

## From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
<b>Name:</b> Elaine McKenzie	<b>Date:</b> 31.01.2020 <b>Age:</b> 56
<b>Key issues:</b> Lesbian. Media. Lesbian Discussion Group. Glass bar. Racism. Sisterhood. Black lesbian scene.	
<b>Narrative summary</b> <p>Elaine was brought up in a traditional West Indian home. She understood herself as being different from a very early age and, thanks to her parents' insistence on wide reading, discovered the word lesbian when she was about nine and was able to recognise and explore her identity.</p> <p>She discovered Time Out with its lesbian and gay section which helped her find events like the Lesbian Discussion Group and, ultimately, a club or event to go to every night of the week. However, she found the scene overwhelmingly white until she eventually discovered private parties where black lesbians were meeting.</p> <p>Elaine talks about everyone being very political (left) and feminist with a strong sense of sisterhood, with Section 28 bringing lesbians to the fore. Everyone went on marches and sit ins and she hosted meetings in her bar. She ran the Glass Bar in Euston which was a private members club for women where they could relax, not having to share the space with men. Different groups came on particular evenings, so it was successful. She talks about 'the look' at the time of jeans and a check shirt. She talks enthusiastically about the quality of lesbian DJ's making a great club night.</p> <p>However, she doesn't really feel that she necessarily fits in with the LGBT community as a black woman. People are appreciative of what she has done, as the Glass Bar was iconic, but 'you're in a world where whatever you do as a black person is never really going to be good enough.'</p> <p>She feels it's generally easier to be out now, but is saddened by the fractures within the community now and lack of sisterhood and community, citing Lady Phyll as someone who holds the black community together, but speculating what might happen if she was not there. Finally her advice is to make good friends and not sleep with them – they will sustain you through hard times!</p>	
	<b>Length of interview:</b> 1 hr 5 mins

Sandra: Okay, excellent. So, what's the date today? Today is the 31st. It's payday I should know this. Today's the 31st of January 2020. And I'm interviewing Elaine McKenzie. And, okay. So, the preamble. I'm looking to explore women's engagement and activism within the LGBT plus community in its broader sense. So, I'll be asking a little about your personal journey and about your interactions, be it work or social or political. Okay? So, the aims of the project are basically to collect reminiscence memories from older lesbians. And we want to create a store, a reservoir, as it were, of information and memories for the younger generation, so that they can recognise who came before them, and what's been done, et cetera.

Sandra: So, you signed the consent form. Okay? We're just going to get started. So, could you give me a little bit about your early life and how you came to an understanding of who you really are?

Elaine: Well I didn't have the difficulties that a lot of my friends and peers had in coming to the conclusion that I was gay. Lesbian. I didn't have that problem at all. Basically when I was young, I grew up, just myself and my brother, and my brother was a gifted child. He knew his timetables by the age of three. He was very talented, won lots of competitions in the Guardian newspaper for his poetry and his artwork. And I was pretty ordinary. But ordinary was considered to be thick, compared to my brother. And my brother was two years younger than me.

Sandra: Oh, no.

Elaine: So, that was difficult. So, my parents used to take us to the library every Saturday. We had to take out seven books, read all seven, bring them back, every Saturday. And I would cheat. So, I would read the back of the covers, and the inside of the covers, and the intro, and the last page and basically get the gist of the story, so that I could prove that I had read the book. So every Saturday we did this. So, we went through the children's section quite quickly, both myself and my brother.

Elaine: And then we ended up needing to read more material, which meant we had to go into the adults section. And there were areas in the adults sections that we were not allowed to go into. And I would imagine those were the areas that had lots of violence and sex and blah, blah, blah, and we weren't allowed to go into there. So there was a tiny area we were allowed to go into. And I knew that I was different to all the other girls. All the other girls in my school used to like to play kiss chase and I hated it. I hated being chased by the boys. I didn't want them to kiss me. I didn't want them to pull my skirt up. In actual fact even today if I bump into any of my male school friends they always say, "You used to beat us up."

Sandra: So, what age was this when you knew you was different from the girls? What age?

Elaine: From about 5.

Sandra: Really?

Elaine: I knew I was different.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Elaine: And it took me until about roughly the age of nine to find the word that describes me, that defined me as different.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Elaine: And this was in the adult section, and they had this whole shelf called, Know Your Rights, I thought, "Oh, this is good. I want to know my rights as a small child. What do small children's rights have? I'm tired of getting a hiding from the school teacher because I keep on beating up the boys." So-

Sandra: So, you should let them pull up your skirt and comply with that? Yeah, anyway, sorry.

Elaine: So I came across this book about knowing your rights, and it went through at 21 you could have an airgun, and at 16 you could get married, but you needed the permission of your parents, you could still have sex. And then it said something about homosexuality. But there was a law against homosexuality but not against lesbians. And then it said: glossary. Which, if you read as much as you do as a kid, you know what the word glossary means. So I went to the glossary, looked at the word homosexual. And understood that, and then they said, lesbian; female version of male. That's all they said.

Sandra: Female version of male homosexual.

Elaine: Homosexual. Yeah. Yeah.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: Yeah. That's how they understood it in those days. And then it went on to say that during the Queen Victoria time, this law was brought in against homosexuals, and lesbians were left out, because she didn't think lesbians got up to anything, anyway. So, I went through every single dictionary you could find about lesbian, just to find a word lesbian. What does it mean?

Sandra: Right?

Elaine: And then the revised new version of various Bibles coming from America, had glossaries and they said lesbian, homosexuals refer back to the section of whichever chapter in the Bible, that talked about homosexuality. Which was just one tiny area, and nothing else. So, that gave me the word that I could call myself, because I knew I was different from all the other girls. I would rather be the boy chasing the girls, rather than being chased by the boys. At the same time, I didn't really want to be a boy.

Sandra: I think that's amazing, because it's quite cryptic. You had to decipher, pick it apart, because it wasn't spelled out.

Elaine: No.

Sandra: That a lesbian is a woman who loves women.

Elaine: No.

Sandra: It wasn't spelled out. It was-

Elaine: And it was very much sex. There was no love.

Sandra: Oh, sorry. Okay.

Elaine: It was sex. It was, men wanting sex, with men.

Sandra: Okay. Okay.

Elaine: So, lesbians wanting sex with lesbians.

Sandra: Right. Okay.

Elaine: And luckily for myself and my brother, my mother is from a medical background, and she taught us about sex. The reproduction and sex and everything. Everything, she just taught us about that. Because she thought the schools were doing a terrible job. So, I understood sex. But I understood sex in a much wider... It was part of something, it could stand alone, but it was part of love.

Sandra: Right?

Elaine: That you had sex to produce children. You had sex because it was fun. I understood all of that. So-

Sandra: Your mum is to be applauded there. [crosstalk 00:08:13].

Elaine: And my parents had this thing, they said, "Read everything that's in the house." Everything. Absolutely everything. So I had to read maths books, I had to read Shakespeare, I had to read David Copperfield, I had to read Wuthering Heights. I had to read anything that came in the post... Apart from their private letters. And they used to get this magazine they subscribed to, called, Times Magazine.

Elaine: And one year... I can't remember which year it was, it was Pride. And they had this picture of two women in Stetsons kissing each other. Not giving each other a Peck on the cheek. Actually properly kissing each other. And I thought, "Wow, wow."

Sandra: Blew you away? Yeah.

Elaine: You can do that?

Sandra: It's allowed.

Elaine: The difference... The slight difference was as a young black child, I was thinking, "Is it just for white women?" That did cross my mind. But then I went to the section about pride, and their gay pride, and all the politics surrounding it, and all the shift in the politics, blah, blah, blah. And it was brilliant. It was absolutely brilliant. Didn't mention race, didn't say anything about, "Well, it's only applicable to white people." So I thought, "Wow, it must be applicable to all." So, for a very long time, I knew. That basically I came out of my mum's womb screaming that I was a lesbian, for a very, very long time.

Sandra: At what age? At what age did you do that?

Elaine: I think from the moment I understood biology, and the moment I understood...

Sandra: What's that? [Alarm sounds] Let's ignore that and just hope it won't happen again. Sorry.

Elaine: I remember watching various films on TV, for example, Tarzan. So, Tarzan comes swinging through the jungle to claim his Jane, or to save his Jane. And the woman was always screaming, and wanting help and assistance, and stuff like that. That 'protect me' role. And I'm just thinking, "Women... I didn't see that from my mum." ? It's just, women are strong. I used to hate it and I used to think, "I want to be the person that's swinging through the jungle. I want to be that person. I want to be the person that kisses and takes the lead."

Sandra: Takes control. Yeah.

Elaine: And I knew I was very, very different.

Sandra: Wow.

Elaine: I hated dresses. I hated them. I hated bows.

Sandra: Oh, I can imagine the struggle on a Sunday.

Elaine: There was no struggle.

Sandra: Did you-

Elaine: There was no struggle. I did as I was told.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Elaine: Traditional West Indian mother. So, you just did it.

Sandra: Yes.

Elaine: And went to church, which I hated. And just complied for a very long time, a very, very long time in my life. And it wasn't difficult to comply. It wasn't difficult, because I knew at some point I would have the final say. And I can remember going to... and this was at infant school, so I can remember going to primary school, and I wore trousers. Because after a while, mum got tired of having to stitch up the holes in my dresses. After a while she just got tired of having to reposition the bow. It was just like, "I don't want to wear this stuff anymore." So she bought me trousers and I was happy. Totally happy.

Sandra: And you take care of those trousers.

Elaine: I took care of those trousers.

Sandra: That's amazing. Wow. Oh, okay.

Elaine: So when I was... I would say between the age of five to seven, I finally knew exactly. I knew that I was different. And from the age of seven to nine, I needed to find the word that defined my difference. So-

Sandra: Okay. That's so interesting. That was quite early. So, did you actually say that you came out to your mom quite early, as well?

Elaine: No.

Sandra: Oh, no. Okay. Misunderstood. Okay.

Elaine: No, no, no, no, not at all. I had to leave home first to do that.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: And I had no intention of coming out to her.

Sandra: Right.

Elaine: Because it wasn't her business, and I just thought she's just going to be a bit of an arse about it. And she wasn't.

Sandra: Wonderful.

Elaine: Surprisingly enough, she wasn't. We used to have this game and I used to say, "Mom, do you love me? And she'd say, "No." And I say, "Mum, do you love me?" And she'll say, "No." "Mum, do you love me?" And she'll say, "Yes. Of course, I love you." And then she'd tell me why she loves me? And she'd spend ages telling me why she loved me, and I always liked to play that game. Because I knew that she would eventually say, "Yes." And one day... This was when I moved from one place to another, what my parents used to do, was they used to pack my stuff up for me, and then the place that I was moving to, they would clean it and then unpack my stuff and put everything away. I know, I'm spoiled.

Sandra: It's so sweet. To me that's just so sweet.

Elaine: Yeah. So they just wanted to make sure that I was going into a clean home, cleaned at mum's standard. Everything was put away and organised. And then she came across this card from an ex of mine. And this card has a picture of two women sitting in sand, being very intimate with each other. And I had forgotten to post the card. And I said, "Dear Ali, I hope we could do more of this." And she picked up the card, and she read it, and then she showed it to me. She says, "What's this?" She threw it at me, actually. Frisbeed it at me. And she said, "What's this?" And I picked up the card and I frisbeed it back at her and I said, "It's a card." And just continued my day.

Elaine: Continued my day, like it was nothing. And she just thought, "Mm." And I didn't think anything of it. And then months later when I was playing this game with my mum, I said, "Mum, do you love me?" And she said, "No." I said, "Do you love me?" She said, "No." I said, "Do you love me?" She said, "No." This is the third time now. I said, "Do you love me?" Fourth time. "No." "What's wrong then?" And she said, "Who's Ali?"

Sandra: Oh. Well it played on her mind. Oh.

Elaine: Oh my God, it did. It did.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Elaine: So that was quite funny. So now I had to come out.

Sandra: I'm sure I have jumped ahead of my questions, but yeah, that's a great story.

Elaine: I had to come out with her. And she says to me, "Men aren't all that bad. Don't look at your dad. He's not much of an example."

Sandra: Your mum sounds wonderful. No, that just sounds amazing. Okay. All right. Okay. I'm not sure I've done the preamble for properly. Did I do it? I'm going to do it again just to make sure. Okay. So this is the 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 31st of January 2020, and I'm interviewing Elaine Mackenzie. There you go, I got it out of the way.

Sandra: So, okay. So, okay. So that was great anyway. So how did you find your community? How did you-

Elaine: It was quite interesting because I came across... There used to be two social magazines, Time Out and City Limits. So, one day Time Out had a picture of two women on the cover, kissing intimately. And I bought the magazine, never bought it my life. But I saw this picture and I bought it. I just thought, "Ah..."

Sandra: Naturally.

Elaine: "... what's this about?" So, it was advertising Desert Heart, which was the first lesbian film that I saw.

Sandra: Oh.

Elaine: So I tell you this, it played at several cinemas in London, called Desert Heart. Played at several cinemas in London. And I watched it at every single cinema in London. Again-

Sandra: Over what period of time?

Elaine: As long as it was showing, again and again and again and again...

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Elaine: ... and again, and again.

Sandra: Okay, cool. Oh, we'll talk about that more later. Okay.

Elaine: It was a fantastic film, for me. And then with this magazine, Time Out magazine, I sort of, "I just want to look at the contents. Let's look at the contents and see what it's got listed." It's got going out, theatre. It's got galleries. It's got lesbian and gay.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: Direct to that section. And it had all these places to go, mainly for boys, but like "Whoo. Look, look, look, look, look, look, look."

Sandra: Wow, Time Out magazine.

Elaine: Yeah. And I just thought, "Amazing. Absolutely amazing." And the first place... And it also had this section at the back, where you can put your personal ads.

Sandra: Yes. Yes, I remember.

Elaine: So I remember putting a couple of personal ads in the back. But it had lots of different places to go. One of the places I went to in London, was the, Gay's a Word, bookshop on Wednesday. Where you had all these women talking about different topics, which was very interesting. And I can remember the first year I went there, I didn't really say much.

Sandra: For a whole year?

Elaine: Near enough. A whole year. And then after a while you couldn't shut me up. But it was good because from there we went to the gay and lesbian centre, and you just made friends, and then you would go out to various clubs, like the Ace of Clubs on a Saturday. You'd hit Orchids at the gay and lesbian centre. You go down to the basement where Ritu will be DJing, and then you'd go to Ace of Clubs where another DJ called Elaine



would be DJing. We used to go to Venus Rising on a Wednesday, once a month on a Wednesday.

Elaine: And that was at The Fridge in Brixton. Thousands of lesbians.

Sandra: Wow.

Elaine: On a school night, it was absolutely amazing. Absolutely amazing. Monday, you would go to the drill hall. Tuesday, you'd go to Fallen Angel. Wednesday you'd go to the bookshop. Thursday, I have no idea. Friday there was something else happening on Friday. Can't remember what it was, and then Saturday and Sunday. There was always something, every day of the week.

Sandra: Seven days of the week.

Elaine: Yeah. In different places, there was something going on.

Sandra: Wow.

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: That's amazing. It doesn't seem to be like that now. Nowadays we don't have much of that, do we?

Elaine: We have a variety, but it's just very, very different. It's very different. People generally, it doesn't matter about your sexuality. we don't have the disposable income that we did.

Sandra: True. True.

Elaine: Back in the '80s and the '90s.

Sandra: True. True.

Elaine: We just don't. You're spending over 50% of your wages just on rent.

Sandra: Absolutely.

Elaine: So, we just don't have that disposable income like we used to. And therefore to go to a particular event, that you have to one, pay to get in, and then you have to meet the bar spend. It's difficult. It is difficult, And it's not so much to do with women's earnings, because gay women, on a whole, have greater disposable income than their straight counterparts. Because we still don't breed as much as straight women.

Elaine: Because of, obviously when we, as a lesbian couple, want to have kids, there's a lot of planning that goes into it. A lot of planning. And it's not just planning to have the kid, it's like, "Okay, that bit you can do, but it's the next stage. Who's going to babysit? What's

the cost of schooling. What sort of support is my employer going to give me?" What's your maternity leave package? We do a lot more planning.

Sandra: Absolutely. They'll just fall into it.

Elaine: You just don't open your legs.

Sandra: You don't just fall into it.

Elaine: Yeah. So, you just generally find on the whole, I'm not saying every single lesbian out there, but just on a whole, there's a lot more planning going into starting a family, than if you were a straight couple. So, when it's kind of like.. when there's a real, No, then it's a No, and that's it. So we tend to have great disposable income. But I think it's an interesting cultural thing about lesbians compared to gay men, in the sense that I enjoyed going out and when I hit the scene it was very white. There was only myself, Joan and Sonia. Yeah, black girls, as far as we were concerned. This was just at the beginning, at the very beginning. And they used to call us the three degrees. We used to have curly perms..

Sandra: [laughing]Sorry. That's so funny. You're telling, in the whole of London, there was three black lesbians? No. That were on the scene.

Elaine: No, it wasn't. It wasn't, the black lesbian scene was so underground.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: So underground, it took one black lesbian to one day pop into my bar and to say, "Why don't you come here?" And I went to this party, which was in Stockwell, on some god unknown floor, in some council block.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: I'm sure you needed a helicopter to get to it. I was just climbing those stairs forever.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: And I eventually got there and it was just rooms full of black lesbians, all dancing, all having a great time. And I was like, "Wow. Wow, wow, wow."

Sandra: Wow. Let's unpick this. Okay so-

Elaine: Wow. Wow.

Sandra: So, okay. So she came to your bar. We're going to talk about your bar in a bit. So, this woman appears out of nowhere. And she invites you to this function.

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Just out of the blue. Yeah?

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Okay. And the function's in a council state in South London?

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Stockwell?

Elaine: South London.

Sandra: And once you go up to the flat-

Elaine: Once I eventually got there, out of breath, needing... I don't know.

Sandra: A drink. Resuscitation, mouth to mouth hopefully. Sorry. Once you got there, the place is just heaving with black lesbians.

Elaine: Yes. And they're just like, "Where have you been? Jesus, you've been hiding yourself."

Sandra: I'm loving this, sorry. Wow. Okay. When was this? What year roughly was is?

Elaine: This was, I would say, '95.

Sandra: Whoa.

Elaine: So yeah, so it was... Yeah. Because the scene was very white, and the mix in the scene was, here you have working class and middle class people, and that in itself was never an issue.

Sandra: Right.

Elaine: The class. And they were all political, and they were all feminists. We were all feminists, and there was a strong sisterhood, really strong sisterhood. And those who weren't political, either played at it, or played with it, or disappeared off the scene.

Sandra: Okay. You had to participate, really?

Elaine: Yeah. You had to be a bit of an activist, you couldn't sit back and just-

Sandra: Roll over, sort of thing.

Elaine: Yeah. And there's no way you could say, "Oh, I'm a conservative." Dear god.

Sandra: If you're stoned, yeah. Wow.

Elaine: If you're lucky.

Sandra: Oh, that story's just blown me away. Okay so let's talk about your activism. What form did that take?

Elaine: Back in those days you'd just go on marches. You go marches, you go on sit ins, and you demonstrate that way. So, it was very, very physical. That's what you did. You went on marches and you sat outside any gentleman's club that had strippers and stuff like that. When I had the bar, people who would come into the bar and have their meetings, the activism meetings upstairs and stuff like that, and that was quite fun. And my job was just to try to keep that area sterile, as far as possible, so that they can have the discussions and nobody was privy to it.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: So that was my input, my input. I couldn't do more. Because if you've got yourself a criminal record, you lose your license. You lose your license, I wouldn't have a bar then.

Sandra: Absolutely.

Elaine: So by having the bar, it limited what I could do, what I could do personally.

Sandra: Right. Okay. How it's done. I mean, I've heard a lot about the Glass Bar. I've come out quite recently so I wasn't able to take part in any of the fun times that you had there, but I feel, just having the bar was quite a bit of a political act. And how did that come about?

Elaine: Well, I have no idea. I passed this building that had a 'To Let' sign on it. It had a to let sign on it for ages. And I remember contacting... I think it was called [Spacia 00:28:50] at the time and said, "I want to take this over, and I want to run a private members club for women." And they went, "Okay, submit your proposal and we'll have a look." And I think because it was empty for so long, they said, "Yeah, all right then."

Sandra: Wow. Just like that.

Elaine: Yeah, it was good. It was good. And I did the refurbishment because it was an office, so I had to change the use and then get a license, and get as much help from the council as possible to do this. And they were very helpful. Very, very helpful, because I was completely naive. I had no idea what I was doing. None whatsoever.

Sandra: So I mean, sorry, let's go back a bit. So you had this idea, to open a private members club for women. What drove, I mean, what was the inspiration? I mean there was lots of, from where I'm standing anyway, there was quite a few places for women to go back then. Did you see a niche, a particular need for something a bit different?

Elaine: Yeah, because what I wanted was... Back then I was an accountant, so I used to go traveling to my clients and resolve whatever tax matters or bookkeeping matters,

whatever. And I can remember sometimes there might be an hour and a half between one client and another. And in those days you either find yourself in a pub.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: Or a Greasy Spoon.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: They didn't have the coffee shop culture, that you have now.

Sandra: Okay, true.

Elaine: They didn't have that at all.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: So if you go into a pub, you're always going to get some drunk, idiot, male. Who's going to go, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: And you'll sit in there, clearly minding your own business, you're just, "Look, I'm minding my own business go away." Or you might be doing a few calculations and, "Oh, you can use a calculator." How I'm not in jail. I have no idea how I am not. I've managed to keep out of jail, because the number of people I would love to slap, anyway. And then you go to a greasy caff and you just stink of old oil by the time you finished.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: So, then I just thought, "It's about time women had a space where they didn't have to share it with men." Because you don't share anything with men. There is nothing that you do that you share with men. Men take the greatest space, they take too much. They breathe in too much oxygen.

Sandra: Absolutely.

Elaine: They eat too much food. They perspire too much.

Sandra: Hello.

Elaine: They take up too much space on the bus, on the train.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: I can remember having a conversation with a group of guys at different places that I worked at, about how much space made take up. And then we continued the

conversation in the pub, and this guy was talking and he turned his back to me, and leaned his arm out on the bar and continued talking to his colleague. I had to tap him on the shoulder and said, "What are you doing? By positioning yourself, you're excluding me from the conversation that I started."

Elaine: At which point he was apologetic. Because he didn't mean to do it.

Sandra: Not consciously anyway.

Elaine: Not consciously, but, "Oh, wow." I just wanted a bar where women could come in and bitch, and not have to compete for attention when they go up to a bar and spend money.

Sandra: Yeah. Yeah.

Elaine: Because we were earning more and more money.

Sandra: Yeah. Yeah.

Elaine: And we want to spend the money.

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: So initially the Glass Bar was just for all women.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: So I opened it up and I sent a lot of information out to different press. And the gay press did not want to know.

Sandra: Really?

Elaine: Diva magazine didn't want to know, Pink Paper didn't want to know. And I think it was Capital Gay or Gay Capital, they didn't want to know. So, I had to advertise in there, in those respected papers, in order to get the word out to the gay community.

Sandra: I can't imagine why they wouldn't want to spread the word.

Elaine: Yeah. Very good question. And they've never been able to answer that one.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: So, but the straights loved it.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: Loved it, oh my god, I was on LBC and some radio 3, and just all over the place. They loved it. I was on BBC 2, I think, about Lipstick Lesbians and stuff like that. That was a film festival. They loved it. Absolutely loved it. So that was quite good. I got in touch with the bookshop and then the girls, what they would do is they would have their discussion and then come to my bar, because they weren't going anywhere once the Lesbian and Gay centre closed down.

Elaine: So that was good. Because that got Wednesday busy, and then I turned Thursday in to dating night. That was busy. Friday, I had this lady called Iona, she ran a comedy night there. So that was busy, and then Saturday was just generically busy. People would come down from wherever to see the Glass Bar.

Sandra: Wow.

Elaine: So that was really good. That was good for me. That was exciting times. And I tried to encourage many social groups and political groups to come meet, and use the facilities there, because it was on two floors. When I first opened the Glass Bar, upstairs I couldn't afford a chaise longue, those long comfortable day beds. So I got ordinary single beds. Now sometimes I can be a bit naïve, and I threw cushions all over them and he made it comfortable and people going, "Oh, go to this bar. They've got beds upstairs?" It was like, "No. Not like that."

Sandra: Oh, it backfired, oh dear.

Elaine: Jesus, but it was amazing actually, because people would come in and they'd use the facilities, but they would sit on the beds, and lots of them would be able to sit on the bed, it was just this, "Oh, they got beds up there." What.

Sandra: Oh, funny. Oh, wow. So when did the bar close?

Elaine: The bar closed in 2008, because the landlord then tripled the rent and backdated it.

Sandra: Wow.

Elaine: Yeah. And was going to continue doing that until I got out.

Sandra: They just wanted you out. They had other plans for the space?

Elaine: And the space is currently occupied by a real ale place.

Sandra: Oh.

Elaine: Because that was the trend, so that's what they did.

Sandra: Oh.

Elaine: And-

Sandra: That's so sad. I'm so sorry.

Elaine: Yeah, it is sad because it's now gone from a place that was predominantly women to a place that's just predominantly male. But the community and the providers of space, if you want it, if you want it, then you've got to support it. Because the cost of life goes up.

Sandra: It does, yeah.

Elaine: And the cost of running a business goes up and it's such a niche market that when you want to transfer, when you're asking that niche market to support those increasing costs, then it's a lot to ask of them. But if you want it-

Sandra: That's what you have to do. That's the price you have to pay. Yeah.

Elaine: That's what you have to do. Yeah.

Sandra: So up until the time, 2008, was it still very heavily used or?

Elaine: Yes, it was used. It was used a lot. It was used a lot. It was a lot of fun. A lot of fun. A lot of fun. When you have blokes just wandering in off the streets, and then you have to tell them to-

Sandra: Leave.

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: So how would that go down?

Elaine: Most blokes were lovely.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: I remember a woman coming into the bar and she said, "Oh, oh, could I have a glass of wine?" And I said, "Certainly, madam." I told her about the bar, it's women only. "Oh, jolly good." Then her husband wandered in after her and she said, "George." And he looked at her, and she said, "Get out."

Sandra: Oh wow. What was doing George's reaction to that?

Elaine: He just spun around and left. She said, "Get away from me. Blah, blah, blah." It was just like, "Oh, wow."

Sandra: Wow, that's just so brilliant. Oh.

Elaine: Just lovely. Really just lovely. Just lovely.



Sandra: Oh, dear.

Elaine: And I remember this bloke came in and he said, "Could I use your toilet?" And at the time I had this petite bar lady called Sarah, and she said, "I'm afraid sir, you have to use public facilities in the station.: He said, "What, I can't use your toilet?" And she went, "No, this is a private members' club, so you have to use the facilities in the station." So he left.

Sandra: Excellent.

Elaine: And I thought, "Phew, well done Sarah." So I just went to the door because the door was open, it was a sunny evening. So, I went to the door and he just... Oh, man. He came back along. It. And then he said, "I want to use the toilets here." I said, "No, mate. This is private property. It's not a public space. You got told to go and use the facilities in the station. Go and do that. It's only 20p, I'll give you the 20p, just go."

Elaine: So he started to relieve himself next to the building. Then he threw his bag down on the floor, and he came up to me, and at that time I used to wear a hat, and he said, "Remove your hat." And I said, "Well, sir. It's not going to get you into the bar, if I have my hat on or off. You've already weed, go away." And then he squared up.

Sandra: He wanted to fight you?

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Oh, what an arsehole.

Elaine: And all these women, all femme, skirts the lot, came to my side. The butches were somewhere over there.

Sandra: How interesting.

Elaine: And they stood with their arms folded across like, "Come on. Bring it on."

Sandra: Just had to just slink off.

Elaine: Yes, he did. He did. He just disappeared and he almost got hit by a bus as he was crossing the road. But, it was just so funny.

Sandra: Wow. Yeah, I could imagine it would really upset some men.

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: But, such is life. Such is life. It's a great story. Okay. Okay. Okay. So... Oh, one question I didn't ask you is, how did you recognise other like you? We were going back a bit. Have we covered that?

Elaine: How did I recognise others like me?

Sandra: Yeah.

Elaine: Other lesbians?

Sandra: As lesbians, yeah.

Elaine: Well back in the days, my gaydar was shit. Seriously shit. And, also you had... So, it was the Greenham Common movement.

Sandra: Right.

Elaine: And it was also fashionable to look like you were poor.

Sandra: Oh, right. Okay.

Elaine: So, you had certain areas of work where women traditionally went into, and had to wear skirts and tights and high-heel shoes, and stuff like that.

Sandra: Reception work.

Elaine: Yeah, reception work, secretary work. And a lot of lesbians they thought, "Don't want to do that." I want to be a carpenter, I want to be a plumber, or something like that. And to get that kind of work was quite hard. And to get it regularly enough, there again was quite tricky. So, lesbians earnings during that period was quite low, on a whole. Not every single lesbian, on a whole. And then you had this... During the '80s and early '90s, this fashion to have short hair, wear check shirts, and dungarees and just look like you were homeless. So, you couldn't tell.

Sandra: You couldn't really tell?

Elaine: You couldn't tell. Everybody looked like a dyke and that was it, even the boys.

Sandra: So, there wasn't really a femme, butch thing going on?

Elaine: There was a femme butch. But the femme butch in terms of the butch looking smart. Tie, short hair and the girl all dollied up, that was dying.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: That was dying.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: That was being replaced by Mr Byrite. And everybody looked like Mr Byrite. Jeans and checked shirts. That's where you bought your street clothes from.

Sandra: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I remember the shop. I remember the shop.

Elaine: Millets and Mr Byrite.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: So, everybody was looking like that. And if you were girlie, I can remember going to the bookshop straight from the city, when I used to work as an accountant. And in the winter I wore a trouser suit, in the summer I wore a skirt suit. I walked into the bookshop, I had a brief case and skirt suit on, and this girl said to me, "What's with the skirt?" I thought, "Wow."

Sandra: Is this, Gay's the Word?

Elaine: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sandra: Okay. It's a bit confrontational.

Elaine: "What's with the skirt?" I thought, "No way, it's just a skirt." It's a nice skirt.

Sandra: I like the skirt. Okay. All right.

Elaine: It was difficult. I found it difficult. I don't know about anybody else, but I found it difficult to identify other gay women. I think it wasn't really until I ran my bar, my gaydar sharpened, a lot. Absolutely. So it's lot... And even now, where gay women are so different. I find it easier to clock a gay, even a femme gay, very easy to clock one, and say, "Yeah, you're gay."

Sandra: I think it's an acquired skill really. Yeah.

Elaine: Yeah, it is. It is.

Sandra: [inaudible 00:45:17] yeah. Okay. Thank you for that. So, you mentioned Greenham Common. We've gone over engagement with political campaigns, but was there any major figures or political movements that inspired you?

Elaine: No.

Sandra: No?

Elaine: No. It's a situation that inspires me.

Sandra: Right.

Elaine: That's what inspires me. It's when I see something that's wrong, and then I think, "Something needs to be done about it." Then I'm very vocal about it.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: I don't necessary ascribe or join an organisation in order to do that. Particularly now, I just do it.

Sandra: Okay. Okay. Direct action.

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Okay, cool. Okay. My next question is, how did you relate to the wider LGBT community? We've covered that I think.

Elaine: That's a difficult one, because I don't feel that I necessarily fit in. I know people see me as a pillar of the community, but I never really felt totally understood by the community. Because you have this black woman, creating history. This is my last year of the Glass Bar. So, I've been doing it for 25 years, so this is my final year.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: So, I used to say to people, "Every day I do the Glass Bar, I'm making history, every day."

Sandra: That's right. That's right.

Elaine: So, you're in a world where whatever you do as a black person, is never really going to be good enough. And that's a very strong statement to make, but it's also a very true statement. I'm not saying that the individuals that I've touched, do not appreciate or value what I've done. They do.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: But on the whole-

Sandra: Wider society.

Elaine: The wider society-

Sandra: I hear you. I hear you. I hear you. Okay. That's a sobering thought, really.

Elaine: Yeah. And then you go to the black lesbian community, the people of colour community have an amazing way of showing their appreciation. But they also have an amazing of pointing out, "But, ah, well what do you actually do for the black community?" And I'm thinking, "I'm doing it every day. Watch me. Every day. Every day. Every time I do something, it's a black face that's doing it. So I'm doing it. I'm showing you, I'm demonstrating, what more do you want?"

Sandra: Blood.

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Yeah. No, I hear that. Okay. So yeah, that makes sense.

Elaine: But you have individuals who really do appreciate what I do. So, sometimes it's like, "You're just not black enough." And other times it's just like, "Well. You're too black."

Sandra: So you can't win for losing?

Elaine: Exactly. And so, I just walk my own path and those who join me on that path, so that's great. I'm blessed. And those who want to get off that path then, "I've enjoyed your company whilst you've been with me. And it's been a blast." And that's how I look at it. I just can't be bothered with that petty, "You're too black. You're too white. You're too this, you're too that." It's like, "Oh. Go and have a shit or find a clitoris. One of the two."

Sandra: Yeah. I think that you're... Or if you're just doing you, is probably the best and healthiest way to manage that situation.

Elaine: Yeah. Otherwise you would just disappear.

Sandra: You'd go mad, you can't please everyone.

Elaine: Mm.

Sandra: Mm. Okay. All right. Okay. So, okay. So tell me something of how the lesbian music scene developed, and where we are now?

Elaine: The lesbian music scene has always been good. Has always, always been good. If anytime you want to do anything with DJs, forget the boys, forget them. They have no clue. They honestly, they have no idea. Just get yourself a bank of lesbian DJs. I have no idea what musical taste has got to do with your clitoris, but it just-

Sandra: There's some kind of correlation.

Elaine: There's some kind of connection. We visit it, all the time. All the time. I am just totally blown away and amazed at the number of DJs we have, how brilliant they all are. How they really educate the lesbians on music. And how the lesbian community on the whole, really appreciates that. It's just... because I run Pout, which is a club night. I haven't don't it for some time now, but it's a club night and it does lots of cheesy music, a lot of disco and stuff like that.

Elaine: But then I link up with lots of other people who do different genres and it's just amazing, how people would just bring in lots of different types of music, and just make it so much fun. So entertaining. I think we are the best people to have as DJs. If it's not a lesbian, do not employ it.

Sandra: Okay. Yeah, okay. Cool. Okay. So, next question. The '67 Sexual Offenses Act was specifically directed towards gay men, but did you feel the impact of this and successive legislation? What legal changes have made the most impact on women in the community in your opinion?

Elaine: I think the clause 28, when it came in. That made a huge impact under Thatcher. Or Section 28... Whatever it's called.

Sandra: It was section... Yeah, yeah.

Elaine: Because that included lesbians. Lesbians were free to just say...

Sandra: You can't see me.

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Amen.

Elaine: So that suddenly brought lesbians into the political arena. And we were very, very active. But we have always been active. Because we have a greater sense of community, I think, in terms of the wider LGBTQ community. There are some lesbians who want to be separatists, but you know what, they go buy themselves a piece of land in Wales and go live there. There is. There is a place.

Sandra: Really?

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: It actually exists?

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Oh, wow.

Elaine: Yeah. In Wales called Women's Land. So...

Sandra: I'm making notes here.

Elaine: I've been there twice.

Sandra: What's it like?

Elaine: Horrid. I don't like it.

Sandra: You don't like it?

Elaine: No. Not because there's no men. Not because there's no men.

Sandra: Okay, we're...

Elaine: We'll talk some more later.

Sandra: ... tangent... Yeah. Yeah.

Elaine: Yeah, so-

Sandra: Section 28. Yeah, Section 28.

Elaine: Yeah, so Section 28 had a massive impact on lesbians, because we were dragged into this political arena. And we fought against Section 28. And then when it was repealed, that was the best thing that's happened. And obviously when the civil partnership, act came in. That was a good step, in the right direction, and marriage. And obviously the adoption, being able to adopt. Yeah, things like that.

Sandra: Yeah, that's all good.

Elaine: And the law under Blair, where you can't discriminate with your services when you're selling stuff. So, that was good as well.

Sandra: Okay, that's great. Thank you. Okay. So, have you had personal experiences of the impact of change in attitudes? How does life now compare to 50 years ago, in your day to day dealings with people and organisations? Do you feel more free to be active within the community now?

Elaine: 50 years ago, I think 50 years ago we were tighter. We were a much tighter community because we had a common enemy. And the common enemy was very visible. Very visible. Even, I would say, well yeah, 25 years ago it was very, very visible. If somebody wanted to be homophobic to you, they could be homophobic and get away with it. Now, it's harder in theory, it's harder. If you push the police a lot they will investigate. But you have to push them a lot because they have limited resources.

Elaine: Being out generally, I've always been out. I've never really had to hide. I have got a face that says, "Fuck off." When I walk down the street, so people don't really bother me.

Sandra: I can relate.

Elaine: I don't get...I think on one occasion, some bloke, some skinny little runt tried to do something, I put him on the ground. No, I just have a, don't give a shit, attitude. I don't care about your opinions. You can exchange them with me, and if I have the time of day, I might listen to them. I might not. But usually, if anybody says anything, I just keep on walking and just ignore them.

Sandra: Good. Good. So what you're saying basically is that-

Elaine: It is easier to be out now. It's easier to come out, it's easier to be out at work, on a whole. There are still certain industries where it's harder, or you've got to be quiet about it. I work for TFL, I'm out. I stamp lesbian on every single piece of document [crosstalk 00:56:58]. I even have a stamp that just says lesbian.

Sandra: I love it.

Elaine: The only thing that I get accused of being... I get mistaken for, is a Christian.

Sandra: Oh, really?

Elaine: Yeah.

Sandra: Why on earth?

Elaine: Because I have my hair natural.

Sandra: I don't get that.

Elaine: I get it. I get it. I get, "You're a Christian, aren't you?" It's like, "No." Because I don't wear make up and you have your hair natural. It's like, "No, I'm not." Have you been to church lately?

Sandra: No.

Elaine: The last time I went to church, was at somebody's wedding.

Sandra: Everybody has a weave.

Elaine: They have weaves, they have a skirt up to here, high heels.

Sandra: Long talons. [crosstalk 00:57:45].

Elaine: Yeah. Make up, jewelry, bling, bling, bling. All the same, it's like, "Which church do you go to?"

Sandra: That's very strange. Very, very, strange. Yeah, that's so weird. Okay.

Elaine: Yeah, they say, "Do you believe in God?" I say, "No."

Sandra: Not like you do, anyway. Okay. Okay. So, are there any issues that you feel we haven't discussed that you would like to raise now?

Elaine: I think the racism within in the LGBT community is something that needs to be addressed.

Sandra: Okay.



Elaine: Because we used to have this strong sisterhood. And now, it's so fractured. So we've almost gone back. And I know you have to take a few steps back in order to leap forward, but we've gone so far back, there doesn't seem to be any movement forward. So, it's nice to have a group that represents black and Asian, basically non-white LGBTQ plus, it's great, because you need that empowerment. But there doesn't seem to be any coming together of various groups, to perform one comprehensive, loving, caring community. There isn't anymore.

Elaine: You have people hating trans, trans hating others, and others, it's just so sad. And then you've got your disabled people within... And it's like, "Well, you can have gay people who are disabled." It's just like, "Hello."

Sandra: Yes. Yeah. [crosstalk 00:59:36].

Elaine: We've got too many fractures within our community and those gaps are getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And there doesn't seem to be anything to pull us together to be a tighter unit, because, we cannot divide like this. Because once you start to splinter then that's when other groups will start picking you off. Pitting you against each other, and picking you off. And they'll do that in the name of limited resources. And really, it's not about limited resources.

Elaine: It's about old values, that you're not worth, you are not worth the effort. You are not worth the time of day if you've been attacked, if you've raped, if you've been beaten. You are not worth it.

Sandra: Yeah. So, you're talking about divide and conquering aren't you? And... Yeah, a fractured community is not a strong community, is it?

Elaine: No. And we need to get back to that. We need to get back to that sense of community.

Sandra: So, what do you think about the creation of Black Pride, for example. Have you got an opinion on that?

Elaine: Black Pride is necessary. Absolutely necessary. Phyll is an absolutely amazing woman.

Sandra: Lady Phyll.

Elaine: So proud of that girl.

Sandra: She is awesome.

Elaine: She is awesome. She is awesome. She is a force. But, I would say that if she wasn't there, what would happen to that community? I see her as the pin that holds all the corners of that community together. That's how I see her. That's how strong she is. What happens if she's not around?

Sandra: That's a very good question.

Elaine: Where's the voice. There needs to be other voices. There needs to be other voices. Voices that can speak as passionately, and as fearlessly as she does. There needs to be other voices. Because at the moment, she is all we have. She is the public face.

Sandra: Yes.

Elaine: There are no other public faces.

Sandra: Yeah, I see she has a committee and I don't know that much about it, but the faces seem to change quite often, so you may have a very good point there. That is something to think about, yeah. Okay, so what advice would you give to the young lesbians, gays. Lesbians, let's just focus on us. Lesbians.

Elaine: Make friends. Make friends. I would say, that's the first thing to do. You can fuck as much as you like, but make friends.

Sandra: Okay. I think-

Elaine: No, seriously. Have casual sex, left right and centre, but make deep meaningful friendships. Friendships that you know will be around in your 30s in your 40s in your 50s. Don't sleep with your friends. That's the other.

Sandra: Okay.

Elaine: I'm quite lucky, I never slept with my friends.

Sandra: Okay. Okay.

Elaine: So that's what I would say, "Have casual sex. Make deep meaningful friendships. Do not sleep with them." The friends.

Sandra: Okay. All right.

Elaine: Because it's nice to have friends around and they're just there. When you need them, you pick up that phone and you say, "I need help." Or, "I'm going through this horrible situation." And they're there for you. And also, your life changes. Your friends end up in different places. Probably high up in the council or a senior partner of this, or whatever. And they're in the right place, at the right time, when you need that support. If you don't have deep meaningful friendships, you're just stuffed. You're on your own. Every time you break up with a partner, you've got nobody to talk to. Nobody to go out clubbing with, or anything like that.

Sandra: Very good point. Yeah.

Elaine: What people do is they get into relationships and it's just them and that person. And that's it. They have no friends, they forget their friends.

Sandra: It's a mistake. It's a mistake. Yeah.

Elaine: It's a huge mistake, don't forget your friends. Keep in touch with your friends.

Sandra: Okay, well I think that's a good place to end. Thank you very much.

Elaine: It's a pleasure.

Sandra: It's been a great pleasure listening to you and speaking with you today, Elaine. Thank you.

Elaine: My pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.