

From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
Name: Nettie Pollard	Date: 03.12.2019 Age: 70
Key issues: Gay Liberation Front. Women's Liberation. The Albany Trust. The Counter Psychiatry Group. Icebreakers. Miss World Demonstration. The Festival of Light. Police. Pride. Age of Consent. Lesbophobia. The Red Lesbian Brigade. Squatting. Stansted 15.	

Narrative summary

Nettie attended her first Gay Liberation Front meeting at Middle Earth in 1971, before she realised that she was attracted to women. She started campaigning and protesting with the Albany Trust's Counter Psychiatry Group; a group who countered the idea that being gay was a sickness. She joined through the outrage that her best friend had been made to feel suicidal due to his sexuality. Their main campaign was to abolish the medicalisation of homosexuality. They formed a service called Icebreakers that LGBTQ+ people could call and talk to other gay people about their problems.

She talks about attending the GLF meetings and how, although there were often more than 500 people in attendance, it felt like one big family. She talks of how GLF supported the Women's Liberation Miss World Demonstration; some of the men dressed in drag and protested outside the Albert Hall, whilst many others protested inside and brought the show to a standstill. A key impetus of the GLF was not only furthering gay rights but also idea of transforming the whole of society, and having a wider political awareness. Nettie goes on to talk about her involvement in protesting at The Festival of Light (a 'Christian crusade' which was very anti-gay) with GLF and with Women's Liberation.

She talks about her involvement in the women's group and the socials that they had. She talks about the tensions within the women's group; especially regarding trans women. But she illustrates how they were all united no matter what when it came to outside oppression. She also talks about the involvement of LGBTQ+ youth, especially in the Age of Consent campaign.

Nettie goes on to talk about The Red Lesbian Brigade; a group which emerged as a result of Mary Macintosh, Sarah Grimes and Elizabeth Wilson's manifesto. They used to go out and do things like spray painting the London Stock Exchange.

She ends by talking about the revival of the Gay Liberation Front, and the excitement that this has brought. Sue talks of the excitement in talking about real issues and ideas again with the GLF, and how there are so many pressing issues regarding LGBTQ+ rights around the world. For the GLF, revolution is the only answer.

	Length of interview: 1 hr 16 mins
--	--





Evelyn: So our series of podcasts starts with the Stonewall riots 50 years ago. This is considered a seminal event in the development of the modern LGBTQ movement. We are looking at its impact in the UK, where the Gay Liberation Front was formed in 1970, and the first Pride march took place in 1972. From this point on, activism became much more visible to the public at large. Today, we are interviewing Nettie Pollard at her home in London, as part of the oral history project From a Whisper to a Roar, undertaken by Opening Doors London and

sponsored by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. I am Evelyn Pittman asking the questions, and I have Lori E. Allen with me, who will make sense of them and create the podcast.

Evelyn: So, Nettie, if I could start by asking you what the LGBT community looked like in the UK before Stonewall.

Nettie: I have absolutely no idea, because I had no contact with it at all. Nothing. So I can't answer that.

Evelyn: So that says a lot about the LGBT-

Nettie: Well, it says, mainly, that I had no idea I was attracted to women and therefore had no reason to be following it.

Evelyn: So when did you first realise your attraction to women?

Nettie: Well, I would say it was December 1971.

Evelyn: And that was your first relationship?

Nettie: Yes.

Evelyn: So-

Nettie: Well, no, that was when I first realised I was attracted, and my first relationship started in the January.

Evelyn: So did that draw you into the LGBT movement at that point?

Nettie: No, because I was very active in it by then.

Evelyn: So tell me about-

Nettie: Do you want me to actually tell you what the story is?

Evelyn: Yes. Yes, I do.

Nettie: Okay. So what happened is that I had a best friend, Jake. He was at school with me and was a friend, very close friend. And he was staying with me and my parents in 1971 for a few days. And we saw this thing in the paper that said something about Gay Liberation Front and he said, "Oh, that'll be interesting. Let's go along and see what that's like." So we went along and it was amazing, absolutely amazing. We went to the place in Middle Earth, in King Street, in Covent Garden. The Gay Liberation Front had just moved there, and there were all these people, I mean, 100, 200 people. An awfully big group. And I remember Ted Brown saying, "I'm black and I'm gay, and my primary oppression is as gay." And I thought, "Well, that's really interesting. These people are really thinking. How amazing." And then someone said, "Oh you ought to meet the women," and they were all sitting on the floor. And I remember Elizabeth Wilson came out and started telling me about the women's group, and I felt a bit overcome, like I shouldn't really be here.

Nettie: But it was just such an amazing experience. There was all this talk of liberation and real change in society. It was so different from organizations that I later learned about, like the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, which was really trying to get equality in society's terms. Have things like gay marriage, and right to equal age of consent, and the right to fight in the armed forces. But this was about changing society completely, about a liberation movement joining with other liberation movements, particularly things like Black power, and children's liberation, and hippies. But particularly Women's Liberation, because we're both oppressed by sexism. That is, homosexuals are oppressed by sexism and so are women, and so that was an obvious link.

Nettie: Anyhow, so that day we went back to my parents' place, and Jake said... he was in bed, and I was sort of talking to him, and he said, "Can I have a bit of paper and a pencil?" And he wrote I am gay on it, and it was the shock of my life. I had absolutely no idea, and he explained that he'd written to the Albany Trust, trying to make his handwriting look nice, and saying was there any pill he could take to get rid of these feelings he had.

Evelyn: So could you explain what the Albany Trust was?

Nettie: Yes, it was a counselling organization started, I think, in the 60s. It was run by Anthony Gray, and it did counselling for sexual minorities. Not just lesbians and gays. And so it was a fairly respectable organization, and it was allowed to advertise, and I think got some money from the Home Office to run itself. And anyhow, I mean I just felt so angry that he'd felt suicidal. And because one of the Albany Trust advisors met him, and he wouldn't meet, he said, "Can we meet in London?" And he said, "No, my stepfather might be there." "Well, can we meet in Norwich, where you go to art school?" "No, I might be seen." And so they met in Ipswich.

Nettie: And this man said, "There is nothing wrong with being gay, I think you should go out and have a gay experience. It will not make you gay," basically was his message. Anyhow, so the next week we went back again together, and he said, "Can you leave me alone for a little bit?" And at that point, he met Derek Jarman, who became his first boyfriend. But I went on going, because it was... Partly because I was just so moved and enraged by the fact that Jake had been made to feel like this, and I just thought, "We've got to change things." And anyhow, there's lots of things that need to be changed in society, and I started going to the counter psychiatry group, particularly, because I was interested in that. And then I went to-

Evelyn: So what happened at the counter psychiatry group?

Nettie: Well that was a great group. That was basically countering the idea that being lesbian or gay was a sickness. And so we had a demonstration in Harley Street, and I didn't actually go on that one, I think it was just before I joined. Painted the road.

Evelyn: So at the time it was considered a medical, a mental issue?

Nettie: By a lot of psychiatrists it was, yes. Far fewer now, though we still have conversion therapy, don't we, even now. But even in Britain.

Evelyn: So you were a part of the campaign to stop the medicalisation of homosexuality?

Nettie: Yes, to abolish it. And eventually the [inaudible 00:07:42] psychiatry split into two. One of them wrote the booklet Psychiatry and Homosexuality, which was Jeff Weeks, Paul Bunting... I'd have to look up the other who edited that. The other was to form Icebreakers, which was a sort of gay help service. Very definitely not counselling, but the idea was to have a telephone line where people could ring up and talk to... These little stickers said, "Gay women and men can ring Icebreakers on 274-9590 and talk to other gay people." And so lots of isolated people and people having problems about their sexual orientation. We also got quite a number of transvestites and transsexuals. And the organisation lasted for many years, and I stayed for at least the first couple.

Nettie: And that was a place where it was men and women combined, but eventually the women got fed up and left. It was about the same time I left, as well.

Evelyn: And what was that about, when women...

Nettie: They just felt that their issues weren't being taken seriously enough. As with everything, numerically they were less than the men. Can I just have a cough? I haven't got a cough. Haven't got a cough, I don't know why I'm coughing this morning.

Evelyn: So I'm interested in the GLF meetings at the Middle Earth.

Nettie: Yeah.

Evelyn: So perhaps you could paint a picture of what they were like, what the men were doing, what the women were doing. Were they meeting together, meeting separately?

Nettie: Yes, no, at Middle Earth and then later on in Notting Hill Gate, it was one big meeting. It could be as much as 500 people.

Evelyn: Wow.

Nettie: So it would be like the biggest political meeting that was anywhere in the country. There were at least five times more men than women, so being numerically smaller really didn't help. But every week there would be two people running the meeting, chairing the meeting. It would always be one man, and one woman, which tended to mean that Mary Macintosh, Elizabeth Wilson, or Sarah Grimes were often the people doing it. Because I mean, I certainly couldn't possibly have done it. I mean, I was much too scared to speak in front of all those people.

Nettie: And so what... I just wrote this. The early meetings were a mixture of energy, creativity, thought, action, and fun. And we also still all sort of kissed and hugged one another, we called each other brothers and sisters, which might sound a bit twee these days, but it wasn't then. It was like we were family to each other.

Evelyn: And what were some of the issues that... the burning topics of the day?

Nettie: Well I mean partly there was solidarity with other groups that we went on anti-internment marches, things like that. Then some of the things that were connected with women, some women who had children, the men went and babysat for them. I don't think that's known very much, and I don't think it was very widespread, but that meant that they could come to the meetings, rather than being stuck at home. We also all went on the abortion march in 1971, which again was something which really, it doesn't affect gay men at all, really. And then there was the Miss World demonstration, which of course, it was great that the men were in solidarity, but also, I mean, it gave them an opportunity to dress up.

Evelyn: So tell us what the Miss World...

Nettie: Well that was a beauty contest, in fact I think it does still exist.

Evelyn: But it was very high profile at the time.

Nettie: But it was very high profile, it was meeting at the Albert Hall, and was presented by Bob Hope, who was a pretty eminent... what do you call him, actor, comedian, whatever, who made extremely sexist comments the whole time. And so, one woman from each country was chosen for her beauty, and so then they paraded in swimsuits, and had to give simpering little interviews, and things like that. And it was all a bit demeaning, many people thought, and that it might be an idea to actually show that women are not ugly, we're not beautiful, we're angry. And that was the slogan.

Evelyn: So what did the protest look like?

Nettie: So the protest, so there were loads and loads of women from Women's Liberation turned up, and then joined by GLF in a secondary role in this case. But we did have the alternative Miss World thing outside, with men dressed in drag with Miss Used, and Miss Abused, and Miss Taken, and things like that. That got a lot of publicity. I mean, and inside the hall of course, the women started protesting. That was not particularly GLF, but obviously there were lots of lesbians doing that, and they interrupted Bob Hope, and brought the whole thing pretty well to a standstill, and there were lots of police around. And I was in a group actually linking arms, with as it happened a man, and this policeman came up and started sort of trying to choke him. And I said, "I can see what you're doing, PCwhatsit,whatsit [number]!" And so he let go. But it was pretty nasty.

Evelyn: And so it was quite aggressive police team-

Nettie: The police were. Well, they were furious. I mean they were all men, and then of course the audience, we were spoiling their fun. You know, I have mixed feelings about attacking beauty contests, but I think at that time it was probably quite a good thing to do, and it raised awareness, made people think. Made people think about the issues of sexism, and how women are portrayed, and what we want.

Evelyn: Because that's interesting, the level of solidarity with other groups, and other people's issues at this time. So the LGBT community were awoken, if you like, in the wake of ... years following on from Stonewall. But there's a wider political awareness going on.

Nettie: Yes, I mean, absolutely. The idea was we needed to transform society. It's a bit like the people in Hong Kong now. You know, revolution in our times. They don't just want... they're not just looking for civil rights, they're actually looking for independence from China and a completely different sort of way of relating. And I've got to just, quickly, I've got a close friend who's actually living in Hong Kong, and he says that sexual liberation is very much part of that agenda. You see, and that links back to GLF in America, in here, and in other countries, to raise that whole question of is that part of the change in society, or is lesbian and gay rights just to do with trying to fit into things just as they are? Have a place at the top table, you know, have gay politicians and gay businessmen, and gay this, that, and the other.

Evelyn: Or to have a new top table altogether.

Nettie: Or not to have a top table. To have a society built on cooperation rather than competition, and to have people having more control over their own lives.

Evelyn: So can you cast your mind back to walking into those early meetings, and can you articulate some of the sense of excitement, and...

Nettie: Yes, well that's right, it was. It was exhilarating, it really was exhilarating, and I'd never... I'd come from a background of being a totally unsuccessful heterosexual, and suddenly I was in something, the most exciting movement that was at all... In the country I'd also been part of, for instance, a youth campaign for nuclear disarmament, and one or two other groups. But they weren't exciting like this. This was because it was about people's personal lives. It was their own liberation. It wasn't about banning the bomb somewhere else, this was about how people actually lived and what

was going to happen to them. And it changed us all profoundly. I mean, we all say this. We're not the same afterwards, because we went through such an intense experience of personal change, and political action.

Nettie: So there was things like the Dr. Reuben book, that's one where it was partly to do... I have not got a cough. I was not coughing yesterday, I was not coughing before you came, and now I can't stop coughing. Can we just turn it off and I'll have a, I'll make myself a cup of...

Nettie: Really was. So you had to do abortions with coat hangers, and for gay men it was talked about how absolutely pathetic they were, and that they spend their lives doing things like putting light bulbs up one another. And lesbians were covered in the chapter on prostitution. And so there were a lot of objections to it. I remember the quote, yes. "One vagina plus one vagina still equals zero." And this was a book that was actually being used by some medical students, recommended for medical students in this country. It was also a very big selling book. I remember going to the railway station and seeing it there, and we had an immense campaign about that, from all sort of different angles. We had a demonstration down Charing Cross Road, with some of the people from street theatre. And they stopped and did a phony abortion, dropping liver on the road, and I remember Peter Tatchell went into Foyle's and picked up a great big stand of these books, and just came and threw them into the road.

Nettie: And we put correction stickers, saying that this book is not supported by the majority of medical opinion, and this book is poison, I remember. And then we went around to book sellers, asking them not to stock it. And I was sent, I went to the Highgate Bookshop, and I said this, and he said, "You mean you really want me to practice censorship, do you?" And I said, "Oh." I said, "Actually, maybe that's not the right tactic, actually. Maybe you shouldn't ask them not to sell it."

Nettie: But the thing that we did do that I thought was great fun was thought of by John Chesterman, were discussed at the action group, which used to meet every Monday. He designed a little flyer, headed Pan Books, saying, "Dear customer, due to the controversial nature of the book you've just bought, Everything You Want To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask, if you return this book, Pan Books promise to pay the complete remittance and postage."

Nettie: And then we just slipped them into books all over, everywhere we could. And they did get some back, and they were furious. They sort of felt they had to pay, I mean I know that was completely not the way you're meant to do it, but it was so clever, and it was such a dangerous book. I mean, just the thought of people reading that, and just being suicidal. I remember really worrying about anyone reading it, particularly anybody... Well, you would have somebody who perhaps didn't know a great deal, who would buy a book like that, wouldn't you? I mean, it wouldn't be, I mean quite a lot of teenagers and that. It was a horrible book, through and through, and it's disgraceful that it was ever accepted for publication, really.

Evelyn: And what other direct action did you take part in? Were you part of the Festival of Light direct-

Nettie: Yes, that was...

Evelyn: So tell us a little bit about Mary Whitehouse at the time.

Nettie: Yes. Well, Mary Whitehouse was a campaigner, mainly against pornography, from a Christian viewpoint. And so she formed the Festival of Light with various other people. Malcolm Muggeridge, and Trevor Huddleston, who was the Bishop that did some good work in South Africa. I'll come back to him later. And they're having a sort of Christian Crusade that was going to have three weeks worth of action, and started off with a giant event at Central Hall Westminster. And this person I was mentioning before, John Chesterman, just said, "Right, well we're going to do something about this." So first of all, one of the people in GLF called Janet got a job in their office, and she printed tickets, duplicate tickets.

Evelyn: Infiltrator.

Nettie: Yeah, infiltrated. And she sent all the coaches to the wrong parking places. And then everyone who was part of the action, a particular bit of the action, was allocated a number. And so, say you were number seven. You'd know what number six had done, but you wouldn't know what anyone else was doing. And we were told to go into the hall, very discretely. We were told to dress respectably, not take any drugs with us, not take anything that might be considered an offensive weapon, and try to sit in the middle of rows, where it's harder to throw people out. And anyway, it started.

Nettie: And first of all, there was Trevor Huddleston, who, as I say, was a Bishop that did things to do with South Africa and apartheid. And we just absolutely let him speak, and didn't protest in any way. And just as an aside, Michael Brown and I, and an awareness group, wrote to Trevor Huddleston about being part of the Festival of Light. And he actually came and met the awareness group, and he withdrew from the campaign. But-

Evelyn: So the other speakers...

Nettie: The other speakers were just appalling. Like Malcolm Muggeridge goes, "I dislike homosexuals." I mean they were all about praying your way out of things, and stopping the sin of homosexuality, or masturbation, and you know, sex should only be in marriage. I mean it was pretty horrible, really. And then just gradually, people started to do something. So number one person would appear to be a very respectable looking man, and he suddenly jumped up and waved his arms around, and went, "I'm saved! I'm saved, I'm saved!" And then pulled his trousers off and they had a sort of hoop skirt underneath. And then there was Tony Selwas, who was dressed as a Bishop. And people coming up to him, and he just said, "No, carry on sinning."

Nettie: And people would be joining singing, and... everybody just carried on from the person before. And then we let out these white mice, and they went over all the hall, caused confusion. And then there were about six or seven people dressed as nuns, only one of which was a woman. But would you believe they didn't notice? And they were going, "Oh, pray for us sisters. Pray for us!" And then so their turn came, and they just ran up to the front of the hall, going "woowoowoo".. And it was just wonderful. It was just wonderful. And we all got thrown out, of course.

Evelyn: What was your role?

Nettie: No, no, I didn't have a role.

Evelyn: Which is surprising.

Nettie: It was big. There were about 150 people there, so that was Gay Liberation Front, and Women's Liberation, and the underground

press, things like Its, and Oz, and Friends. About 150, and observers from the National Council for Civil Liberties. And nobody breathed a word, they genuinely, they never found out. I mean, I can't imagine that happening now, just everyone keeping their mouth shut, but they did. Nobody tipped anyone off, or rang the press with a good story, or anything like that.

Evelyn: So it was a complete surprise all night?

Nettie: It was a complete surprise, and a complete success. And we got, generally, rather favourable coverage. Then outside, some of us were actually trying to talk to the Christians about it. But there was a big group of them, and policemen came up and was harassing a man, one of the gay men. And so he kissed the policeman on the cheek, and the policeman tried to arrest him. And then suddenly, sort of like he was surrounded by all these people who sort of go, "Sure you're going to do that?" And he said, "Well, don't do it again," and disappeared.

Lori: What year was this?

Nettie: 1971. So I think we're actually talking about December, but it would be easy to look up [09.09.1971]. Really, it felt a bit... it never really took off. They had a rally in Hyde Park.

Evelyn: The GLF?

Nettie: No, sorry, the Festival of Light did, and we-

Evelyn: Oh, the Festival of Light.

Nettie: We sort of turned up and were a nuisance there, too. Oh, yes they had in Conway Hall, there was a banner when it was unrolled over the balcony that said, "Cliff for Queen." And as somebody who's really anti-censorship, and was later a member of Feminists Against Censorship, which I'm still in, I would not normally think it was ever right, A, to add people, and B, to disrupt something like that. You should actually listen to them, and generally you don't stop people speaking. But I think you've got to have each case on its merits, and I think in this case it was justified. I mean, these people were a real threat to us all, and...

Evelyn: But I'm also getting a sense of fun, because they were creative and funny direct actions.

Nettie: Oh, yes, they were.

Evelyn: The other side of the political movement around GLF and so on, was there much social interaction?

Nettie: Oh, absolutely.

Evelyn: Tell us about that.

Nettie: Yes, I mean we'd have dances, and benefits, and private parties as well. And I mean at the women's group, later on, we haven't talked about the women's group yet. But the one where when it was at the commune, in Faraday Road, I mean it was sort of a bit like a party every Friday there. Because it was quite, it was a social thing as well as a political meeting.

Evelyn: So tell me about the women's group.

Nettie: The women's group, I mean I first started going to it, I don't know, but not right at the beginning but maybe June or something like that. I'm not quite sure, and that was met at Mary Macintosh's flat, 37 Allendorf Square, which is in Islington.

Evelyn: And again, is this 1971?

Nettie: '71, yeah.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Nettie: And then it was quite large, might be about 20 people there, and people talked, and we'd plan some actions, and people would do things like drink beer sometimes. And what Mary said is, it's basically sort of a working class thing. And she didn't move when it moved to Faraday Road, which was a woman's commune in Notting Hill Gate. Then the atmosphere was completely different, it was younger women, mainly. Not necessarily, but mainly younger women, and lots of dope, taking dope and cocaine, and things like that. And people often stayed overnight, because it was more of a social thing.

Evelyn: Was it more middle class in Notting Hill Gate?

Nettie: I suppose it was in a way, yes. Yes, I mean, and that was where we had the issue of transgender coming in, because... I'm just going to say, do you want to know about this?

Evelyn: Yeah.

Nettie: Yeah. I can cover it now. So, as far as I know, there were no female to male trans men in GLF, though there is one of the people who came to the women's group, called Tony, who I think was. But I can't say that for certain. But we did have male to female, and particularly somebody called Rachel Pollack, who's now quite a well known writer. And she came with what was then her wife, Edith, and this was somebody who was preoperative, and I don't think was necessarily even on hormones. Who looked like a man, but wasn't, because she was trans. And the issue was, was it appropriate for her to be coming to the women's group, or should she just go to the transvestite/transsexual group? And this caused immense problems, really, because people felt very differently. Remembering that this is 1971, and the position of women in society was quite different, and it was very much male dominated, and it was quite important for women to have a space of their own in those days.

Evelyn: They felt particularly vulnerable in those years.

Nettie: Yeah. I mean, I do think it was very different. Remember, this was before women had equal pay, before we had anti-discrimination, before we had rape in marriage, before we had proper legislation on domestic violence. And lesbians would always lose custody of their children. And also, women were just considered to be inferior still then, and they were expected to get married and settle down. And so lesbians were going right outside the mould, and they did need a space of their own, but was it appropriate, or was it not appropriate? So there was a lot of discussion about that, I mean, Rachel wasn't ever banned, but we then had a 'think in'. These are these occasions where we all went to a particular place and thought about particular subjects.

Nettie: We had one at the University of Leeds, we had another one, I think in Lancaster, and so this is a women's think in. And Rachel came to that, and we were in the hall at Notting Hill Gate, in the church hall, and so we were all talking, and then suddenly this rather drunken man came in and went, "What's that man doing here?" And the women immediately said, "That's not a man, it's a woman. Now get out, and stop interfering." And it was thus instant solidarity that you got. The minute there was somebody outside, the internal conflict about whether Rachel should have come to the meeting or

not disappeared completely. And I mean that was one of the things that was really impressive about GLF, when one of the women in GLF was accused of terrorism, and being part of the Angry Brigade, the whole of GLF came out in solidarity. Didn't matter, we thought, I mean almost all of us thought what the Angry Brigade did was not a very good idea at all.

Nettie: And the bombing in London, that was completely inappropriate. But we didn't say, "Oh, we'll back her because she's innocent." We didn't. We said, "We'll back her because she's a sister. She's in trouble, and therefore we will support her." And so we did endless things, we went on demonstrations, and we visited her in prison, we did all sorts of bits of solidarity work. And that was something very much where the women and the men worked together.

Evelyn: There's something about that oppression from outside-

Nettie: Yes.

Evelyn: That pulls the community together very, very tightly.

Nettie: Yes. And I mean, when we were on demonstrations, compared with other political groups, we all linked arms. And if a police tried to arrest anyone, pull one person out, it did not succeed, because we were so together as a group, where other groups were just random individuals walking along. And I remember particularly, after the women's group, that's the one at Faraday Road, I stayed the night that night. And then in the morning, we decided we were going to go to Holloway Prison and do a demonstration. Because we often did things just instantly like that, just decided to do them and off we'd go and do them. That's not the only occasion, they weren't all planned weeks before.

Nettie: But there was a woman called Pauline Jones who had lost her baby and then she'd snatched another baby from a pram, when the mother was out shopping. Which is a terrible thing to do, but I mean she certainly didn't harm it, and it was obviously because she was suffering some sort of quite serious trauma to do with having lost her own baby. And she gave the baby back, but they decided then that it was appropriate to send her to prison, whereas we were saying she needed help.

Evelyn: Help, yeah.

Nettie: Yeah. And so we just turned up, not very many of us, about 10 women, something like that, turned up at Holloway Prison and we sat in the road, and held up placards that we'd made that morning. And of course then the police came, and they started trying to drag us off. And if they tried to drag one woman, all the other women held on to her, and then she'd go, "Ow, you're hurting me, you're hurting me!" And the police didn't know what to do, and I mean the traffic had stopped. And this went on for quite a long time, and they did actually manage to arrest two of the women in the end. But those things happen sometimes.

Nettie: But it got a lot of publicity for her case, which was really, we thought was really worth it. And we did lots of sort of quick things, we called them zaps. You know, rather than a planned demonstration. And sometimes the spontaneous ones were the best. There was another one where my girlfriend and I were at the commune in Notting Hill Gate, Colville Houses, and we were talking about the fact that the local gay pub wouldn't serve people in drag, or in GLF badges. And so we just spontaneously decided we were

going to go there and confront them. And so my girlfriend rang up the... went to a phone box, no mobile phones then. Went to a phone box and rang up LBC and one or two others, and said there were-

Evelyn: Radio broadcasters?

Nettie: Yeah. Yeah. Radio broadcasters. And said, "There are 200 angry homosexuals descending on the Champion pub." Which was completely untrue, of course, and I said, "But that's not true!" And she said, "Yes, but it will get them there." And I thought, oh, yes, yes it might. And they did come. And so we had a big demonstration there, where we all sat on the floor and refused to go, and then the police turned up, and were sort of dragging us out. And we did that, in that case the police managed to arrest two people, but there was only a sort of show trial at Marylebone Magistrates Court, which is... that's another story. But anyhow, eventually all pubs did serve people in GLF badges and drag.

Evelyn: Were you ever arrested?

Nettie: No. Yes. Well, yes. Or actually, was I? I'm not quite sure. I was taken in by the police, that was, I was telling you about the person that was accused of being in the Angry Brigade. So some of us went out in my car, and we were putting up posters about the issue. And we would put one on the stock exchange, I remember, and eventually a police car was sort of following us, and we got stopped. Because I didn't, I wasn't going to go through a red traffic light, so I stopped. And so we were taken to the police station. I don't know if we were arrested, but we were certainly questioned. And that what they were really interested in, which amused me, was that they were saying, "And where does GLF get its funding from?"

Nettie: I mean, it was pretty well self funding, I mean, you didn't... there was no membership, and they had a sort of black bag, a big black bag, and if you wanted to, put some money in as you left the meeting. So they didn't have any funding, because it didn't have any paid officials or smart stationary, or anything really. Didn't really need any money. And anyhow, as far as the police things though, eventually they just let us all go. I mean, all we'd done is put some posters up with paste, we hadn't damaged anything. It was just a political thing, they wondered who we were and wanted to question us.

Evelyn: So did you take part in the early Pride marches?

Nettie: Yes. And the one that was before the actual Pride march, which was the age of consent one, organized by-

Evelyn: So tell us about that.

Nettie: Yes. GLF had a youth group, which was open only to people who were under 21. And people over 21 were not allowed to go, but you could go to one meeting. So I was 21, and so I went to one meeting. I was so impressed, it was just in someone's private house, but there were about 15 people there, all under 21, all very well organised, and a number of them were girls rather than boys. And a number of them were under 16, which is interesting. You'd think, particularly in those days, maybe 13, 14 year olds wouldn't be out being politically active, but they were. And they brought out an issue of our magazine called Come Together, the youth group issue, and they organized the first demonstration, which was about the age of consent. And the idea was that first of all, an equal age of consent at 16, but with the possibility of not having an age of consent at all.

Evelyn: So remind us about the difference in ages of consent at the time.

Nettie: Yeah. For heterosexual sex it was 16. Lesbians, no age of consent, and gay men 21. So a reasonable demand is it should at least go down to 16, and that's what the Campaign For Homosexual Equality was pressing for, of course. That was just an amazing demonstration. We just, on a nice sunny day, and we walked through the streets where there was as many police officers, I think, as there were demonstrators. There were quite a lot of us. Yeah, at least a couple of hundred, maybe, it's difficult to remember. And then we took over Trafalgar Square, and put up microphones, and people spoke from the podium, particularly Michael Mason, who was later Gay News. And Carla from GLF, who had the word lesbian written in enormous letters in the sort of T-shirt thing that she was wearing.

Nettie: And it was a joyous occasion, it was enormous fun, and it was angry. And we were shouting, you know, "G-A-Y, what's that spell, gay! And what is gay, good! And what else is gay? Angry!" And that was one of the slogans that we were shouting from the... And yeah, I mean it was just, there was so much strength. People were very relaxed, and full of energy. More than at any other time, I think. If you look at photographs of people in GLF at the time, you can see how sort of relaxed they look. I think it's really interesting, because there was so much solidarity, and we could all rely on one another. If anyone was in trouble, other people would help, for instance.

Evelyn: So even though the rest of society could be quite hostile, as you long as you were in a GLF gathering, you felt as if you were in a safe space.

Nettie: That's right.

Evelyn: Even if it was on a protest march in the streets.

Nettie: Yeah. Yeah, I think that's true. And I don't think it was true for people on the gay scene generally, and I can't answer for a lesbian scene, because I only... I went to the Gateways once, but I did because somebody invited me, but I realised I shouldn't be here. They were very strictly into sort of butch/femme couples, and I thought that's absolutely fine, but what am I doing as a tourist, coming? And I don't think I ought to be here.

Evelyn: So the first Pride march.

Nettie: Yes.

Evelyn: And this was 1972, wasn't it?

Nettie: '72. Not so different from the youth group march, as far as I recall. It's difficult, obviously, to remember details, but yeah. Again, there were a lot of police again, and some of them were trying to photograph people on the parade, on the march. I mean, it wasn't a parade. And we had had some leaflets that we gave out to members of the public who generally were a bit puzzled, but not necessarily hostile. We didn't... I don't recall anyone being really hostile there. And it went off very well, and I mean, so many in more recent times have generated, I would say. But we'll have to see what happens in the future, because we don't know what will happen with Pride. There may be changes.

Evelyn: So you've pointed out yourself already the differences between Pride then and Pride now, perhaps, so in those days, it was very much a march, whereas now it's more of a parade.

Nettie: Yes, and I mean the fact that you can have BAE Systems having a float there, to promote their weapons, which is absolutely nothing to do with lesbians and gay, trans or bi, or anything else. And also big business, you know, Barclay's bank. Some people haven't forgotten what they did with apartheid, and now they're sort of being the good people. I think it may change, but it really got quite nasty when they said you have to have a wristband, and it was also a problem that it got so big. On the other hand, they said about having to restrict numbers, but about remaining in the European Union. I mean there was a demonstration with, about a million, was it, a few months ago? That marched through London, and with no restriction on numbers for that. And Extinction Rebellion, their first big demonstration, which again was, it was really vast, and far more. And where they spilled the blood on the streets. Fake blood. And there were no... So one really does wonder why our march is the one that's being targeted.

Evelyn: So it was open to all, and it was more political?

Nettie: Yes. It was political, and it was also a way of people coming out in some ways, or just reaffirming their right to be who they were. I mean, I've got just one little anecdote, which is I was telling you about Icebreakers earlier. And we had a lot of young people that used to bring, often, again, you know, like 13, 14. And there was a 16 year old that rang, saying he was a bit desperate. And so, one of the male Icebreakers met up with him, and then he came to one of our smaller meetings. And the next day he was on Pride. You know, in the space of about a week, he'd gone from somebody who was sort of desperate to change everything. And my friend Jake, that I mentioned, again, he never looked back, really. I mean he was perfectly all right after that.

Nettie: It was just that society had told him that it was sick, and it was evil, and he didn't know anyone else gay, and in some ways I think it's even worse for lesbians, because they were already being treated as inferiors as women, particularly in those days. And to some extent now, but I think there's been a big change. I remember when I was at school, they were saying things like, "Oh, you have to pretend to be less intelligent than the man you're going out with," or, "It may be wonderful looking very glamorous and pretty, but it's the plain ones that get the husbands." [Coughing] And so you better edit that out.

Laurie: It's okay, I can get it out.

Nettie: You know, I never have a cough.

Evelyn: So within those early marches, obviously there was a lot of political action around, or protesting around, LGBT rights. Did you see that solidarity with other issues within those marches as well, or were they specifically around LGBT issues?

Nettie: Well I think they were around LGBT issues, if I'm remembering it correctly, the actual pride marches. Though, one must remember, the miner's strike. Just ever so slightly off what you're saying, but Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners went to Wales, and supported the miners in their strike. And they made great friends with the miners, and they ended up with the miners coming and leading the march.

Evelyn: This was-

Nettie: In solidarity with us.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Nettie: Which really was the most extraordinary turn around, because I remember when the... there were three dockers who were imprisoned in Pentonville, as trade unionists, I won't go into details. And there was a lot of solidarity with them. And my girlfriend and I went to be part of the demonstration. There was also someone from the GLF office, because this was Pentonville Prison, GLF office was at the other end of the road, on Caledonian Road. And this person called Julie, who was a man, but wearing a dress... I don't know if he was trans or not, I honestly don't know. But we were trying to stop buses going by, and Julie tripped over their dress, and the bus got by, and they were people saying, "Oh, we don't need that kind of support." And I was so proud of my father, who said, "He's supporting us, and that's the only important thing." And I thought that was such a good thing to say.

Evelyn: So your father was there at the protest.

Nettie: Yes. Nothing... he was there because he was a trade unionist, and he supported the...

Evelyn: Ah, of course.

Nettie: Yeah. No, no, neither of my parents ever went on Pride. Well, probably because they never went gay.

Evelyn: Yes, exactly.

Nettie: Though my mother did go to the psychology and homosexuality conference that we organized at the LSE, and I think that was December '71 as well, that was something I was on the organising committee of. It was a lot of people that went to it, maybe a hundred. Not quite sure if it was quite that many, but it was at one of LSE big theatres, and it was putting a very radical view about homosexuality. And I remember Mary Macintosh, who you will know, speaking, and Paul Bunting, who is one of the other people that wrote the psychiatry and the homosexual. Charlotte Woolf attended, the well known psychiatrist, psychologist, what is she? Anyhow.

Evelyn: Sure. And I'm getting the impression of such a wide range of things that the GLF did. You mentioned a publication, obviously the meetings, the psychiatry conferences. It's-

Nettie: And then there was street theatre, which... well, did street theatre. I told you about deliverance, and the Miss World one, but they did lots of other ones. Because there was a group for everything, really, there was a sort of Jewish gay group, there was a night worker's gay group, there were... Some of them weren't overtly political. There were so many groups you could go to something every day of the week. I mean, I just did my week, so Monday I'd go to the action group, Tuesday I'd go to the Red Lesbian Brigade, Wednesday was the general meeting, Thursday was Camden GLF, Friday I'd go to the women's group. Saturday we'd have a demonstration, no doubt, or something like that. And Sunday was the counter psychiatry group. And there were loads more groups, I mean we had about, at least 20, I think, all together.

Evelyn: Well I'm intrigued by the Red Lesbians.

Nettie: Yes, that was what the people who wrote the manifesto, who included Sarah Grimes and Mary Macintosh, and I think Elizabeth Wilson, and men of course, and they wrote the manifesto. Which is, again, something really worth talking about. Putting a really radical view of how change should be in society, and how the gay issue fitted into it. Then we started this daughter of the manifesto group,

which we called the Red Lesbian Brigade. And we went out and did naughty things like spray painting, and various other things.

Evelyn: Tell me. We like naughty.

Nettie: Yes. Well, we went to, again, I think the stock exchange, and sprayed sod the cock brokers on it. I wasn't there on that one.

Evelyn: Oh, shame. Missed out.

Nettie: I think Elizabeth was. Oh, I know, we can't do everything. And remember that I was also a latecomer, because it started in October, October the 13th, 1970, and I didn't even go to the first meeting until... And it was in April, and it wasn't the first one of April, because there was still an LSE there, and I didn't go to LSE. So it was probably nearer the end of April. And then I, obviously I didn't get active immediately, because... Well, I mean I went to the general meetings, but I wasn't really sure, as somebody who wasn't, you know, wasn't attracted to women, whether it was fair to do so. I mean I was a bit very dubious about whether I really ought to do it, and whether I ought to say something. And I sort of never did, and everyone assumed.

Nettie: And then later on in the year, I had this strange dream where I was on a railway station with two of the women. Anyhow, with two other women, and I suddenly felt attracted to them. That was all, I woke up, and I went, "Oh, yippee! I can't believe it, I cannot believe it, oh, I can be attracted to women." And after that it was just completely easy. Never had any problem about, I mean I was so lucky never to have suffered oppression, that obviously pretty well everyone else did.

Lori: You said earlier that you'd failed being heterosexual. What did you mean by that?

Nettie: What I meant is, I never managed to get a boyfriend or have sex. It just sort of didn't work out. I didn't know how to meet the right people, I didn't look right, everything was... I felt very uncomfortable with it all. Sort of not going to ever be the little woman, and on the other hand I wasn't glamorous either, and I mean it just... I never met anyone. You know, I really didn't. I never met anybody that might be a boyfriend, which is extraordinary, because in later years I met loads of people, both male and female. But then you see, I was meeting a different kind of person.

Evelyn: So tell us about the manifesto.

Nettie: Well, I really can't, because I mean I'm sorry, but it was published in 1971, and I wasn't part of it, and so no. But why don't you get hold of a copy of it, and look. I mean, it just explains all about radical ways of changing things in society, and what being gay means. It's very annoying not to be able to use the word gay anymore to cover everything. Because we always used to, and I mean, it always covered everybody. Everybody didn't fit in.

Evelyn: Yes, and in terms of language today, younger people often use queer in that way. But-

Nettie: I know.

Evelyn: And in those days...

Nettie: In those days, no, no, there was a big fuss at gay liberation, where Eric Thompson, who was one of the founders, said, "We should move forward to the time when we can reclaim queer." And everyone, "No,

no, no, we should be using gay, can't look back," you know. I met him the other day, and he was saying, "Hm, yes, told you so."

Evelyn: Told you so. Because queer was a term of abuse completely in those days.

Nettie: Oh, absolutely. I don't know, though, how many women do you think actually consider themselves queer?

Evelyn: I think probably quite a lot of young women.

Nettie: Some, but an awful lot wouldn't as well. I mean, you're never going to find something that pleases everyone, it's just nice that we found the word lesbian, rather than gay women, don't you think?

Evelyn: Yes. Yes, something just for women.

Nettie: Just for women, with no unpleasant associations, and descriptive.

Evelyn: So the GLF grew up after the Stonewall riots over in America. GLF sprang up here, and burned really, really brightly, and then burned out.

Nettie: Then it all went... Oh, well and I think that's, in a way, a good word for it. Yes. I mean, it was so intense, it was so much momentum, that you can't keep that up indefinitely. And so in, was it January '72? It was at the beginning of January when women left. I mean, women were unhappy about the fact that they felt that they were often ignored, some of the men were chauvinist, and they thought that they would be more effective joining with Women's Liberation, rather than joining with gay men. And I felt completely split on that, because I sort of thought that was true in one way. On the other hand, I thought, we're never going to be as strong again if it's just men on their own. It's never going to have proper balance, and it's not really going to work.

Nettie: And so there was this big meeting, we had a meeting before, the women, and then we went into the big meeting and said we were going to leave.

Evelyn: Was that a sort of block vote?

Nettie: Yeah, it was a sort of block vote, though I sort of abstained in the end. But they had a mass walk out, and one of the men suggested we be given half the money. I mean, it wasn't massive money, but we had given half the money, which was agreed. And some of the men looked really upset, and then the women walked out. And I sort of stayed there, and I heard one man say, "Oh, good riddance." And I was really surprised. So now we're not there, they dare say that. I mean that was only one person, but I just thought, "I bet he's not the only one." I think the whole thing was very uncomfortable. I went a few times to Gay Women's Liberation, and somehow it didn't have... Just, the fact that I can't remember that much about it, you know? It just didn't seem to have the sort of spark, and I can't remember any big campaigns or actions they did. Do either of you remember anything, or have read in books about what they did?

Evelyn: Certainly not the sort of, I suppose that sense of fun and creativity, in terms of some of the direct action, was not a feature of the Women's Lib.

Nettie: No, I don't think it was.

Evelyn: In the same way.

Nettie: No. But I mean, it was a lesbian group, but I don't remember... and they didn't last, I think they sort of merged into Women's Liberation, and I think Lesbian Line may have been getting together. And likewise, the men's one was a pale shadow really. I mean it did do some more things, but by that time I had a partner, and we were going off doing other political things. Squatting and other issues.

Evelyn: Squatting was a big lesbian pursuit in those times, and there were very interesting communities that sprang up.

Nettie: Oh yes, there were. So I didn't really have an awful lot to do. I mean, I did continue to go to GLF from time to time, and go to parties and things like that, but not... It really, my wholehearted involvement in it ended at the end of that year. I mean I continued to do Icebreakers. When I say continued, I didn't set up at that point, it was... was it 1972 or 1973? It might have been 1972, late in '72 before it actually got going, and got a telephone.

Evelyn: But however, a lot of other groups sort of followed on from the split of GLF, so you have many groups that are arising from the embers, if you like.

Nettie: Well there was lots of sort of like, gay teacher's group, now called School's Out. And gay social workers, and gay this, that and the other.. yes. But they were pressure groups, mainly, it wasn't anything. I mean there were ones to do with your work, or there was the gay groups within political parties. But it wasn't really anything like GLF. I mean, it was how it had to move on, and you had Gay Switchboard, came out of GLF, for instance. And that was a very valuable service, and still is.

Evelyn: And do you feel like some of the groups, like Outrage, were an actual successor?

Nettie: Yes, they were a bit, yes. Particularly in the early days, when they did little mass actions, and I remember I think sitting in the road for something, it may even have been the age of consent, or it might have been AIDS, I can't actually remember. But that doesn't actually exist anymore. I mean, Peter Tatchell has his own campaign, as everyone knows.

Evelyn: And moving on then, into the 80s, against the background of the AIDS crisis and Section 28-

Nettie: Yes.

Evelyn: There's a lot of political awareness and political action around particularly those issues.

Nettie: Yes, there was. I mean I didn't do a great deal on either of those things. Again, I was doing other things.

Evelyn: However, in recent times, GLF has rekindled.

Nettie: Yes, and that is really amazing. We had the first meeting was in November 2018, back at LSE, where we came from. And there were actually over 50 people there, so that was a wonderful mixture of original GLF-ers and quite a few non-binary and trans younger people, and other young people. And then a few middle aged people who had nothing to do with GLF, and yes, it was really exciting. And we're hoping to have a revolutionary convention this year.

Evelyn: Wow.

Nettie: Which I think is now going to be at the Bishopsgate Institute, but to have a high profile speaker, and also to have workshops, and poetry,

and all sorts of things along the lines of GLF, and about solidarity with other struggles. Particularly, in this case, Black struggle, because Aubrey and Walter, who were the people that started GLF, went to Revolutionary Convention of the Black Panthers in 1970, and that's really where they got the idea of GLF.

Evelyn: Because in those days, there were so many other civil rights movements, effectively, that they kind of fed into the development, I suppose, in the early days.

Nettie: Yes. Yes. And then we've also done fun things, and we've done solidarity with the Stansted 15, for instance, GLF was quite prominent in that, and for instance spoke at their rally.

Evelyn: And if you'd tell us some more about the Stansted 15.

Nettie: Stansted 15, 15 youngish people who went to the Stansted Airport, where a plane load of immigrants were going to be deported. Asylum seekers, mainly to Nigeria. And they simply glued themselves to the plane, and made it impossible for the plane to take off, and they stayed there for hours, and hours, and hours. And so they couldn't take off, and quite a reasonable proportion of the people who were going to be deported now have the right to stay, or are still involved in legal processes, because what the government has done is to deport people before their appeals, which is absolutely appalling. And actually there is someone who is on the executive of the campaign for homosexual equality, who is at this moment languishing in Nigeria. He made an appeal, he went and took his case for asylum, they turned it down. He appealed, and they sent the papers to the wrong address. And the next thing they knew, he'd been arrested, he was in a detention centre.

Nettie: We tried to visit him, and they just said, "Oh, he was deported yesterday." And that was nearly two years ago, and now he's still in Nigeria, and the whole legal thing is still going on. I mean, they should never have deported him before his appeal. And that was what, they quite regularly do things like that. There was a lesbian on that plane, I believe, was married, you know, her husband was threatening her. I mean they make a lot of money by doing that. Anyhow, all these people were then arrested and charged with conspiracy, and there were these big show trials, and they were all found guilty, and they're going to appeal.

Nettie: And there were some of the best barristers in the country were representing them. I went to the appeal, and so there's now a Lesbians and Gays Support The Migrants group, which is a sort of radical group. And it's called Lesbians and Gays Support The Migrants, rather than LGBTQ, it's because it's copying Lesbians and Gays Support The Miners. Which I think is quite good, actually. So I mean, there are radical groups, they're much work with us. And also I mean, Stonewall has suddenly become much, much more radical than it used to be. I remember when that was a sort of gay rights group with government funding, who didn't help trans people. And they've got turned around completely, and in fact representatives from Stonewall have come to some of the GLF meetings, and fitted in.

Nettie: And so a few months ago, on the anniversary of the youth group demonstration, we took over Trafalgar Square again, without permission, and just climbed up, and put banners out. About lesbians, and about gay revolution, and Gay Liberation Front. I mean that was quite fun. We actually got quite a lot of people there, it

was about 30, which is quite good. Because it was day time, so people who were working or students, it wasn't all that easy for them to get there. And so that was, again, it was the older people. The original people were there, and the younger people there, and everyone else who supported was there. And so eventually an official came and turfed us off, as you'd expect. But we'd been up there for about half an hour, and then we took over another part of the square with microphones and music, and we all made speeches. Read out the GLF demands, the original demands like that from 1970.

Evelyn: And next year is going to be the 50th anniversary of GLF.

Nettie: Yes, that's right. So we're hoping to have the revolutionary convention, because you don't have to have regular numbers. We had a celebration for the 49th one, in October. And I just think it's amazing how many people... I mean, it's a long time, 50 years. You know, how many of the original people are still around? Still supporting? I mean, some of us are actually still going to the meetings, but even the ones that aren't going to the meetings are still, people like Jeffrey Weeks, for instance, that you mentioned earlier.

Evelyn: So, are there any burning issues you had in your mind before you came today, that you feel we haven't discussed?

Nettie: Not sure there are, actually. What did I write here? Or is there anything else that you want to know more about?

Evelyn: I think we've touched on most of the topics that I had thought of. So I think overall it's been a real pleasure, and a very instructive one, to hear about the early days of the GLF and to get a sense of that vigour, and excitement, and joyousness of the discovery of a community. The delight in visibility, which was so important then and remains so until today.

Nettie: I think it's also that the new GLF has also been very exciting. I mean, it's been so exciting to talk about real issues and ideas again, not just about rights. You know, rights can easily be taken away. Look at what's happening around the world, Brazil, America, lots of places. All these LGBT+ rights are being taken away. But that's why people in GLF would say revolution is the only answer. Maybe it'll work, maybe it won't work, but it's the only answer that would actually work long-term.

Evelyn: And on that note, I think we will say thank you so much for your time, and your memories, and your ongoing radicalism.

Nettie: Thank you.

Evelyn: Thank you, Nettie.