

## From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
<b>Name:</b> Angie Bates	<b>Date:</b> 27.06.2019 <b>Age:</b> 63
<b>Key issues:</b> Catholic upbringing, Gay's the Word, Lesbian Discussion Group, 80s, Greenham Common, Lesbian Strength March, Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, the Women's Movement, The Glass Bar, Girls On Top (Hemel Hempstead), AIDS crisis,	
<b>Narrative summary</b> Angie had a Catholic upbringing and fell in love with a girl at convent school at about 12. In her mid-twenties she attended an event where she encountered many lesbian women and realised she was a lesbian. She was living with a male partner at the time and, after she came out to him, he was supportive and they continued to live together until she moved out to live with her girlfriend. Discusses her 38 yearlong participation with Gay's the Words Lesbian Discussion Group having taken over running Gay's the Word Lesbian Discussion Group after Amanda Russell moved to Hebden Bridge. Discusses the value and importance of the group in the past and today. Also discusses her experiences with Embrace the Base at Greenham Common, Lesbian Strength Marches, and going to Drill Hall with miner's wives. Also involved in a consciousness-raising group as part of the women's movement. Discusses women's bookshops, bars, and cafes, in particular, The Glass Bar, Girls on Top, and Tabby's. Her girlfriend was a nurse and involved with the Terrence Higgins Trust working with people with AIDS. Word got around to parents at the nursery where Angie worked, and there were calls for her to leave the nursery or her girlfriend. A speaker came in and reassured parents. Discusses the public perception of AIDS and the fear and misinformation of the time. Discusses the ways in which AIDS and Section 28 pulled the lesbian and gay community together. Discusses the personal and general impact of legislative changes, particularly marriage, and societal attitudinal changes.	
	<b>Length of interview:</b> 1 hr 5 mins.





Evelyn:

This is an interview for From a Whisper to a Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is the 27th of June, 2019, and I'm interviewing the wonderful Angie. Could we start? Can I ask a little bit about your early life and how you came to an understanding of who you really are?

Angie: Okay. Right, okay. Well, let's see. I think I'll start at my school. I went to..Let me say, I had a very fundamentalist Catholic upbringing. I went to a convent school. I had a very close, close, close, close ... I fell in love with a girl at school, and I think she was in love with me. And that was from when I was about 12. And we were really, really close and I really struggled inside of me about the kind of, the sexual feelings I had towards her. I had no problem at all with the fact that we loved each other. We were inseparable at school. We used to do sleepovers and stuff like that, brush each other's hair, sleep in the same bed. And I really struggled with my sexual feelings towards her and felt there is something really wrong with me. There's something really.. There's some kind of sick, dark thing inside me. How can I say I love her when I feel like a man towards her? I had no language to say it in any other way, and so that really distressed me. That distressed me and troubled me. I didn't even know the word lesbian.

Angie: At our school, there was a great tradition of having crushes on older girls, and there was even a school rule. An older girl may not accept a present from a younger girl. That was a school rule. And that was all to do with the crush thing.

Angie: Anyway, just to say that we had a school reunion 25 years later and the girl ... I know she wouldn't mind me saying, Fiona, her name was, was there. And at that reunion, people said, "Oh, it's so lovely seeing you two walk across the quad arm-in-arm like you always did before." She identifies as bisexual, and she said to me at that reunion, "Angie, for sure, you were my first love", which was really validating for me.

Evelyn: Absolutely. How lovely.

Angie: Yeah, so that was lovely. We went to the same college. We chose the same college to be with each other, but we drifted apart after that and I think I tried being straight for a little while. And I had a relationship with a very, very, very lovely man, who loved women. He had long hair. He used to write poetry. We had a really equal relationship.

Angie: And I went up to Scotland to visit some people who Fiona and I had met when we went to the Isle of Wight Festival 10 years before, and we'd kept in touch. And I went up to stay with him, and he was sharing a flat with a gay male couple up in Aberdeen. And the gay male couple always much preferred hanging around with lesbians. And they went to some community ... It was like a community centre. It was an art-y thing. It was a co-op and there were loads of lesbians there. And when we walked in and I just saw all these marvellous young women, and I was 25 going on 26, it was like the penny dropped instantly.

Evelyn: Light bulb moment?

Angie: Yeah, because in my head, yeah, I'd learnt the word lesbian but all I knew was The Killing of Sister George. That's all I knew. And here were these young, vibrant, funny, political women. Well, I spent all my time going with them and I felt, "Oh my God, oh my God. This is who I am." The toothpaste is out of the tube, can't put it back. What am I doing to do with this lovely man?

Angie: At 25, we had a house together. We had a dog together, and he was lovely. Whilst I was away in Aberdeen, he'd hand-washed all my jumpers. That's the kind of guy he was. And so I felt, "I'm going mad." I was terrified. I was absolutely devastated, what am I going to do with this? Because for sure, I love this man, but sexually it had never been right. I had never felt ... Sexually, it had never been right and I thought, "Oh, that's my Catholic conditioning," or something like that.

Evelyn: Oppression.

Angie: Yeah, oppression. Exactly. And I came back and I thought well, I've got to tell him. And he was wonderful and he said, "Well, if I can still be with you in some way on this journey you're going to take, let me be." And in fact, we ended up still living in the same house for five years after I came out. And so he would bring his women home, I would bring my women home, and we had a really great time. So, it was resolved to a point at that stage. And then I moved out to go and live with my ... Actually, she's the only girlfriend I've ever lived with. And so then I left and we sold the house.

Evelyn: So, you were about 30 at that stage?

Angie: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. One of the first things I did was go to Gay's the Word to the Lesbian Discussion Group. I think he even drove me up the first time, and I was really scared of going in and walked up and down. And when I went in, I remember thinking to myself, "I am walking on gay ground."

Evelyn: Roughly what year are we now?

Angie: I think we're 1981. We're the summer of 1981.

Evelyn: And that was when the Lesbian Discussion Group started?

Angie: It had been going, I think, about six months. It had been going about six months. And for me, it was a lifeline. It absolutely was a lifeline. It was vibrant. It was just wonderful and I felt I belonged. And yeah, that was it, really. That was me launched into my lesbian lifestyle.

Evelyn: It was your way into the community, yeah.

Angie: Exactly, exactly.

Evelyn: Yeah. And who was running it at this stage?

Angie: It was Amanda Russell. She was the co-manager of the shop. There were two managers. She started it, and she started it in response to women saying to her, "Where can I go where I can just talk to women? In bars, the music's too loud and everything. I want somewhere to meet other lesbians in a non-bar surrounding." So, she started it off.

Evelyn: And what was she like?

Angie: What was she like? Let me think, what was she like? I think she was marvellous to do what she did. In those days, there used to be three groups, three topics, all sitting on the floor. We were all young. The older ones were in their 30s and everybody else was in their 20s, so we all sat on the floor, apart from there was a little seating area at the back of the shop, which isn't there now.

Evelyn: The shop is long and thin?

Angie: Yeah, it's long and thin. Exactly. At the very end, there was just fixed seating along two walls. You'd have a group there, a group in the middle and a group at the end. Amanda often wouldn't be facilitating, but would ask other people to facilitate because she could lock up and everything. And often she might get on with her own work and let other people-

Evelyn: And you had three different sets of discussions going on?

Angie: Three sets of discussions.

Evelyn: Gosh, yeah. Must have been like the Tower of Babel.

Angie: Well, it seemed to work. We all smoked, and the non-smoking group used to be the group that sat by the door. And then a group in the middle, group at the end.

Evelyn: It must have been absolutely full of smoke, actually.

Angie: Oh, yeah. How appalling was that? Yeah.

Evelyn: Yeah, we forget today when smoking in buildings is gone.

Angie: Oh God, yeah, yeah. Yes, yes. And a lot of people used to bring a can of lager, as well. A can of whatever. Those were the times, really, yeah.

Evelyn: And what sort of topics?

Angie: Pretty similar, in some ways, to today. Always coming out, and we always have coming out now. Monogamy and non-monogamy, as it was called then, was pretty hot topic. S&M was a popular topic, and then more political things. Most people identified, that went to that group, as lesbian feminist. These days I think the topics are more broad, actually. A broader ... Yeah.

Evelyn: More about relationships, per se, do you think now? Or-

Angie: No, broader than that. We sometimes talk about topics that it's good to talk in a bunch of lesbians, it's good to talk about that. But it's not necessarily about being lesbian, although that seemed to colour most things. Now we might talk about ... We've had a topic on silence, for example. Now, we would never have had that in the beginning. It was always lesbians and/or relationships, falling in love, splitting up, long-distance relationships. All the kind of things we talk about now, but I think we have a broader thing than we had then.

Evelyn: We're talking about the early '80s?

Angie: Yeah.

Evelyn: And the '80s are an extraordinary decade, politically. You've got Thatcherite Britain. You've got the move towards Section 28 coming towards the end of the decade. You've got the AIDS crisis coming in through the decade, and you've got the miner's strike in '84. And a lot of stuff went on at Gay's the Word as a building at that stage. Were there any connections? Was there experiences around that that you remember?

Angie: Yeah. And Greenham Common, of course.

Evelyn: Yes, of course.

Angie: Yeah. Yeah, quite a lot of things, I think, came out of our Lesbian Discussion Group. One I remember for Greenham Common. We also had the GLC, don't forget, with-

Evelyn: Ken Livingstone.

Angie: That's the man. There was some money for funding lots of things in those days. And I remember one of the projects was funding an under-25s, I think lesbian and gay project, or maybe just lesbian project, not sure. Funding making a film. And I was 26, so I tagged along and carried things. But I remember us going to Greenham Common on the day when 10,000 women had encircled the base at Greenham Common with the cruise missiles.

Evelyn: Yes. Perhaps you'll explain for people in the future might not know about Greenham Common, all of that.

Angie: Okay. Might not know. Okay, Greenham Common was a place, I think it was in Berkshire. And there were cruise missiles, which were nuclear missiles, which belonged to America, which were on British ground, which was in control of the Americans and was pointed at America's enemies, Russia.

Evelyn: Because we were closer geographically.

Angie: And there was a huge protest lasting years against the presence of these missiles. A Peace Camp was set up, and many women lived at the Peace Camp. And also women would go and visit the Peace Camp to lend support. And there was an event planned to entirely encircle this base, which was all surrounded by barbed wire and fences and stuff like that.

Evelyn: So, women held hands.

Angie: Women held hands.

Evelyn: Around the base.

Angie: Around the base. And it took 10,000 women to hold hands around the base. And it was publicized, because this is way before any email or anything like that, with chain letters. You got a chain letter, and you sent it on to the next-

Evelyn: On to another 10 people.

Angie: To another 10 people.

Evelyn: Physically through the mail?

Angie: Physically through the mail. I think there might have been telephone trees as well, which was a similar thing. You rang 10 people. And in that way, 10,000 women embraced the base. It was called Embrace the Base. And the under-25 lesbian project filmed on that day. It was in December, I remember. And I was working in nurseries at the time. And also, on the fence, there was lots of artwork and peace slogans and ribbons. All the fencing was decorated with all these things.

Evelyn: Miles of it.

Angie: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And I brought things from the nursery that the children had done.

Evelyn: That your children had made, yeah.

Angie: Yes. In fact, I'd got the girls to do things with tissue paper and collages and things like that and tied those to the fence. So, that was one thing.

Angie: Another thing that you didn't mention was there was a Lesbian Strength March for a few years. And that came out of the Lesbian Discussion Group. Yeah. One year, I remember I was responsible for liaising with the police about the route and all the rest. It was very small.

Evelyn: What was the aim of it?

Angie: The aim of it was to have a (Pride march) march that was for lesbians. It was much smaller. I think one year we had 1,000 women, and we were really pleased when there were 1,000 women. It was not like Pride today, where it's mostly whistles and music. It was chanting.

Evelyn: It was a political march as opposed to a parade.

Angie: It was a political march. Absolutely, a political march. And for our own protection, it was wall-to-wall police. I've got some photographs from that time and there are as many police as there are women, really. Both sides, your-

Evelyn: Of the street as you [crosstalk 00:18:39] went along.

Angie: Of the street as you went along. You were there, and there were just as many police walking with you.

Evelyn: And that was for your protection?

Angie: I guess so, I guess so. Yeah, I think so.

Evelyn: If there were spectators, what would they-

Angie: You'd get people looking shocked. You'd get people shouting out things. To be honest, I didn't feel an awful lot of hostility, really. I didn't feel we were in danger. And it felt great. It felt great, yeah.

Angie: With the miner's strike, I remember one time, I think Gay's the Word had bought a minibus for the miners. And I remember the miners' wives coming down to thank us for the minibus. And the Lesbian Discussion Group took charge of welcoming the miners' wives, and we went to the Drill Hall ... Drill Hall on a Monday evening was women only, and I remember going there with these women from the mining towns to the Drill Hall and talking to them, yeah.

Evelyn: Because the miner's strike, I suppose for future generations, was a massive face-off between Thatcher's government wanting to close down mines, essentially decimating the mining villages, really. Which have never recovered, many of them.

Angie: No, and it was characterized by a lot of violence. It was violent.

Evelyn: Yeah, the police were very aggressive towards the miners, so it was a nasty business that went on a very, very long time. And the gay community, or the lesbian and gays collected a lot of money to support the miners because they were out of work and had no money.

Angie: Yeah, wherever you went, there'd always be a bucket, always, for the miners. I remember The Fallen Angel, we'd go



there and you'd have somebody by the bucket and then we used to take turns going there. Go there, go and do half an hour or an hour down with the bucket while people were going in.

Evelyn: And a lot of it emanated from Gay's the Word one way or another. Yeah, it was a community there.

Angie: Yes, yeah. And they met, didn't they? The Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, that started off, they were meeting at Gay's the Word.

Evelyn: Yeah. So it's been the hub of a lot of things.

Angie: It has, indeed. Yeah, it has indeed, yeah.

Evelyn: It has indeed. Were you at Greenham any other times?

Angie: I never lived there, but I had a friend who lived in Berkshire, not far from Greenham Common, so I would go at weekends, yeah.

Evelyn: Essentially, it was a women's camp but there were a lot of lesbians there at the core of it all.

Angie: There were. Yeah, there were. There were gates, different coloured gates. And I think the orange one was the predominantly lesbian gate, but there were a lot of lesbians involved generally, yeah.

Evelyn: And also at this time ... Well, I suppose coming up to this time, the Women's Movement, the second-wave feminism. Were you involved at all in that?

Angie: Let's think. I went to consciousness-raising group. Earlier actually, when I was 19, I went to a consciousness-raising group.

Evelyn: And how did they look? What was it like?

Angie: It was in different women's houses. Today, I think you'd think this is like a therapy group. It was a bunch of feminist women coming together to talk and be supported, and to deepen their understanding of feminism and feminist issues, I would say, yeah.

Evelyn: And in terms of consciousness raising, they were really looking to help people understand their own upbringing and how the patriarchy and so forth had been enforced why it had been-

Angie: Yes, and how it affected your life and if you had internalized some of this oppression. It was to be supportive, because obviously people were from different places and at different levels of awareness, really. Yeah, yeah.

Evelyn: Within the feminist movement, again, there was a strong lesbian core, I guess.

Angie: Yeah, yeah. I mean, things like setting up refuges for women fleeing from domestic violence, national abortion campaign, things like that. I knew lots of lesbians involved in those organizations. Women who would meet women coming over from Ireland at the airport and assist them. Or, women coming over from Spain.

Evelyn: To have a termination?

Angie: To have a termination and act as interpreters for these Spanish women who needed interpreters.

Evelyn: So, they were coming from Catholic countries, essentially?

Angie: Absolutely, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. And especially Spain and Ireland, yeah.

Evelyn: At this time also, I suppose particularly in the '70s, what we think of as the LGBTQ community, there were a lot of tensions. The men were pursuing certain interests ... The men were pursuing more and more of the legal side of things, and the women were actually being involved very much in women's issues generally, like control of your body and so on. But for many lesbians, abortion wasn't really an issue, but they were involved with other women.

Angie: Yeah, it wasn't an issue. It wasn't, but it was about a woman's autonomy over her own body, yeah. Yeah. And also there was women's bookshops at that time, like Silver Moon and Sisterwrite. Actually, I would go to Gay's the Word for the Lesbian Discussion Group, but I'd get my books from Silver Moon and Sisterwrite. And Gay's the Word had a more male-dominated feel about it then, too.

Evelyn: Yes, thinking of that, what were some of the places to meet? How did you find your tribe? Where did you go, and was there a look so that you might recognize people?

Angie: Absolutely, there was a look. Absolutely there was a look. In the '80s, it was dungarees, short hair. Definitely short hair, no makeup. I didn't possess a bra for about 10 years. Definitely not high heels and not dresses or skirts. I know that earlier there was the big butch and femme thing, and that was also one of our topics. But in the lesbian feminist tribe that came to the discussion group, that was old school. And it was very much a kind of androgenous look, if you like. But yeah, it was great in terms of the fact that you could see another lesbian walking down the road from 100 yards away. And you could see- ah!

Evelyn: You knew where you were.

Angie: Yeah, and you knew who you were. I have a wonderful story to tell, actually, of being on a late night Tube coming back from somewhere. It was probably the last Tube of the night. And I'd had a few drinks. And I was standing up in this very crowded Tube carriage, and I was standing in the doorway. And opposite me, a woman got on, clearly in the same uniform as me. Clearly a dyke. And we were, though our journey, flirting with each other completely silently. Whilst all kinds of stuff was going on with the drunken, straight, Tube carriage going on.

Evelyn: Hurly-burly of the last night, the last train.

Angie: Yeah. That's it, the hurly-burly. That's it. Anyway, I was kind of catching her eye and smiling and looking away and I'd look back and she'd be looking back at me. And there was definitely lots of body language going on, just flirting with each other.

Evelyn: Chemistry.

Angie: Absolutely, absolutely. And she got off at my stop. And when we got off, she just said to me, "Are you with anybody?" And I said, "Yes," because I was. And I said, "Are you?" And she said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, we'd better just kiss goodbye then, hadn't we?" And we had this wonderful kiss on the platform and then off we went. And we went up the stairs and she went one way and I went the other.

Evelyn: What's the movie? What's the wartime movie, Celia what's-her-face?

Angie: Oh. Brief Encounter? Yes?

Evelyn: Yeah, there you are. Brief Encounter for lesbians of the '80s. How lovely.

Angie: And for sure, we knew that we were, that's kind of to illustrate this kind of look. There was absolutely no doubt that we were both lesbian. And it was just, yeah. I had a partner, but this just felt like a kind of seize the day sort of moment.

Evelyn: Yes, moment. Absolutely. You had Sisterwrite, some of the bookshops. What were the other places you went?

Angie: Sisterwrite, Silver Moon. Oh, and to meet people, later on I guess it was the London Lesbian and Gay Centre. Loads of bars. There was The Carved Red Lion, which was a pub which was open seven days a week, that was a women-only place. I think it was women-only. Might have had men as guests, but I only remember women. The Drill Hall, The Glass Bar.

Evelyn: That was at Euston, wasn't it?

Angie: It was, it was.

Evelyn: Tiny place.

Angie: It was tiny, it was like a little Tardis. Did you know it?

Evelyn: I've seen it since. I mean, it's still there, it's just not [crosstalk 00:30:49] a women's bar any more.

Angie: That's right, it is. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it had an upstairs. For a time, I ran a lesbian mother's creche on the top floor on a Monday night, I think it was. So that the mothers could stay downstairs and have a pint or two. And I worked in a nursery and The Glass Bar was run by Elaine, and she had a very small budget. So I used to bring something, a couple of things from the nursery for us to have to play with and then carry them back and take them back to the nursery the next day. Yeah.

Evelyn: So there were quite a lot of women's spaces, it was-

Angie: Oh, there were lots and lots and lots of women's spaces. My favourite space actually wasn't in London, it was just outside London in Hemel Hempstead. And it was called Girls On Top. And it was fabulous. It was held in the Civic Hall, and they would do benefit gigs, so we'd have benefits for all sort of things. AIDS organizations like The Food Chain, there'd be a benefit for that, and they would tell you at the end how much money they'd raised and how many women were in. And I remember one year there were 1,000 women, so it was a great place, fabulous, big dance floor and a stage. And with a bar upstairs, and a kind of balcony where you could look over. And I used to get so excited just going in to the car park

because you would see all these cars and vans and they would be disgorging five, six, seven, eight, nine women out of them to come to this thing. It happened once a month.

Angie: In fact, I remember coming in a van once with, I think there were 10 or 11 of us. And one of the women said, "Okay, everybody must have a slow dance with a complete stranger who they don't know, or they've got to buy everyone a drink. Okay?" And we said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, okay, okay." And it closed fairly early, it was only about 12:00 I think, or even 11:00, it might have closed. And I was having a great time and dancing and you'd always see people that you knew and talking. And they had great big tables, so you wouldn't have tables with two or three people. There'd be big tables that would fit 10 people. It was run by an organization called Women's Link, if I remember.

Angie: Anyway, it got to about, I don't know, twenty to 11:00 or twenty to 12:00 and I thought, "Oh my God, I haven't danced with ..." Or maybe half past or something. It was coming up soon. I'm thinking, "I haven't done this slow dance with anybody and I can't afford to buy everybody a drink." I looked around, saw a nice-looking woman and I said, "Excuse me, could I have a dance?" And she said no. And I said, "Oh, please have a dance with me. Because I'm on this bet where if I don't have a dance, a slow dance with someone, I have to buy them all a drink and I can't afford it." And she said, "Okay then." And she danced with me. And she was a really nice woman. She was a teacher of children with special needs. And anyway, thereafter, every month we would have one dance for old times' sake, if you like. So I kind of got to know someone through that bet.

Angie: And another time, somebody bet that we would have more women coming back with us than we had going. And I think we went with 10 and came back with 12.

Evelyn: Fair enough.

Angie: But they were great days. They were great days. That was my favourite place, I think. It was so exciting to be with so many women. Can you imagine, 1,000 women?

Evelyn: Women, yeah.

Angie: Fantastic. But yeah, you had the pick of, in London you had an awful lot of different places to choose from to go. There was a café in South London, in Tooting, called Tabby's. And it was a kind of coffee shop and sauna. It was a café and sauna.

Evelyn: Oo-er.

Angie: Yeah. And some of us used to kick a football around on Clapham Common and then go into Tabby's and they'd have board games and we'd have pots of tea and play games and stuff like that. It was really nice.

Evelyn: And then naked women in the sauna.

Angie: And, yeah. They must have been naked. I never went in the sauna, actually.

Evelyn: Oh, yes?

Angie: No, no I didn't, because I've got a heart condition. I'm not allowed to go into the sauna. But it was a lovely place where you could just relax and be with other women. And there'd be magazines and games and nice, friendly women welcoming you, yeah.

Evelyn: And were there a lot of women's organizations, interest groups? A bit like the Lesbian Discussion Group, only, I don't know, political or other things that you recall?

Angie: There were women's centres. A lot of places had women's centres. With different stuff going on. What kind of-

Evelyn: Oh, I was just wondering about the range of things that you could do. But I suppose it was just, in a sense there were so many different clubs and social situations that that fulfilled a whole range from wanting to chat to wanting to dance the night away and everything in between.

Angie: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: We're in the '80s here, and I think we mentioned that the community wasn't incredibly cohesive. And then along came AIDS and towards the end of the decade, along came Section 28. You were in teaching?

Angie: No. I was in nurseries and community projects working with parents and children. One of the things with the AIDS thing that I recall, I was in a community nursery and my partner at the time, she had worked for the Terrence Higgins Trust, and she was a nurse. And she was involved in a scheme enabling people to be able to die at home if they wanted to. And she worked with people with AIDS. And there was a guy in hospital who had been one of her clients and she wanted us to visit him on our way to somewhere else.

Evelyn: Clients.

Angie: And I had mentioned that to a couple of the staff at work, that that's what I was going to do. And then I went on holiday. And when I came back, my deputy said, "I need to talk to you." And what had happened was that one of the staff had told the parents, and it had gone all around, getting very distorted. So it ended up-

Evelyn: Chinese Whispers.

Angie: That's it. That I was living with an AIDS doctor, was the story. And this was in the days when The Sun had This is the Gay Plague in big headlines. And the parents had said, "Well, Angie's compromised all our children because she's living with this AIDS doctor and going to see AIDS patients. And she must either leave her girlfriend or leave the nursery. If she's allowed to stay on, we'll put some posters up saying it's an AIDS nursery." What else was there? Some appalling things were said. Really appalling things were said.

Angie: And I was very upset. And the first thing I did was I offered that the parents sit down and we have somebody come in and talk about AIDS and transmission and all this. There was one parent who'd said, "What if Angie happens to be changing a baby's nappy and she's crying and a tear drops from her face onto the baby's body?"

Evelyn: Oh my goodness.

Angie: "Is my child in danger?" Firstly, it's assuming I've got AIDS, my girlfriend's got AIDS. Yeah, it was crazy. Anyway, in the end, it was settled. When I first said, "Let me organize somebody to come in," because I was the manager of the place. Let me, somebody come in to talk about it. They said, "No. Don't want it." Anyway, because it was a community nursery, all the parents that used the nursery were on a management committee, and so I just went ahead and did it, got someone. And they were a captive audience. And this was a very skilled person and he made that session really good and really reassured the parents. And I got an apology and flowers and things like that. But for a short while, I was thinking I could lose my job because of my girlfriend working with people who had AIDS.

Evelyn: It was an extraordinary climate of fear, wasn't it?

Angie: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I remember stories about it coming over, there was this strange thing happening to gay men in the Bay Area in San Francisco. And when it came over here, it was very frightening. And you very much thought, well, there for the grace of God go I in terms of, the guys are getting it from making love with each other. Well, that's what we do and we're really lucky that it's not decimating us like it's decimating them.

Evelyn: Absolutely. And I think it's one of the things that made the community more cohesive, increasingly, through the '80s. There was a fellow feeling between the women and the men and well, we might have some differences in what we want to pursue in terms of equalities policy and so on, but in terms of humanity, it pulled together.

Angie: That's it. And The Food Chain was something staffed a lot by volunteers where getting nutritious food to people, and I knew people involved in that. Yeah.

Evelyn: And that took food parcels out to people who were sick?

Angie: Yeah. Yeah, yes. Yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: Moving on through the decade, were you involved at all in some of the Section 28 things?

Angie: Not much, actually. Not much. I mean, people coming to the group who were teachers would talk about that climate of fear.

Evelyn: And for the benefit of someone who might not know, this was legislation brought in by the Thatcher government in '88 [May], I think, to stop councils allowing their schools to promote homosexuality in any way. In effect, it stopped them discussing it in any way. And the key phrase that stands out is, "Homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."

Angie: Pretended family. Yes, that's right, yeah.

Evelyn: Yeah, pretended family. And that it couldn't be seen as valid, that kind of pulled the community together a lot around that, didn't it?

Angie: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. I went on a couple of marches, but I wasn't really active in fighting that. But it was a big thing. And generally, people, now it really strikes me how for years we were running the Lesbian Discussion Group.

We never recorded anything. We certainly never photographed anybody, because there was that fear. In those days, in the '80s, you could lose your children for being a lesbian and you could lose your job for being a lesbian. And so people were very careful about not being involved in photographs or even on the doors and the windows of Gay's the Word, there were big wooden boards that we'd have to put up after the discussion group. Now we've just got glass and a thin little purple curtain. But in those days, there were great, big wooden, heavy boards we'd have to put up, yeah.

Evelyn: And a lot of people going round the block three times before they plucked up the courage to come in. Because for any women who attended, it was activism to walk across the threshold.

Angie: Absolutely, yeah.

Evelyn: For a Lesbian Discussion Group which committed you.

Angie: Yeah, yeah.

Evelyn: Which is interesting and scary.

Angie: Yeah, yeah.

Evelyn: In those days. Looking over this long period of time ... I didn't ask. When did you take over running it?

Angie: Well, Amanda moved to Hebden Bridge. I was always, I kind of went there pretty much every week, so I was often one of the people facilitating. And so it was really when she moved away. And then there was a period of time, because there used to be lots of groups running from there. And there was a problem with some stuff from the shop going missing and some damage done with people not being careful with drinks. And the manager at the time didn't want groups to continue to be using it because he felt that it was being abused. But he allowed the Lesbian Discussion Group to continue, but only if it was only me that had the keys. For quite a long time, it was just me every single week doing it.

Angie: But there haven't been that many facilitators, all together. You could count them on one hand, really.

Evelyn: And how did it develop from the three separate groups? How did it change over time?

Angie: I can't remember. I can't remember.

Evelyn: Because now it meets as a single group.

Angie: Now it meets as a single group, yeah. And sometimes it's very big. There are 43 chairs and on occasion, all those chairs are used. But it still works, I think. And occasionally, we'll say, "Talk in small groups and then we'll come back as a big group." But often when we've said, "Okay, shall we have two groups?" People haven't wanted that and have wanted it to stay whole. It's been, for quite a long time, one group. It was the early days when it was three.

Evelyn: And what do you think it gives to women?

Angie: I think it gives them a feeling of belonging. I think it gives them a sense of community. I think that's the biggest thing, community. Identity, confirming, okay, this is who I am. I

think it gives me contact with such a broad range of women in terms of their ages, their nationalities, lifestyles, that I can't think of anywhere else where I get that wondrous mix. And I really appreciate that.

Angie: And we get quite a lot of people coming over as students or traveling in the summer or people living here for a few years. And you can talk to somebody who's 21, grew up on Malaysia, brought up Muslim, and there's us talking really easily because we've got this thing in common. And that's all about coming out and how you feel about who you are, what your story is. And I really love that. I really love that wonderful, rich mix. And because it's not a closed group, it's really open, you've got different people coming in every, single week.

Evelyn: And it's a very warm group.

Angie: Yeah, yeah. It is. And it's not, I think it's very welcoming and very open, so you never get people saying, "Who's that new one?" at all. New people are welcomed in and then if they come again the next week, people will remember their names. And the new person thinks, "Oh, they look like they've been here forever," because people are saying, "Oh, hi, Mary," or whoever it is.

Evelyn: And you have a set of ground rules.

Angie: We have a set of ground rules. Which, to sum up, really are about respect and making a big group work. They're things like not interrupting and not talking at the same time as someone else and being allowed to disagree, but never to disparage anyone else. And to treat everybody with respect. And wow, I think people do really brilliantly with that. And it's great.

Evelyn: Helps them step up.

Angie: Yeah.

Evelyn: Be their best selves.

Angie: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Evelyn: Have you any high points from across the years?

Angie: Oh, lots. Lots and lots and lots. One woman that came to our group for quite a while, she was from Iran. And when we were speaking, I remember her saying, "In my country, there is no punishment other than death. It's not prison, it is just death." And although I knew that, hearing that from this young woman who'd just come into our group, was really shocking to think, this woman is living, has lived, in these conditions. Anyway, she had had a girlfriend in Iran, which is just, wow. So courageous. She talked about sometimes ... Oh, she talked about being stopped by the religious police because she had a little bit of hair sticking out of her hijab. You'd be stopped by them. You may be taken to the police station, you'd be hours late from wherever you were meant to be going.

Angie: And she talked about sometimes binding her breasts and dressing as a boy and going out, just to experience what it was like to be able to walk-

Evelyn: Down the street.



Angie: Freely, not covered, and to be looked at in the eye by other people. And again, that was an amazingly dangerous thing to do. But she did it, and got away with it.

Angie: Anyway, she was with us for about a year, and I remember at the end she was saying she was really torn by not knowing what to do. Again, another kind of toothpaste is out of the tube. How can she go back? When she's experiencing ... She thought London was paved with gold in terms of freedom, and felt torn. Loved her family, but just couldn't imagine going back after she'd had a year of being here. And she used to come in with her black t-shirt with big letters, Nobody Knows I'm a Lesbian, written on it. She was so out when she was here, she was wonderful.

Angie: Anyway, she met a woman in the discussion group and they got married and they live in Canada. So that's a kind of really happy ending to that story.

Evelyn: Have there been many marriages?

Angie: I'd say there have been a few. There have certainly been a lot of relationships, because obviously we haven't had marriage for that long, really, have we, in the scheme of things? But, yeah. Vera, she met her wife in the Lesbian Discussion Group. And in fact, that young woman from Iran flew back from Canada to attend Vera's wedding.

Evelyn: Oh, and Vera's one of the facilitators?

Angie: She is, she is, yeah, yeah.

Evelyn: Lots of great stories, I'm sure.

Angie: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Evelyn: Looking back across time, we've got a lot of successive legislations and increases in our equality and freedom. Have you felt the impact of that personally across time?

Angie: Yeah.

Evelyn: Do you feel women are really more free?

Angie: Yeah, I do. I do, definitely. I take my hat off to Stonewall for campaigning for gay marriage, because I know in the '80s, I kind of pooh-poohed that and thought, "What? We don't want to ape heterosexuals, get into that patriarchal institution. No way." And used to think they're boring people in suits that are campaigning to have heterosexual, patriarchal marriage. It's nothing, not interesting me.

Evelyn: That was a strong stance at that point.

Angie: It was. And I eat my words. Because actually it's made a huge difference, knowing in the legislation that we've got a right to have that, I think has really changed the whole feel of being lesbian and gay in this country. I really do.

Angie: And I can just, in the old days, we used to have to find different places to go for a drink after the discussion group. And we would get thrown out of all different places. People just wouldn't like the fact that there would suddenly be 20, 25, 30 lesbians in their pub. It would turn their pub lesbian, because there were more of us than there were of anybody else.

Angie: There was one where we used to go in for the quiz. They had a quiz night, and we, with our huge range of sometimes quite highly-educated women, we would beat ... win every week. And we were asked not to come because we kept winning the quiz night. And it would be, we would always be anywhere, temporarily. You'd know it, that we would be there temporarily. We'd get chucked out, asked not to come. In The Marquis of Cornwallis, a woman had an epileptic fit, one of our group, complete one. We were told not to come back after that.

Evelyn: Bizarre.

Angie: Yeah. Yeah. Why I'm telling you this is because recently, we've been struggling to find where to go, because we used to go to a gay bar and it stopped being a gay bar. And actually, there was a kind of misogynist incident, so we'd said we're not going there any more. And I said to Vera, who is younger than me, she's 30, that I would go and approach the Holiday Inn down the road and ask them. Or was it Mabel's? Anyway, it was one of the local things, I'd go.

Angie: And actually, that weekend I wasn't up here, so I didn't do it. And Vera did it. And I said to Vera, "Did you say we're from Gay's the Word?" Because I would have said, "We're a discussion group from Gay's the Word, is it okay for us to, there'll probably be quite a lot of us ..." And she said to me, "No, Angie. I said we're the Lesbian Discussion Group." And I thought, oh yeah. Because I am still, in my head, thinking we have to-

Evelyn: Pussyfoot around it.

Angie: Pussyfoot around it a bit, because I'm so used to, over the decades, being chucked out of places. And Vera reminded me actually, we can be really upfront and say, "Yeah, we're a lesbian discussion group, we want to come and use your bar." Yeah.

Evelyn: And do you think women's voices are heard more now?

Angie: I think they're beginning to be. I think they're beginning to be. For a long time, when people talked about gay history, they talked about men because there was the-

Evelyn: The legislation was all around them.

Angie: The legislation was all around men, the age of consent.

Evelyn: Consent.

Angie: I think even in the '80s, it was 16 for heterosexual and 21 for gay men. So our issues were different. And when people talk about gay history, they often focus on that. And lesbian history's different from that. There are a lot of people, far more in the olden days than now, that used to come that had been married and then came out. And had got married because that's what you did. Didn't really know that there was anything else that you could be. And I think we still have that a bit, but I think it used to be a lot more.

Angie: And sometimes, I remember one woman come in and it was a coming out topic, and she said, "Well, I grew up in Brighton. I saw two men kiss for the first time when I was about nine years old. My parents are cool. There's nothing to say." And I

thought, wow. That's what we were really all working for. For it to be not a problem, for it to be so easy.

Evelyn: When you were thinking about coming to do this interview, was there anything.. any issues you were thinking of that we haven't covered?

Angie: I don't think so. I think for me, the central bit of my activism, really, is the Lesbian Discussion Group. I think if I look back on my life, I think one of the things I'm proudest of is being so involved with it and keeping it going for so long.

Evelyn: 38 years.

Angie: 38 years.

Evelyn: Just stunning achievement.

Angie: And recently, Elaine Chambers has published a book called *This Queer Angel*, and it's about her being thrown out of the army for being lesbian. And she was investigated by the military police. And when I went to the book launch, one of the pieces she read from the book was about coming to the Lesbian Discussion Group for the first time. And I think this was in something like 1990 or '91. She'd been thrown out of the army, devastated, lost her career, and she described getting back into the Lesbian Discussion Group as learning to feel okay again.

Angie: And unknown to me, she'd actually said, "Oh, and I went and there was this facilitator with fair hair called Angie with an open, welcoming smile," and I didn't even know that she'd put me in the book. And there she was, reading it at the book launch. So that made me feel proud, really.

Evelyn: I should hope so, too. Because that's the tiniest tip of a massive iceberg full of women who've had similar experiences coming to the Lesbian Discussion Group, I'm sure.

Angie: Yeah. And we have had people come back after 10 years and it's really nice that I'm still there. And sometimes can remember their name as well, yeah.

Evelyn: I'm sure.

Angie: In fact, there was somebody hadn't come since 1989 or something like that, came back and lives up in the north of Scotland and had come in and, yeah.

Evelyn: Fantastic. Looking back on that little Angie who didn't know the word lesbian and didn't know what to think, what would you say to her, finally?

Angie: Well-

Evelyn: As a final thought.

Angie: Well, I would say, hang in, girl. It gets so good. I would say that. I would say also, when I was talking about seeing these lesbians in Aberdeen and the penny dropping, and I thought, "I'm going mad. This is terrible." And actually, that was the start of a wonderful journey. And I was so scared. And felt I was going mad. And it's one of the best things that I ever, ever, ever, ever did.

Evelyn: You were actually becoming sane.

Angie: Yeah. Yes, yeah, yeah. That's right. Yeah. And I'm so glad that ... I mean, we get people from other countries who, it's still like that and worse. But I think in this country, you'd be pretty hard-pressed, perhaps, to get a little girl, didn't even know.

Angie: Somebody actually asked me at school when I was talking about a crush, he said, "Oh, are you a lesbian?" And I had never heard the word. I said, "How do you spell it?" And I wrote it down. And the girl that I had a crush on said ... I said, "No, I don't know. I'll look it up in the dictionary." And the girl said, "Oh, don't look it up. It's not a very nice word." So I didn't, because my girl I had a crush on told me not to. I just assumed it was a swear word or something like that. Yeah.

Evelyn: But now you've had a glorious life.

Angie: A glorious life.

Evelyn: Exploring exactly what lesbian is all about on every level, emotionally and intellectually, on every level.

Angie: On every level. And helping other people to do that, too. And I hope making people's journey joyous, really, as mine has been. Yeah.

Evelyn: And I think the lesbian community owe you a debt of gratitude for that because, speaking on behalf of, I don't know, hundreds of women over time, you've been always a friendly face and a welcoming warmth. And a role model.

Angie: Thank you.

Evelyn: A role model for us mere mortal lesbians.

Angie: Oh, thank you.

Evelyn: Thank you so much for your time.

Angie: Thank you.

Evelyn: It's been an absolute privilege to hear your story.

Angie: Thank you.

Evelyn: And I'm hoping that future generations will listen, heed and carry on the good work.

Angie: Thank you.

Evelyn: Thank you.

Angie: Thank you.