were in, and we probably had the door closed for, I don't know, maybe five minutes, maybe 10. I was not wearing a watch as part of my outfit. And then there was a really loud banging at the door, and that was the point we were like, "Oh, shit." So, I stayed seated. The little garter belt thing that I was wearing was larger in the front than it was in the back. So, from the front, it looked like a really, really, really tiny skirt, but then the back was open, and I was probably wearing a thong. Yes, I was. So, I wanted to stay seated while the men were there. So, Ange [Beever] opened the door and they kind of... There was the five of them. They came into the room effectively blocking us in. And their manner, their demeanour, was not particularly threatening, but their presence was. They weren't supposed to be there according to what we thought the night was going to be and who was going to be in the building.

Robin Woodward (00:43:02):

So, there was a mixture of, for me personally, there was a mixture of, I guess, fear, but also a little bit of that defiance of, "We're invited guests, we're supposed to be here. You're not." I wouldn't have said such a thing, of course. I probably just stayed pretty quiet. So, they kept us in that room for quite a while. They asked us a bunch of questions. They did ask for ID, and we gave it to them because part of the advice that we were given from the organizers was: "If you feel comfortable giving them your name and your ID, you don't have to, but it may make things easier for you." Something along those lines.

Robin Woodward (00:43:50):

So, we had actually kept our ID on us specifically for that reason. So, I pulled my driver's license out of the top of my boot and Ange [Beever] would have had hers in a pocket. I was nervous about that, but felt like it was a relatively safe thing to do. I also remember, while we were in that room, and like I said, there was the two of us and then these five men, kind of blocking us in. One may have left at one point, but all I just remember is kind of this cluster of men. And they were wearing windbreakers and not full cop uniforms, but cop lite.

Robin Woodward (00:44:34):

So, they were asking us more or less like, "Have you been in here all evening?" They were asking about our presence in that room. I mean, most of the time I was just like, "I don't know what the hell is going on." And Ange [Beever] was being really charming. I think they said, "We're going to ask if you'll stay here." And I remember them reading our descriptions, or listing our descriptions into a radio, like describing me as blonde, long hair. I can't remember if they talked about what I was wearing, but maybe they did. And they described Ange [Beever] as wearing like a leather vest, shirtless. And I don't know if they knew they were chaps, but I do remember them describing something about what Ange [Beever] was wearing.

Robin Woodward (00:45:25):

But Ange [Beever] was being friendly and playful and chatting with the cops, and they asked her about her tattoos and Madonna was one of them. And so, she was being enthusiastic about the new Madonna single and sang it to them, which I really appreciated because that was her way of keeping us safe, was: "I'll make them like me so that they won't harm us." And I remember, while I was kind of watching this, seeing Chanelle Gallant — who was one of the bathhouse committee members — was standing outside the room, and she made eye contact with me and was communicating that they were watching. And I think she maybe had a clipboard or something or some paper, or it might have been someone else, but I remember there being someone who was clearly making notes that was... Our people were taking care of each other. So, we talked with them for a while. I don't remember saying a whole lot, but I really don't know.

Elio Colavito (00:46:31):

Yeah. I do have a question off of that whole thing that you just said. You mentioned that the cops didn't necessarily have a threatening demeanour, but that their presence was still threatening nonetheless. Can you say more about why you felt that way?

Robin Woodward (00:46:48):

Well, they weren't supposed to be there. I mean, according to what was planned for the evening, it was supposed to be women, and trans folks, and members of our community. And Toronto Police Services, those officers, those men, were absolutely not part of our community. They were intruders. And obviously they may have had legal reasons to be there, but it wasn't valid in my estimation. Yeah, it felt intrusive and potentially threatening. We all know stories about police violence against lesbians. And those sorts of stories did go through my head of just being aware that there was a possibility. It felt remote. It didn't feel like I was in imminent danger of physical violence; I was just aware that it was a possibility and that I was vulnerable.

Elio Colavito (00:48:05):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). How did the atmosphere change after the cops left?



Robin Woodward (00:48:09):

Well, they completely deflated that party balloon. There was a mixture... I mean, again, because we were in this weird space of being kind of stuck in this room, I don't know what else was happening at that point elsewhere in the building, but like I said, a lot of people left, and the vibe completely changed to being more of a mix. There was no longer the sort of excitement of, "Hey, I might get laid tonight," that was there earlier. Now it was, "What the hell happened? Where are my friends? Did everybody leave? Who's still here? Are the cops still here? And is anybody going to get arrested?"

Robin Woodward (00:48:55):

There was a lot of unknowns at the time of what the result was going to be. If there was going to be legal problems for anyone being a found-in, was anyone going to be taken away? Once we left that room, once we were told that we could go... And I remember them when they were speaking to the walkie-talkie, I remember hearing something like, "Yeah, that's not them." So, what we presume is that there had been some activity in the room that they were trying to confirm whether we were the people that had been viewed and reported on engaging in a criminal activity.

Robin Woodward (00:49:41):

So, after that, then I know that I spoke with Chanelle [Gallant] and a couple of other organizers, and they offered support of just sort of checking and see if we were okay. And I don't think we stayed too much longer than that, but I did start to get a bit scared when we were leaving because then it was like, "Okay, well, now I feel..." We stayed certainly 'til we knew that the police had left. Those officers had gone, and I think that we deliberately stuck around until after that point to sort of, I don't know, reconnect with our friends and with the space and what the intention of the night was, and kind of check in and see where everyone was at. But I do remember actually being frightened to go through the door to leave, and wondering what was going to be on the sidewalk. Were there going to be officers out there waiting to arrest us? I just, I didn't know.

Robin Woodward (00:50:36):

I had read about the sort of historical raids of queer bars, and we knew a little bit about what had happened with the more recent ones in the gay men's spaces, but I didn't know anyone who'd been there, so I didn't know anyone's one-on-one experience of, "And then what happened?" So, that was the part where I actually started to get kind of freaked out, and I think we just took a taxi home. And I remember being worried that they have our address, they know where we live.

Elio Colavito (00:51:12):

Right. It was later revealed that before those male officers entered the club, there were two women police officers, undercover in the space. How did it feel to learn later that there were these outsiders surveilling you in the space?

Robin Woodward (00:51:30):

Not good. I guess, I can't say that I was surprised. Like I said, we kind of expected it, and there had been a lot of antagonism between... The police chief at the time was Julian Fantino, who I have a great deal of antipathy towards, and did so even then because I was raised in London, Ontario, where he made his career ruining the lives of gay men under the guise of it being a child pornography ring. So, I had absorbed all of that media, the official story, while I was living in London and going to school.

Robin Woodward (00:52:15):

And then after I came to Toronto and I started reading some of the coverage in the queer press about what really happened with this Project Guardian thing, I had a very strong sense that he was a careerist who was trying to make his career by ruining the lives of gay people, if possible, or just making things harder for us by playing up the sort of morality bullshit, also under the guise of liquor license violations. That was the window they used to get in.

Elio Colavito (00:52:52):

And what do you know about the legal proceedings that followed the raid?

Robin Woodward (00:52:59):

I know that two of the volunteers who had signed a Special Occasions Permit that allowed them to serve liquor, they were charged with several violations under the Liquor License Act. Some of which I remember, in my experience, being false. For example, I remember them... One of the charges was serving outside of service hours, and I knew that that was false because by, number one, the male officers came in before one o'clock in the morning. I'm pretty sure that last call was 1:00 a.m. at that time. I forget when it changed, but I think... No, actually it might have been 2:00 a.m. Anyway, who cares? But I know that they absolutely were not serving beyond the legal hours. And I think maybe there was one about that they charged with serving someone under age. I can't speak to that, but it felt like bullshit.

Robin Woodward (00:54:03):

And I remember that the two people who had signed on the Special Occasions Permit, like I said, they were volunteers, and the money that was being raised from the bar that night, we all knew, there were signs up, that it was for a scholarship fund for queer students. So, it felt wrong. Yeah. Whatever we found out afterwards, and when we found that charges have been laid, I mean, I was worried about criminal charges because it was theoretically possible that people could have been charged under the criminal code. There are specific sexual acts that are, and I believe still to this day... For example, I believe that if anal sex is happening and there is more than two persons present, it can be charged under the criminal code, which may have been what they were looking for when they were asking us things. I don't know. But the idea that anything that could have been happening in that space was possibly a chargeable offense was enraging.

Robin Woodward (00:55:21):

Because, again, because of the tone of the way the police had been talking about these things, it very much felt like kind of a moral panic of, "They've got to close down these sex rooms in case someone unknowingly wandered in," which was impossible. And this is part of the thing of going in, when you asked about that, it was made very clear that this was a sexual space, and that there was going to be naked people and there was going to be sexual activity, and you could not walk in there and be surprised by that.

Elio Colavito (00:55:54):

Right.

Robin Woodward (00:55:57):

Okay, I've been talking for a while. You should probably ask me a question again.

Elio Colavito (00:56:02):

Did you do anything to support the community or the legal action in the aftermath of the raid?

Robin Woodward (00:56:08):

We did. When the case went to court, that was the criminal charges, or I'm sorry, the liquor license violations against JP [Hornick] and Richard [Aitcheson]. There was a call that went out. I can't remember if it would have been by email or in *Xtra* or whatever, but we were aware that there was an organized show of support. And it was a really early morning, and it was really cold, and we went to the courthouse to be outside to show our support for these volunteers who had been caught up in this. And we went into watch. And I remember our intention was, "We'll go there for a couple of hours. We'll chant. We'll make some noise. We'll show our support. We'll go to the studio and do some work." And we did not leave because it was fascinating, enraging and fascinating. And then we went back the second day.

Robin Woodward (00:57:13):

So, on the first day, one of the things that was so interesting was, at some point, someone was describing seeing a woman in a room with cops surrounding her, and they were talking about me. One second. It always makes me emotional because in the time between when the raid happened and the court case, I remember telling the story, like, a hundred times to people; it was a thing to talk about in the community. And the way we told the story was very much that defiant, like, "You're not going to get us. And, yeah," and the stuff about Ange [Beever] singing to the cops and how it was charming and funny. And the anger at their actions had kind of carried through that storytelling, and then hearing someone describe me as looking terrified... It actually... I was like, "Oh my God, I was scared." I forgot I was scared. I had kind of repressed that or just pushed it aside to deal with the injustice of it. But hearing someone talk about me, it completely brought all that stuff back.

Robin Woodward (00:58:41):

And at one point there was a recess and I went to speak to Frank Addario, who was the lawyer for the good side, and I just told him my experience. And so, he suggested that perhaps I might be useful as a witness. So, he had his assistant prep me as a witness. And I remember having this really weird lonely time, it was kind of like... I think I was asked to not attend the afternoon in case they needed me to there. So, I remember wandering around the Eaton Centre for a little while to kill time until I was told to go back. But at that point, it was by myself. And then I think I sat outside for a little while, and I believe it was later that day, I'm not 100% sure, but they did say, "Okay, we're not going to use you, but thanks very much." I was actually kind of relieved, but was absolutely willing to say what I had to say, if it would be helpful.

Robin Woodward (00:59:44):

So, we went back the following day. And the thing that had been so surprising and moving in a way — moving is the wrong word; I'll go back to enraging — was seeing these police officers, and they were the undercover officers. I watched them lie on the stand, and I knew they were lying because I had been there. And it was about the things about, like, serving after hours and some of the behaviour of the bar staff, and I was like, "That's just not true. It's not true." And honestly, it was one of those, like, that little moment where you realize that all of those things... You know, I had grown up thinking that the police were on my side and they were a place to turn when I needed help, and it was that moment that I realized, not necessarily, that they may also do harm, and I'm really fortunate that I was in my late twenties before I felt that knowledge, that I was part of a community that I could not absolutely count on the police helping me instead of harming me.

Robin Woodward (01:01:02):

And that's something I've learned a bit more about in intervening years, but that was a really, I guess, an epiphany kind of moment of like, "Oh my God." It's different than watching the detectives on *Law & Order*, maybe say something to get this really terrible person fudging the truth a little bit, or making sure that the evidence does its job to convict someone who is horrible. You see that stuff on TV and it feels morally very different than it does when you're sitting in a courtroom and watching police lie under oath, and seeing volunteers who were just running a community event that are now in legal trouble. Excuse me a sec.

Elio Colavito (01:01:55):

No problem.

Robin Woodward (01:02:01):

That part was really interesting. And also watching our community, the people that took the stand, Janet... Is it Rowe? Janet Rowe. I can see her face; I'm just blanking on her name. I think, is it Janet Rowe—

Alisha Stranges (01:02:17):

Yes.

Robin Woodward (01:02:17):

...that I'm talking about? She was amazing because the crown attorney, the prosecutor that they sent in, I remember her being described as being very green and not... She seemed really out of her depth. And the prosecutor's understanding of trans identities was not sophisticated, would be an understatement. And she was essentially trying to prove, or at least arguing the idea that no one should have been upset that men were there when the male officers showed up because isn't a trans man a man, or isn't a... Oh, no, sorry, a trans woman. They were trying to argue that like... I can barely even deal with the logic.

Robin Woodward (01:03:06):

And Janet [Rowe] put them in their place so beautifully that it just... It was almost laughable. And everyone that took the stand to support the people who were charged, they seemed smart and really knowledgeable and politically savvy, and it just... The cops' case fell apart. And then of course the judgment that came after was so clear that it set a precedent, because they... I'm probably telling you things you already know, but the breach of human rights was determined to be so egregious — I remember the judge using that word — that because the human rights... I'm blanking, I'm sorry. Because the violation was so egregious with the number of women who were there. And it was tantamount to a strip search. And they threw out the evidence collected not only after the breach, but before, and that had never happened in Canadian law apparently. And so that really, I think that really galvanized the people in the community to push harder to get an apology, to get some sort of redress and to make the police force accountable for having overstepped.

Robin Woodward (01:04:42):

And that turned into... There was both a human rights complaint and a class action lawsuit that essentially got rolled into one. And we were contacted at some point to ask if we would be part of the class action suit. And because Ange [Beever] and I were self-employed and didn't feel that our livelihoods would be in jeopardy, we said we would do it because it was something we could do to help our community. I think we probably knew we weren't going to be the types that would be able to write big cheques, so we had the freedom to feel like we could take this on and to be named plaintiffs, so that we could represent the class of women who were there that night.

Elio Colavito (01:05:36):

And can you tell us a bit more about your experience with that class action suit?

Robin Woodward (01:05:44):

I was really glad that we did it. We met a couple of really awesome lawyers, Bonnie Tough, who has since passed away, and she was formidable. I really, really liked her. And then Kathryn Podrebarac was her co-counsel. They were great. It was the first experience I'd had working with lawyers closely. We only had a few meetings and there was a settlement conference, but they were really helpful in explaining what was happening. And Richard [Aitchison] and JP [Hornick] were the other two named plaintiffs who had been on the Special Occasion Permit.

Robin Woodward (01:06:36):

There was a settlement conference when it ended. And we were in, I think it was Sheraton or the Hilton. It was one of the hotels downtown. And I remember feeling quite chuffed that we got a swanky suite to hang out in and catered lunch and whatever. Because the lawyers would come in, they would explain to us, "Here's what one of the proposals is. This is what we want." And I'm sure that there were people from the bathhouse committee there. Actually, I don't know. I honestly can't remember. They must have been.

Robin Woodward (01:07:14):

We were not essentially in charge of arguing things. We weren't the policy makers for lack of a better term. We had some guidance on that because there were other people who were better qualified, who were more engaged with the community to make the specific demands and they were good demands. They asked for money that would go to the, I believe it was called Bill 7, the scholarship fund that the bar was originally benefiting, and Maggie's, the sex workers outreach group. Because it was, again, it was about policing women's sexuality, and Maggie's, I know had been very helpful to the bathhouse committee organizers, both before and after the police raid.

Elio Colavito (01:08:00):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Robin Woodward (01:08:01):

And there had also been a community meeting too that I remember being really lively. I think Olivia Chow was there and spoke. And I remember that there was an impromptu march, actually. I'm kind of going back in time because this was before the court case happened. It was the immediate aftermath. There was a community meeting at The 519. And I remember "out of the bars and into the streets" march, as we emptied out of the space and went down Church Street and then marched to 52 Division headquarters.

Robin Woodward (01:08:41):

And come to think of it, there's also a photograph of Ange [Beever] and I sitting on top of the moose that was outside the police plaza at the time. There's probably only a few of them left in the city, but around that time, late, late 90s, I think it was one of Mel Lastman's civic engagement things to have all of these big fiberglass moose sculptures decorated throughout the city, and there was a cop moose. And I don't know exactly how it happened, but someone boosted Ange [Beever] and I up, so we were kissing on top of the moose wearing bike jackets. Super cool. And that wound up in the *Toronto Sun* of all places too. And the guy who wrote about it was... I was kind of surprised that in the *Sun* he actually was... They seemed to be pretty down with all of us out there protesting what the police actions were.

Elio Colavito (01:09:44):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right. This is my final question for you before I turn it back over to Alisha [Stranges]. When you made the decision to attend the event, what were you hoping to experience and how did your expectations for the night compare to your actual lived experience of it?

Robin Woodward (01:09:59):

Oh. I don't think I had any really specific expectations. I was in a relationship. We weren't necessarily going there to hook up, to meet someone, to have sex; it was more about being in that community space where it was possible, just to have a sexy space for women. Well, and to be fair, the first place that Ange [Beever] and I kissed was a women's fetish party. So, that's the kind of spaces that we liked because it was exciting; it was fun. I liked to be in a sexy space, even if it wasn't about my own sexual gratification or activity. I just liked it. It was queer. It felt a little bit daring, but exciting, and that's what we were supposed to be doing, it felt like. In that time and in that place. And that's where and how a lot of us were growing into our orientation and our sexuality, and having those places that were available for exploration and a little tiny bit of boundary pushing if you were up for it. Having those spaces was important to us, so that's why we wanted to participate.

Robin Woodward (01:11:26):

I can't tell you exactly what I expected, other than it would be fun. Fun, sexy, hang out with women who may or may not be dressed and have a great time. So, there was a little bit of that. It certainly made me feel ultimately more connected to my community. I don't know if it's like trauma bonded, kind of thing, but feeling that something that mattered was threatened, and feeling proud of community for the way they had organized it in the first place, the way they had kept people safe and the way that they kept fighting until there was some something resembling justice that we could hang on to and feel proud of collectively. It wound up being a really big thing. And if... It would have been a whatever, if the police hadn't showed up. Probably would have been nice, probably would have been fun, but I probably wouldn't have remembered so much about it.

Elio Colavito (01:12:33):

Right.

Alisha Stranges (01:12:36):

Thank you for sharing all of that. Thank you. I mean, I need to take a deep breath. Maybe you need to take a deep breath before we move on to the last couple of questions here. Do you need a break or...?

Robin Woodward (01:12:53):

I'm good.

Alisha Stranges (01:12:54):

Okay. So just my last set of questions here is about, more about — and you're kind of hinting toward it — the impact of the Pussy Palace as a community initiative. I mean, I think it's clear by now, but to just ask directly, what's your impression of the intent behind the Pussy Palace, its reason for being?

Robin Woodward (01:13:20):

Its reason was to provide the queer community, the queer women's community, a space for sexual exploration that was safe and fun. Like I said, swimming outdoors naked in Downtown Toronto, that's amazing. That's not a thing that I think I ever took for granted. In those times, it was a big deal just to have a space that... Where sexuality was part of it, but it wasn't... Sexual activity wasn't required; it was just available. It was open. And so that openness and that safe space aspect was really, really important. I know that was what the organizers were aiming for, and I think that they succeeded remarkably well, especially given the circumstances.

Alisha Stranges (01:14:23):

Yeah. One of the often-cited goals from the event organizers, the reason they were putting these events on, is to address the invisibility of queer women's sexuality. Prior to the first Pussy Palace event, which happened in 1998, would you agree that queer women sexuality was somewhat invisible in the public sphere?

Robin Woodward (01:14:48):

Absolutely.

Alisha Stranges (01:14:50):

And what do you think contributed to that lack of visibility?

Robin Woodward (01:14:57):

I mean, like Victorian and pre-Victorian... Just the invisibility of women's sexuality in general. These old ideas that women are not sexual in and of themselves, and that male sexual energy is what keeps sex going. As queer women, we knew that to be not true, of course. And also, still lingering stigma of also the economy of... Like I said, queer bars, gay bars, were usually very male-centric. Men would go and send money on drinks, and there were, at the time, there were several to choose from on Church Street. And I think in the time that I had been in Toronto since the mid-90s, I think the heyday of women's bars, we might have had two at the most at any one given time. Maybe three, but I'm pretty sure it was just two.

Robin Woodward (01:16:08):

So, overall, women didn't earn as much money and women didn't socialize outside of the home as much as men did, so obviously women's queer bars were not as economically viable for anyone to run, and also therefore there were not the same spaces. I mean, I don't think our conception at the time would have really imagined that a permanent, like, always available sexual space for women would have been a big enough draw to keep it going. And so, the Pussy Palace events were special. So, there was an urgency about it because you didn't want to take it for granted, I guess. Because we knew that this wasn't something that we had access to all the time. And I mean, even a bathhouse, just the pure sensual pleasure of a bathhouse, of being able to go in a hot tub and have a social time with people, that I would do all the time. So, whether there was sex involved or not, just being able to be in that space and sort of be surrounded by women, and feel safe to be undressed and to be enjoying a steam or a bath or an outdoor swim; those things are valuable.

Alisha Stranges (01:17:36):

And we know at some point the name of the events changed from the Pussy Palace to the Pleasure Palace. Do you know when that happened, what might have prompted that shift?

Robin Woodward (01:17:49):

My guess is that it was probably intended to be more trans inclusive. I assume that must be the reason. I don't recall there being a debate about it or anything, but yeah, I actually kind of forgot because we just always call it the Pussy Palace because that's what it was on the big night.

Alisha Stranges (01:18:09):

Right. Yeah. Well, this is sort of coming to a close here. Is there anything else that you haven't yet had an opportunity to share about your experiences perhaps that our questions haven't facilitated?

Robin Woodward (01:18:24):

They were very good questions. I can't think of too much. Although I am supposed to tell you... Ange [Beever] asked me to share with you that Kristyn Dunnion was not there that night.

Alisha Stranges (01:18:34):

Okay.

Robin Woodward (01:18:37):

We hung out with her at another one of the events, but not that particular night.

Alisha Stranges (01:18:40):

Okay.

Robin Woodward (01:18:44):

No, I can't think of anything else. There was something that I wrote up about five years ago about the experience, and I read that before our interview just to remind myself, but I think we've kind of covered everything that I had written down.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:03):

Was this a published piece or...?

Robin Woodward (01:19:06):

No. It was sort of a pitch for a publication that never went anywhere, or at least my part was not included in the queer stories. I believe it was... Is it *Queeries*? I can't remember the name of the project. I think... What I saw... I just did a little skim because I remembered I had a submission. It was just a pitch of like, "Here's what I could write about..." And I believe that the idea at the time was, someone was probably going to do an anthology specifically about the bathhouse raid, so let's save it for that, and never heard anything more about it. So, this is even better.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:46):

Yeah, we'd be very interested to read that pitch and to even include it in the archives in some form.



Robin Woodward (01:19:51):

I'll send it to you. It's just, it's very brief, but it's mostly what we talked about. But yeah, I'll send it along in case it's helpful.

Alisha Stranges (01:19:58):

Yeah, for sure. Well, with that, I mean, we can close here off the recording. You pause yours and I'll pause mine, and then we can kind of do our little follow up before we leave the call. But thank you. Thank you so, so, so much. It was just brilliant to bear witness to your retelling.

Robin Woodward (01:20:20):

Yeah, thank you. And thank you for all the work that you've put into really thoughtful questions of trying to tease out these things that happened. And I'm grateful that someone's taking it up to preserve it because it is... I mean, it was personally important, and for our community, it was important, and hopefully it is the last of its kind.

Alisha Stranges (01:20:45):

Yes. All right, I'm going to pause it now.

Robin Woodward (01:20:50):

I will do the same.