From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
Name: Sally Knocker	**Date:** 30.08.2019 **Age:** 54
Key issues: Religion, Greenham, Section 28, Lesbian parenthood, older LGBT+ in care, gay marriage.	
Narrative summary Sally's parents divorced when she was young and she went to boarding school where she had 'pashes' on other girls, but these didn't stop as expected in her teen years. She tried dating, not unsuccessfully, but developed strong feelings for a woman at university in Exeter which was problematic. The woman was a feminist wanting to relate to other women, but not truly wanting a romantic or sexual connection. She became involved in many political campaigns at uni such as anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid. She was very conflicted about being gay, partly due to very strong religious feelings as a young woman and identified as bisexual at the time. She still considers herself as bisexual, but homo-erotic as she can find men attractive, but her emotional connections are always with women. During the eighties she was deeply involved in many causes: Greenham Common (where she began to understand women's empowerment), gay rights, animal rights, anti- racism and Section 28. She recalls the aggression on a Section 28 march caused by heavy police tactics, whereas most marches were peaceful. She also remembers the early Pride marches, feeling safe and the solidarity. In her 30's Sally was longing to have a child, but was unable to become pregnant and her partner had a baby girl. She talks about being 'pioneers' as a lesbian couple in this situation and about being able to parent in a 50/50 way without the gender stereotyped roles. It was hard work and she sometimes felt on the outside as the non biological parent, but nothing undermined her love for her daughter and they are very close. Currently she works a lot in the care sector for older people. She runs the first Rainbow Café for LGBT+ people affected by dementia and does training around raising awareness of the needs of LGBT+ in the care system. She worries about vulnerable older people, particularly the trans community. Finally she talks about her personal journey from being against marriage as a feminist to going beyond the political to enjoy the equality that this represents with her wife now.	
	Length of interview: 1 hr 5 mins

Mandy: Here we go. Okay. So, this is an interview.

Sally: It's going, isn't it? Yeah.

Mandy: Yeah. This is an interview for From a Whisper to a Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors, London and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is the 30th of August, 2019, and I'm interviewing Sally Knocker. So, Sally, can you start by telling me a little bit about your early life and how you came to an understanding of who you are?

Sally: Yes. So, I lived between London and Hampshire because my parents were divorced when I was young, but I was actually born in Africa. And in my teens, well, I went to boarding school. I had quite a tricky time at boarding school. I found it quite hard. A really typical sort of old fashioned girls boarding school. In the 'Sloane Ranger Handbook' Downe House girls were "nice girls, sweet girls, straight girls" (!?) lacrosse and 'jolly hockey sticks' type feel to it.

And in my early teens I had a huge passion, crush, whatever, they used to call crushes in those days, or 'pashes', on a girl. And at boarding school it was very much acceptable to have a pash. You made their beds, gave them gifts and things. It was really in the Dark Ages type feel. And so, it was sort of allowed and encouraged to do that. In fact, that's what you did. When you first came to the school at 11, you would have somebody you chose as a pash, and I basically fell madly enough with this older girl.

And what was difficult for me about it was that at about 13, you were then supposed to stop that. And, of course, well, for me it didn't stop! It didn't. Everyone else grew out of it, and I was still very, very besotted. I've got a book that was devoted to her. I used to copy her clothes and, yeah, total adoration. And it was tricky because she was a

daughter of friends of my parents, my dad and step mum. So, we used to go on holidays together in the school holidays, and so, of course, I'm starry-eyed.

And so, at about 14, I thought, "Oh, I've really got to try and straighten myself out a bit." And in my book it used to say things like, "Well, I love her but not in **that** way." I was talking myself out of it the whole time. And I actually dated her brother, which was quite funny because I was obviously trying to convince myself that this really wasn't a thing. And, of course, the brother was not going to live up to Nicky at all!

And I then went to six form college and had a quite serious relationship with a guy for two years, which was lovely, a really positive relationship, actually. And so thought, obviously, that my feelings for Nicky had just been a stage. I went to university at 19 in Exeter, in Devon, and joined Nightline, which is like a helpline for students. I always was very passionate about causes. I was chair of the Uni Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and involved in anti-apartheid. And, obviously, in those kinds of very political groups I met quite a lot of gay people, very openly gay people. But at that stage, again, I was dating a guy.

And at Nightline I met, interestingly, a Canadian woman. That's just come back to me. A very tall, very dykey Canadian woman who slightly scared me. She was very out and proud and a bit older than me and, yeah, very political. And I remember waking up one morning, having had a really sexual dream about this woman, thinking, "Oh my God, where did that come from?"

And then following that, I met, again on the Nightline and through the political groups I was in, a really lovely women called Cariad. Again, I have memories of meeting her on the hill in the university campus, and she was wearing a hippy anorak, and she was very artsy and hippy, and is still a very dear friend, actually. I had supper with her two nights ago. And gradually, over the period of months following that, I fell very in love with her.

But it was a very difficult relationship because, essentially, she was heterosexual and just dabbling. So, there was all the pain and angst of really wanting a relationship with someone, and she was kind of wanting it from a feminist perspective but not really wanting a romantic or sexual relationship. So, it was a difficult time, actually, those first few years because I didn't choose well, really. I fell for someone who actually wasn't going to give me what I needed.

I was quite religious in my early life and talked about being a nun which, again, is an interesting dimension as a gay woman. And so, stupidly went to my local vicar in the village that I lived in in Hampshire with my mum, and he was just awful, the stereotypical, "It's because your parents were divorced, and if you pray hard enough, you'll be cured…"

Mandy: Oh, gosh. How old were you then, when you went to him?

Sally: Well, it was when I was first having really serious feelings for Cariad,-

Mandy: Right.

Sally: ... so about 19. And, yeah, I mean, he's now a Bishop or something. I feel like writing to him and saying, "Thanks very much for that wonderful religious solace." So, it's always given me a real ambivalence around the church and faith, because I do consider myself a very spiritual person, but less so a religious person now. So, that was a very difficult time.

And then in my later life, move forward about 10 years, um..actually no, longer than that because it was when we were trying to have a baby, my stepmother rejected me for religious reasons as well.

Mandy: Right.

Sally: So, there's been these big rejections in my life linked to the church. And I was really close to my step mum. She was like my second mum, and she was my trendy mum in London, and she was in my life since I was about seven. So, that's been really hard, that actually losing a close family member basically because we were going to have a child. She was kind of okay about being gay, but the-

Mandy: Oh, it was having a child.

Sally: ... having a child thing. She had problems with her own fertility, et cetera. I think there was just some trigger for her about the fact that, as lesbian women, we could somehow do some things that had been difficult for her.

So, yeah, a difficult ongoing ambivalence around the church and my faith. And then following the relationship with Cariad, which as I say, was a turbulent and kind of university years kind of angst, I met an older woman. Again, another close friend still, a classic lesbian thing, friends with all of these lovely women still, who was about 12 years older and very sorted in her sexuality. And it was just what I needed, really, to have a really nice, uncomplicated loving lesbian relationship.

And through the last year of my university she had a really cool flat, and I got nurtured by her. It was a bit of a stereotypical mother figure type relationship, I guess, but really, really lovely. Not big passion, but really solid and lovely.

Mandy: And what difference do you think that made to you in terms of your own identity, having that relationship at that point?

Sally: It just, yeah, made me feel less of the guilt and less of the angst. There was a lot of homophobia, actually, that I had to deal with, I think. And being with someone who was relaxed about their own sexuality was just very important for me at that stage in my life because, yeah, I still wasn't entirely there with feeling comfortable with it.

And I identified quite strongly as bisexual during that time. There was a bit of me that said, "I'm not going to be entirely lesbian." So, when I came to London I got very

involved, and I was thinking about this last night in terms of the archives, that I was very involved in the London Bisexual Movement, which was a really cool, quite active group at that time.

And we met at The Fallen Angel in Islington. I can't remember what night we met. So, I was one of the founder members of that, the bisexual group.

Mandy: Oh, okay.

Sally: I met some really nice men and women. So, my bi-identity at that point was quite powerful. I was very strongly identified as bisexual at that point in my life, and did have a few flings with guys, particularly in reaction to Cariad, I think. Although since the relationship with Chris, the older woman in Devon, I've not had any other relationships with men. So, I think the bisexual identity is still something that I can identify with because I feel like it is about loving a person. But, obviously, in reality the majority of my life has been very identified as lesbian.

Mandy: You've said that it was very important having that... [noise interrupting]

Sally: It's getting louder, isn't it?

Mandy: It's getting louder. I'll tell you what-

Sally: Do you want to play it back a little bit?

Mandy: ... I'll just stop it for a minute.

Mandy: So, you said that you were having to deal with quite a bit of homophobia around the time when you got involved with, was it Chris?

Sally: Chris.

Mandy: Your older lover?

Sally: Yeah.

Mandy: Can you tell me a bit more about how that homophobia showed up? What kind of things were you aware of?

Sally: I think it was just internal. That's what I mean.

Mandy: Right. Oh, okay.

Sally: Yeah. I think I just wasn't comfortable with being lesbian. And actually, interestingly, I really feel it's only been to some extent with my lover now, that I've really feel

comfortable in my own skin. It's really interesting because I went on all these pride marches and I was really political and in a strange kind of way, particularly through having a really good sexual relationship, I think wow, I'm finally really comfortable with who I am. So, it's been a bit of a longer process than I thought because everyone who knows me would say, "Well, she's been out and proud and whatever for many years." But I think it is a process and I don't know what the internal homophobia is about. I think it is about... My mum has been fine, my dad was basically fine. But there's always that niggle sometimes that somehow you've disappointed. Particularly as an only child, there's a lot of onus to live a particular life. Even though, as I say, I think broadly, my mum's been pretty good about it.

It's really hard to know where homophobia comes from isn't it? Because it sort of manifests itself in little ways. I suppose it's, all in my friendship group mainly straight, doing the sort of conventional weddings and having 2.2 kids and particularly and quite an upper-middle class family upbringing. I was the sort of pink sheep of the family a little bit and yeah, it's hard to place why you give yourself a hard time. There is something there about actually somehow feeling outside and there's part of me that loved being outside. One of the things that's great about being gay in some ways and perhaps happening less so now with the younger community being less divided, is the outside feeling is actually kind of special.

Yeah, I mean there's a sort of rebel part of me that wants to be on the fringes of it and on the vanguard, particularly with all the sort of political stuff that I was doing and Greenham particularly where I spent a bit of time was an amazing feeling of all these women from all walks of life and different ages and it was a really exciting time as well. You did feel you were shaping history but there was a sense of urgency around the world being in a very difficult place. I remember thinking that a nuclear bomb might really come. That time in the sort of eighties was energising... and then obviously with Thatcher and all of that, there was just such an urgency around everything that we did to try and make the world a better place.

Mandy: Yeah. So, I guess one of my questions was about that kind of, what were your political influences? What did you engage with? You talked about heading up the bi group?

Sally: Yeah. Yeah.

Mandy: And being involved with Greenham.

Sally: Yeah.

Mandy: And around what time in your life...?

Sally: And all the Section 28 campaign. I've got a picture of being on that demonstration and I've quite a few friends who were teachers, who were obviously very directly affected by that. So, there was a feeling politically that, yeah, in the whole Thatcher years that we were under attack, our freedoms were really being more and more violated. And I think going to Exeter University was actually great in one way because it was quite a

conservative university, so it made me even more political. I might have gone to Sussex University where it was already really radical and probably been really lazy, but because I was in quite a conservative university with a lot of private school kids with a strong sense of privilege and entitlement..

Mandy: There was something to push against.

Sally: It gave me quite a focus. And I think there's a slightly jokey cartoon of me in the university magazine, which I can show you, which says, "Sally needs a moped to get from one good work to the other and she's got all her badges." I've got a collection of badges with me here that sort of tell the story. And I think if I was to have a memory box and I do a lot of work in older people's care, I would definitely have my badges because they're a great way of showing what I was passionate about. You can see the progression. 'There's Tip over Patriarchy', 'Stop Sexist Ads'..

Mandy: And what sort of period are these from?

Sally: That's the pride march. It's '94.

Mandy: Oh, that's Pride '94.

Sally: And then Abseil Against Section 28, I'm one of those Common Women from Greenham, Love is a Human Right, the Future is Female, You can't sink a Rainbow, (that was the Green Peace movement), Fur Coats are worn by Beautiful Animals and Ugly People. So, the animal rights stuff was big for me at that time. Young Lovers Against the Bomb. I think I've got the bisexual group one here somewhere. There's one of the pink triangles from obviously another country. I don't know whether that's Dutch, is it Dutch, is it pink So yeah, you can see the range. Oh, here's the London Bisexual Group badge. And again, if we put that on the website, it's basically for those... obviously you can't see it here, there's a circle and obviously there's the women symbol and the men symbol coming out of it, and the sort of yin-yang kind of symbol. So, that was our London Bisexual Group badge.

Mandy: That was your particular design? Fantastic.

Sally: So, all these badges tell a story really, don't they? Boycott Homophobia….

Mandy: I'd love to take a photograph of these if I may at the end.

Sally: Yeah. We could do a whole sort of stories around those.

Mandy: Yeah. Let's do that.

Sally: There's the good old two. We all know this one, it's the two women symbols interlocked. So, I was very politically motivated and that gave a real energy to my sort of

young twenties I think, being passionate about, yeah, trying to make the world a better place as I said earlier. And being a lesbian was part of that, I suppose. But it was multidimensional in terms of the peace movement, animal rights, anti-racism, anti-apartheid. All of these things to me really interlinked because it was about people who were in any way marginalised or persecuted. And I really hope that continues, that we make the links. Because I think sometimes there's a sense that there can be factions between different political groups.

Mandy: So, that's interesting because I wonder whether that perspective that everything was linked was shared by everybody that you were working with at that time politically or whether you encounter people having different perspectives or views?

Sally: Yeah, it's a good question. I mean, I think the hope was that people who were fighting against racism would also fight against homophobia, etc., but it doesn't necessarily work like that does it? I remember one Pride march, I don't know whether you remember this one. We had to for some reason go through to Brockwell Park through Brixton. Were you on that one?

Mandy: Yeah.

Sally: And it did have a slightly more nervous feel, because of the potential antipathy, although I don't know whether that was more perceived than real, because I don't actually remember, but there were a few people on the streets looking at us in a sort of slightly less friendly feel. And I remember feeling sad about that thinking, obviously Brixton with a very big black community, West Indian particularly, you would hope... And certainly, historically there's quite lot of connections with the Caribbean community and gay clubs and things. But I remember at the time that march feeling a little bit uneasy. On one level, it was really nice to be in South London and Brockwell Park and everything, but thinking, ooh, is it entirely safe for us here? And that's probably one of the few pride marches where I remember that feeling. I was at the first one in Kennington Park, which was tiny. I mean, Kennington Park is a really small park near Oval. Were you at that one?

Mandy: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sally: Where literally, there was only a few thousand of us, weren't there? That felt like a time of really relatively small beginnings, and then fast forward 10 years and we couldn't fit into Hyde Park, could we or were spilling over? And I miss the times where Pride had a real end place. Now, obviously there are speakers in Trafalgar Square and things, but you can't fit that many people in and I do miss the sense of a coming together in a really big place that those big park events had, whereas I mean now Pride is more just the march and then you all filter away, don't you? But yeah, those early pride marches were awesome.

Mandy: What was it about them that was so great?

Sally: Just this amazing sense of solidarity and power of being with loads of people and holding hands with your girlfriend and not feeling scared to do so... but yeah, you were slightly invincible, because of being in such a large group.

Mandy: So, did it feel different holding hands with your girlfriend at Pride from how it felt in regular life?

Sally: Yes. I would have definitely been less able to do that on the tube, for example. I still, occasionally see younger lesbians being really physically affectionate on the tube and I think, ooh, I don't know whether I would do that... I'm doing it slightly more with my new lover because we're so in love but I'm not very into sorts of public displays of affection really in public anyway. But yeah, I'm more likely now to hold hands. But, yeah on Pride you feel like you've got this safety in numbers really, isn't it? And I do remember on the tube a couple of times though getting a few sort of religious rants on the way to Pride. One woman came up and said, "I think it's disgusting," and having a sort of a rant at us. She was quite brave really to do it with a whole basically train full of gay people!"

So yeah, they were fun times and sort of picnicking together. And I remember each year I used to buy a different t-shirt. So again, I've got a few of those left. Like '8 out of 10 Cats prefer Lesbians' and these random t-shirts. So, over the years getting the year one. So, I did pretty much go to most of the Prides I suppose from the eighties right through to the nineties. I go less so now. What's been interesting in recent years, is I've got a daughter as I mentioned and for about five years, Gay Pride clashed with my daughter's school fair in July.

Mandy: Oh, no.

Sally: But at one level I thought well this is perhaps significant that maybe I'm making more of a difference by being two lesbian mums at the school fair running the brick-a-brac stall than I am being on a pride march because at my daughter's school we were very out, I suppose because we were the only lesbian moms. It's not like staying in Stoke Newington where you are, we really were 'the only gays in the village'. I guess we did in a sense shape some attitudes and quite a few of the parents in that period said, "Well, it's been really good for our kids to see a really positive lesbian family." They didn't say it in a patronising way. They said it in a really nice way that our children have grown up with Meg with two mums and that some of their children would come back and go, "I want two mummies, why haven't I got them?" That's a lovely turnaround.

Mandy: There are different ways of being an activist.

Sally: Exactly. And that was the message for me as I stood there on that brick-a-brack stall thinking, I could be on the Pride march, but no, this is okay, I'm good with this!

Mandy: Can we go back to Greenham?

Sally: Yes.

Mandy: I'm guessing that that was before you became a mum, is that right?

Sally: So, in the eighties. I was struggling with remembering the years. I mean I was a very much a part-time Greenham woman in the sense that I think the most I stayed was one night. So, there was this slight division between those who were there full time. Did you ever go?

Mandy: I had a friend who lived there and I was a very occasional visitor.

Sally: Exactly. So, you did feel slightly that you were coming nicely clean looking and from your lovely warm houses with the shower. Although having said that, lots of the women I think welcomed having people bringing some food and that was the time when I was with Cariad, the woman who I was really in love with, who was not lesbian but was kind of playing I guess with the idea of it at that point or at least exploring her sexuality. And so there was some pictures to show you of cutting the fences and doing large 'sit-ins'. The relationships with the police were quite interesting. A few of them are really lovely and really nice. And then there were some who were clearly, I don't know, just sort of exerting their power in not such a good way.

I remember being arrested once just for lying down on the ground and spending quite a few hours in a police van, which was quite intimidating. We didn't get arrested or anything, but there was a fear. But the main feeling for me around that time was just so many women together and lots of lesbian women. And again, this passion for, there was a real passion for trying to prevent this horror of nuclear decimation, which really felt very real. It's hard looking back at it now, because I'm not sure that I would, now I'd analyse it and think, well, was it really real? But it felt at the time that we had to do this, otherwise there wasn't going to be a future. And I love the fact that it was driven by lots of feminists and I was quite late to feminism in a way. So, it was a part of my awakening about the power of women, the ability to collectively make this incredible statement.

I don't think it lasted very many years, now I look back at it. Was it about three or four years? I can't remember. Yeah, you don't know.

Mandy: Greenham, I don't know. That sounds right to me.

Sally: I remember going probably three or four times over two years and I've got pictures of me and sitting down and doing basically, these big sit downs and things. We also went to Molesworth. There were other peace camps that I was a part of. One of them, I think it was Molesworth, was in the snow, so it was really cold. So, we were all dressed up in really, really warm clothes. Yeah, that I think was when we were trying to block the roads and prevent people getting into the camps to go to work and quite scary because you have these big trucks coming towards you and police in quite big groups.

And it was the same with the Section 28 march. That was scary because they were people on horses. We got quite hemmed in, quite frightened. It was the only time, because I was really strong on peace activism, I joke about this a bit because the women that were with me at the time, I got really angry and quite aggressive with these police

and shouting and everyone was going, "So much for the ‘eye for an eye makes the whole world blind’ thing." The sense of crowd fear made me quite angry because the police were just hemming us in with their helmets and stampeding us, they really dealt with it very badly, which made everyone just more reactive. So, we all got more angry.

That was a particularly scary march, the Section 28 one, as far as I recall because it actually attracted quite a lot of conflict. Most marches I've been on are very strongly peaceful. But I think Section 28 brought in elements of, I guess, thugs who just wanted a bit of the action in a sense as well. So, there was a slightly more nasty element.

Mandy: as part of the march, you mean?

Sally: They sabotaged the peaceful march emphasis and that's happened on a few marches I've been on, where for whatever reason, there've just been some people who are out for a bit of a fight, maybe drinks involved, maybe drugs involved. I don't know, but that was a march I remember particularly being more frightening than positive.

Mandy: Right.

Sally: Yeah.

Mandy: So, I just got a bit distracted by the noise.

Sally: I'm thinking that.

Mandy: Let's just stop for a moment.

Sally: My daughter is really close to all my exes. Her favourite women are my ex-partners. And it's almost uncanny, she obviously has the same taste in women as I have! But literally her three favourite women are my ex-partners. I think it's funny.

Mandy: Isn't it? Well, I wanted to ask you a bit more about that kind of motherhood because that's obviously something that's been a very important part of your life, and you said that it created that breakdown with the relationship with your stepmum.

Sally: Yeah. Yeah.

Mandy: So obviously being a mother has been something that's been really important in your life-

Sally: It's a choice, but it's a sacrifice. Yeah.

Mandy: Yeah. So tell me-

Sally: Are we on? Do you want to-

Mandy: We're on, yeah. So tell me a bit more about your kind of journey towards becoming mother, if that's okay.

Sally: So yeah, I became very, sort of post 30, really obsessed with being a parent, and it was actually probably one of the most painful times of my life. Because between about 31 and 37 I was trying to get pregnant. All my friends were having babies, and it was just all consuming. I was fixated. It was the absolute classic kind of obsession, really, with being a mum. And I think it was actually quite detrimental to my relationship with my ex-partner who I was with for nearly 29 years, because we lost focus on each other as a couple and became sort of slightly obsessed with the whole parenting thing. She did it more for me, but in the end, anyway, she had to have the baby because I couldn't get pregnant. That was fine and lovely that she could do that for me although she never particularly biologically wanted to have a baby. One of the advantages of having a two-women relationship is we had a second option if you like. We did it with a donor in the end, although we did try with a friend for a while.

Yeah, it was a very difficult six years. I mean, I would say I was pretty depressed and hard to live with. Any people who have had problems with fertility will relate to that. And then, obviously, my stepmother rejected me as soon as she knew that Jackie was pregnant. She basically sent a letter saying, “I never want to see you again. It's wrong, against God”, and all of that kind of thing. And I haven't seen her since, so for 17 years. So it was a very mixed time and actually when Meg arrived, my daughter arrived, parenting was really hard. God, I just think there should be more health warnings to parents about the impact of it on lives, generally. I wasn't great with the lack of sleep, and she had lots of colic and all that kind of thing. It was really quite a difficult first two years, and after all those desperate years of wanting it and then suddenly you get it, and you feel quite guilty about the fact, you are not enjoying it as much as you imagined! You know, again, many parents relate to this, this ambivalence about you loving your child, it's the most amazing experience in the world, but it also really impacts on your life.

And Jackie, my partner, and I had had however long, 14 years of freedom and independence before Meg and we travelled all over the world. We'd been to New Zealand and South Africa and also lots of parties. We had the Ace of Clubs, which was in Piccadilly, really cool lesbian club in that time. So lots of music and fun and whatever, and then suddenly you have to be responsible for another human being. It's a wake up call and particularly when you do it in your late 30s which we were by then, aged 37. So I have memories of the joy of, particularly when Meg was a toddler, kind of being a parent that that age is amazing. All the joys of a little person growing and developing, but also some mixed times, in terms of how it impacts on your relationship as a couple. And I think many heterosexual couples could probably relate with that, too. That as soon as you start to focus on another human being, there's a real danger that you lose your way a little bit as a couple. And that certainly did happen to us, I think.

Mandy: And those are pressures for all parents, aren't they? And I wonder whether... What difference do you think it made that you were two women being parents together? Did that give you more support, less support, a mixture of the two?

Sally: I mean most of our heterosexual friends at the time were so jealous because Jackie and I shared the parenting completely. It was like 50/50. I mean we were almost, I wouldn't say pathologically because that sounds negative, but everything was shared in our partnership. It was an incredibly equal partnership, which was lovely. So we worked half time, we did half cooking, half the washing. It was a real, amazing partnership. And all my heterosexual women friends went, "Oh, God. Oh, to have that," you know, with most of them in quite traditional role division parenting situations. Some of my straight friends had to give up jobs and their husbands were the earners, and not exclusively, but there was a lot of that at the time. So actually I think, yeah, it is amazing parenting as two women in one way because there was less of that kind of role divide.

But I think there are issues. Again, I don't know whether other lesbian parents would relate to this about who's the biological mum and who isn't. My partner obviously had the baby in the end, and I was the one who actually really wanted to be the parent, and although during the pregnancy I didn't experience it terribly, I think there was some jealousy for me around breastfeeding and things that I was suddenly like the husband in the sense of being away from home more. I had to go back to work and she was off on maternity and in those days you wouldn't have got partner leave or anything. So I think it was tricky as a three and with hindsight I think we should probably have had a second child, actually, which would have balanced it out more. But as a three, and again, it's not exclusive to lesbian relationships, but maybe particularly more so with the lack of biological link with my daughter, I felt excluded sometimes. Although it doesn’t lessen my love for her, because I do see her totally as my daughter. She was born into my arms in hospital!

But I do think sometimes I've been a bit on the outside and even though in some ways I have the easier, less complicated parenting relationship, it's more intense between Jackie as the biological mum and Meg. And they are very deeply connected - there's a similarity between them. I'm the sort of extrovert in the family, and they're more not exactly introverted, that's the wrong way, but they're less outwardly sociable than me. So yeah, I think that's an interesting dynamic in lesbian relationships where there's one who's the biological parent. I don't know whether other women would relate to that, but it doesn't make you love your child any less, in the same way as your adopted child is just as close. But it does sometimes feel different. Yeah, sometimes affects me, I guess, that they are more linked somehow, more linked by something. Even just in looks. They're both blondes. Although, interestingly, my daughter is a little like me in some aspects, not like my ex-partner Jackie. So she is exactly the same height as me and people say sometimes they see mannerisms in her in the same way as you do with adopted children.

But yeah, it's an interesting experience being a parent in a lesbian relationship because there are no rules to it in one way. We were at that time quite unusual in our group of friends as most chose not to have kids... I mean, loads of gay women have, and gay men as well, have kids now, so it's less unusual. But I think when we were doing it, we were the pioneers.

Mandy: You were pretty unique. And I think you said at your daughter's school you were the only lesbian mums?

Sally: Only lesbian family. Although what was nice was there was a lesbian deputy head, which was really lovely. And her partner worked there as well. She was in charge of P.E. rather stereotypically. And they were very out in the primary school, which was really cool.

Mandy: And when was that?

Sally: Well, Meg's 16 now, so 13 years ago.

Mandy: Okay.

Sally: Well, yeah, 12 years ago. She was there from 4 till 11. So they were lovely, and we had chats in the playground and there was a bit of kind of gay bonding on that.

And actually we had a funny story where the deputy head did a session around gender stereotypes, you know, as you do in school, the school social and emotional education bit. I can't remember what they call it. So they did a session around gender and things and my daughter must've been about eight, and they said, "So what do boys like doing and what do girls like doing?" And my daughter replied, "Do you want the stereotypical things?" And Michelle, the teacher, came to me afterwards and said, "Check out the lesbian mum's daughter who's already got the feminist perspective!" She was really kind of hot on the feminist stuff at that point.

Mandy: You taught her well.

Sally: So yeah, she was very cool. It was just lovely that she was so open. Like her childminder got engaged to be married, and I remember my daughter saying, "Is it to a girl or to a boy?" So that lovely openness that, as you say, you're able to give a child is pretty cool. What's interesting at secondary school is she's become more reticent. But actually now, recently, she went to Pride for the first time this year in a long time. We used to take her when she was little, but this year she went on her own with her friends and she's got a lot of gay friends, a gay boyfriend particularly who she loves. But for a few years for her there was a kind of needing to play down having two mums. At primary school we used to go to events together. Secondary school when there were parenting things she only wanted one of us to go, and that was quite hard. We had to respect that.

Mandy: How did you handle that?

Sally: Well, it turns out that it had to be Jackie because I work away from home a lot, but again, that's slightly exacerbated my sense of being on the outside. And I still haven't met a lot of Meg's secondary school friends, and it's just, there's a sense that as she's trying to work out her own sexuality and who knows what that is. I think she's still not sure that she wants to be public about her family. Yeah, at some level was not ashamed of us, but kind of nervous about being 'out' as a child of two mums and that was a shame that that's still around.

She's at a big London state school, which is 50% Muslim. So she's, I guess, aware of that dynamic as well. Even though, again, the school's very positive on gay stuff. They have a

Pride flag, and they've got gay teachers and again, there was a lesbian deputy head there, interestingly. So, I wasn't worried about the school's approach. And in fact when I talked to the school, they said we'd be really on it if there was any homophobia, and I was confident that that was the case. But I think it wasn't so much the children's attitudes. It was possibly some of their parents, which applies, I suppose, to any religion, whether Muslim or Christian or Jewish. So that's been an interesting dynamic, recognizing that for your daughter... They've got to experience their own sort of journey and what it means to be in a different family and to find their own identity in that... She's got possibilities for her own sexuality. Her best friend is a lesbian girl. Who knows what that means. Will she explore that herself? I don't know. I do think there is an element of choice there for young people now.

Mandy: I was going to ask you about that, how things are different now.

Sally: Yeah. Because many say in the nature/nurture debate that gay is kind of genetic and everything. But I do think there are more people who now just feel that it's just a legitimate choice to love who you want to love.

Mandy: What do you think about that?

Sally: I think there's a choice element. For lots of gay men I know, it feels like it was very genetic. They knew when they were four, you know, it was like I was always gay. But for a lot of my lesbian friends, I would say there was a point in their lives where they realised how much they identified with women and loved women and therefore chose to be lesbian. I still think I could have probably lived with a man quite comfortably, but I don't think I would have had anything like the level of deep emotional connection that I get with a woman. I sometimes describe myself as bisexual, but homo-emotional, I think is how I would describe it. That I can still find a man attractive or fancy a guy, but emotionally my deep connection is definitely as a lesbian woman because that's where I feel most safe and nourished. But most of my friends were saying, "Are you even trying to pretend to be bisexual, Sally?" Because I hadn't had a relationship for 30 years with a guy! But it's interesting. Occasionally, when I'll kind of see a good looking guy and go, "Oh, he's cute," or whatever, I think, "Why shouldn't you still find somebody of the opposite sex attractive?" rather than feel constrained by the box. And I quite enjoy that with my daughter actually. We watch the Naked Attraction programme, which is the most random programme on television, which has these nudes..

Mandy: You better describe for the... Thank you. Describe for the tape.

Sally: Well, Naked Attraction is this blind date programme, but basically it's based on choosing people's bodies. I mean, it's really random. So they're in boxes, and they show parts of their bodies starting with their legs, then their middle part, and then they're all naked. Only in England! My Canadian partner says, "You'd never have that in Canada," but it's quite a fun thing to watch with a 16 year old to kind of get you talking about what you fancy, and it's a sort of safe way to talk about relationships and sex and things. And yeah, I feel it's a good thing that the next generations coming through will just be somewhere on a spectrum, I think. There'll be less need to specifically label yourself. And yet, there's another part of me that thinks I like the label, and I want to be part of

that camp, and I don't want it to be too kind of mainstream. Isn't it funny? It's an ambivalence in a way-

Mandy: Because that tension isn't there.

Sally: ...That suddenly now we've become so mainstream that you've lost that... I don't know. It's this sense of being in a sort of slightly exclusive club that... And I think the words that we use are interesting, aren't they? You know, dyke, lesbian, gay woman, whatever. And then by being challenged by a few older women that I worked with at Opening Doors of saying, "Why don't you use the word lesbian more? We need to hold the word lesbian" because I often use gay more.

Mandy: To describe yourself or others?

Sally: I don't use the words. I mean, I do occasionally use the word lesbian, but it's not my preferred word. I'd be more likely to say dyke or gay woman. But I'm aware with the older women I talk to that they feel quite strongly that in gay, you lose the specific identity of lesbian.

But again, that's maybe some internalised homophobia from me about that word lesbian, that perhaps I've not entirely lost.

Mandy: Do you remember when you first encountered the word lesbian?

Sally: I just remember in this book I wrote about the first girl who I loved at school - “I'm not “L” – I didn't and couldn’t even write the whole word.

Mandy: So when you were young.

Sally: Quite young. Only about 12-13 probably. I mean, my dad used to make quite homophobic jokes. He'd go, "Bloody poofs," and those sorts of things. Although interestingly, we lived next door to Virginia Wade, the tennis player. My dad went to parties where Martina Navratilova was there and he met Martina. And what was quite sweet with my dad, even though he was a bit kind of a typical man of that generation, he was quite anti-gay men, but kind of okay about lesbian women. Weird kind of difference. He apparently went up to Martina at a party and said, "It's really awful what's been happening to you in the press and just to offer you support," or something. I thought it was really sweet. Yeah.

Mandy: And how would you explain that?

Sally: I think Martina was probably a bit disconcerted with this random man coming up to her!

Mandy: So was that just him or was that because he knew at that stage about you?

Sally: I'm wondering whether it was linked about me. I think it was.

Mandy: Right.

Sally: Yeah, it kind of educated him a bit-

Mandy: So maybe that made a difference to him.

Sally: I think he was... Well, he just loved me very unconditionally, my dad, so although it was a shock, I think, because I'd had a boyfriend and he didn't kind of see it coming. He was very sweet with my partner, Jackie, who I was with as I mentioned for a long time, nearly 30 years. He used to go out and look at her car. She had a lovely old Austin Morris car, which was really cool, actually. It's a really classic car. And it was like sort of bonding with the 'son-in-law' kind of thing! So Jackie had to go into slightly sort of butch mode with the "Yes, isn't the car lovely?" She was like the son-in-law. Of course one of joys for me about being in a gay relationship is those roles weren't there. Although, interestingly, the sort of butch-femme thing is, I've noticed in some other countries now, it kind of seems to be coming back.

I've got a friend who's got a German partner at the moment, and there is much more of that sort of dynamic in other countries. The equivalent, the sort of butch-femme kind of thing going on still, which for me, is surprising because one of the joys for me about being in a relationship with a woman is you don't really have to decide who does the plumbing and who does the cooking, and it's whatever you fancy and plays to your strengths. I think that's the joy for me about being in a gay relationship is there are no rules. And that's interesting for me looking back on the history how in those early years for gay women who I've spoken to, and they almost had to decide which they were. I mean when they went to the Gateways club you had to almost identify which one you were to sort of conform in some way to some kind of similar heterosexual norm.

Mandy: Whereas for you that's one of the joys where you can challenge gender stereotypes.

Sally: Yeah. I mean, interestingly, when I was with Jackie we visited some friends in Ireland. There was a very straight kind of Irish guy, friend of ours, and he took photographs of us and in the photographs... He's a very good photographer... Because I had short, dark hair and Jackie had long, blonde hair and was very girly looking, he put me in the kind of male role in the picture without deliberately doing it. But you could see that I was sort of slightly above her, and she was looking more feminine. I did challenge him on it after. I thought, "Oh, it's interesting you see us like that." He was trying to make sense of it, I guess. Whereas actually, in reality, Jackie was probably much more the practical one who did all the kind of DIY jobs around the house and blah blah. Actually I did more cooking. But people want to fit you in something, don't they?

Mandy: Yeah. They're trying to fit you into the boxes that they know in a way. And as you say, maybe unconsciously.

Sally: Yeah. Yeah. And actually interestingly, my taste in women has changed over the years because I used to mainly be attracted to very ‘feminine’, blonde, long-haired women. And there's a real sort of type, if you like, in the case of my early lovers, and yet my wife now has much shorter hair and I guess looks more stereotypically lesbian.

Mandy: That's interesting.

Sally: And that's really changed for me. Yeah. I am much more likely to find a woman with shorter hair and more ‘Tom boyish’ looks attractive.

Mandy: What do you think that's about?

Sally: I don't know. Interesting, isn't it?

Mandy: Yeah.

Sally: I don't know. And Jackie would say the same. My ex would say the same that she probably wouldn't find me attractive now, either. We both came to a decision, and that's why the split was actually quite relaxed in a way. Everyone's amazed how good friends we are, and we still text each other most days, and we still love each other dearly. But we got together at 21/22, and suddenly at 50, we kind of realised we don't really find each other attractive anymore in that way, but we still really love each other, we became like sisters really. I think that happens quite a lot with long-term relationships doesn't it?

But yeah, I don't think either of us would find each other attractive now because we've sort of changed our taste! Not that I have a type, but you know what I mean. I'm more likely to notice a woman now who is more conventionally, stereotypically gay-looking, if you like. And yeah. Interesting reflections on who we find attractive throughout the course of our life. I mean, for me, now actually what you find attractive is actually what's inside, isn't it? I mean, the lovely thing with my relationship now is just this incredible soul connection, which you just can't replace really when you feel such a strong spiritual bond, as well as the same humour and same passion for nature and animals. It's wonderful when you find that in someone, as well as finding them really sexy! As we were saying earlier before we got the tape on in your 50s... To start again in your 50s is quite challenging in some ways, but actually has been incredibly exciting as well.

Mandy: And we're saying about that, kind of, the possibilities that not fitting into a stereotypical straight life can offer people in later life, and I know that you work a lot with older people now in your professional life...

Sally: I do.

Mandy: So I just wanted to talk a little bit about, or hear what you had to say about that because I think you were saying there are older women that you work with at Opening Doors and maybe also another arena-

Sally: Yeah. I run the Rainbow Cafe, which is for all the people affected by dementia who are LGBT+, and it's been actually a delight, particularly meeting the older gay men in the group. Because in my life traditionally, interestingly, I've tended not to have many gay male friends. I've often got one or two gay, male friends, but my relationships with men over the years haven't been very sustained. I get kind of almost platonic crushes on men. I love their minds, and I enjoy interacting, but they don't last long-term. So, a couple of the older men I've met in the Rainbow Cafe, I've got really fond of and close to. It's been such a privilege to kind of facilitate that group because again, it's the first group of its kind, specifically around LGBT+ and dementia.

And then in Opening Doors London I did some interviews with older lesbian women about their experiences of growing up. And it's humbling. I mean people, like Jo, who appears in one of the films whose girlfriend was murdered in the streets in a very shocking story. I don't know when that was, in the 70s, I think. And the mental health implications of that... A lot of the women I've interviewed have had episodes of depression, et cetera, and you think no wonder, really. And in the care home world, what scares me, and that's my main work, how invisible we become.

I actually had a lovely story yesterday with a worker in a home in Devon where I was working, and she had two women in her home and they shared a room. They had two twin rooms adjoining. And so it was recognised that they had a very close friendship, as they described it. But the worker said, "I'm sure they were a couple," but everyone talked about them as friends. But when one of them died, this lovely worker, a straight, heterosexual woman took the woman, the partner, to the funeral. And it was just such a beautiful story.

She took her to a shop, and they bought a rose together, and the partner stood beside… this elderly woman in her 80s, quite frail herself, stood beside the coffin of her long-term girlfriend and put the rose on the coffin and said, "I'd like to say something" and just read this most beautiful poem. I mean, the worker yesterday said she didn't know which it was, but I think it might have been W. H. Auden or one of those kind of classic funeral poems with the sort of gay story to it. And she said there wasn't a dry eye in the house. And then this lovely worker who was off-duty, wasn't working officially, took the woman back to the care home and stayed with her for the evening, and they drank Sherry and reminisced about the lives of these two women. I thought, "Wow." It's easy to get depressed about the future of care homes, but there are some good people out there.

But equally, I hear terrible stories of women who've been close and they'd been separated and families have intervened. So it's scary that we've not got more protection. Well, there's no specific LGBT provision for older people. There's talk about developing care homes for gay people, but I do worry about some care homes and the attitudes of some staff, particularly for trans people aging, actually. There's a whole other layer of prejudice against trans people in, particularly those who are aging and are very vulnerable, if you like, particularly around personal care and all of that. So there's a long way to go to create safe places for us all.

When I was doing some training in Hackney, I mean I was doing an LGBT+ training day. It was half day, and I hate doing those. You'll relate as a trainer, half day training sessions on LGBT stuff. And on that particular day, I remember there was a guy kind of at the back of the room, arms folded who said, "What causes this perversion?" The first line in the training day, and you think, "Where are you going to take that?" You know, that they're going to attend this training and have it checked off as a thing. Yet, they could be going into the homes of a vulnerable LGBT+ person the next week. If they said something as offensive about a person of colour, they would be sacked, but it doesn't feel like a level playing field in dealing with homophobia.

Mandy: Just pause. Sorry. [Interruption]

Sally: Sorry. Oh, need to move?

Mandy: I think we might need to move-

Mandy: Great. So you were just saying about some of the really, really difficult experiences that some of the older women and men that you worked with have had in care. I guess you must feel that your life has been very different from theirs, and so you could understand how some of them had ended up being depressed and having mental health problems.

Sally: Yes.

Mandy: Is that right?

Sally: I think it's true. I think we all go through different experiences. I think there's a danger sometimes of going, it was much harder in the old days, et cetera, because even looking at my daughter's experience now, there's so many different pressures on young people. And even although we know it's a more open world, hopefully around sexuality, I think there are still difficulties with identity and making sense of what you want out of your life.

But yeah, broadly, it was definitely a better world for me growing up as lesbian or gay in the 80s, as it was. But I did experience those prejudices with, as I say, the church and my step mum particularly. So, I think we've all had our own journeys. But what I've liked is not having to be invisible, hide it all the time. I think that's what I've noticed about the older people I speak to, saying 'women like us' and not even mentioning the lesbian word, and there's sort of having to pretend that you were straight and in some cases having to marry to conform. I was in a hotel this week with Nancy, my partner, and I'm so much more open now about booking a double room, and it's kind of fairly easy for me now to just sort of go, well it's your problem if you've got a problem. Whereas, I think in the old days if you did that, you might be arrested, or whatever. It's a very different level of fear, isn't it? If you know that actually you could lose your job, your children...

So I don't think we face those pressures, but I do still, I'm still aware sometimes when, as I say, when I see people on the tube being very open and affectionate, that it's still

not that easy for us to do that, unless you were at a particular part of town where it feels very safe. And in Canada, interestingly with my partner who's Canadian, there were parts of Canada when Nancy says it's absolutely fine to be open. And then there's parts of Southern Alberta, where she's from, which are very much Bible belt, redneck type territories where we'd have to be pretty cautious about booking a double room.

We're still work in progress.

Mandy: We're still working on it. Yeah. It's important to recognise it's not like that everywhere.

Sally: But I do feel very thankful to those older women who paved the way for us and men. Yeah, they really did have to tread incredibly carefully. I remember reading quite a lot about lesbian custody cases as well. Women really did lose their children. And get, you know, horrible sort of things said in court about their suitability to be parents. I hope we wouldn't find that in an English court now, but who knows. There probably are still some bigots there who would make judgements based on if it was a sort of lesbian woman versus a heterosexual man in court.

But goodness me, the whole marriage thing. Again, I was really ambivalent about marriage, especially as a feminist. I thought, oh not sure about the whole marriage thing. But it's interesting that Nancy and I did choose to get married last year in November. We went to the Rocky Mountains.

Mandy: Did you?

Sally: Yeah. Nancy was really clear about, and happy about getting married and I went, ooh, do I want to do the civil partnership thing instead as it is less charged? Then I actually thought, no, this is pretty cool that we can do this! I was really ambivalent about the word ‘wife.’ I thought, oh, God. Horrible! Sort of ownership stuff around that as a feminist. But interestingly, Nancy and I now are quite jokey about it and we go, "Oh, my lovely wife," and things, and we're enjoying it. Although there is a humour in the way we say it, how cool is it that we could get married and it enabled her to come and live in this country? And actually interestingly, to get the visa to be in this country, we had to chart our relationship. It was quite invasive process, actually. Photographs and evidence that we were lovers, rather than just friends , it was a bit like the Green Card film.

But yeah, getting married was actually really lovely. I really felt good about it and I thought we have come a long way that this can happen. And we went to the registry office in the Rocky Mountains in this little town in Canada. Again, you don't know what kind of response you're going to get. We met this lovely woman who was kind of excited for us. Quite a conservative little town, but she was totally lovely about it. We were married by Nancy's aunt, who's a very religious woman, who really struggled with gay marriage ten years ago, but now, because she loves her niece and sees the love between us, has really felt very blessed to do it. Actually, seeing the changes in our own family members who now see, I suppose see the love between two people and think why ever was there a problem with that?

Yeah, it was pretty cool to come round to the marriage thing. I didn't think I would, because as I said, as a feminist, I've always been quite uncomfortable with it. The whole kind of patriarchal history of it as an institution, and allowing myself to get beyond my politics and actually just enjoy the fact that this is an equality that we've come a long way to enjoy.

So I feel, yeah, very blessed to have a wife! What was interesting was we had to do it for the visa, so lots of people going, "Oh, are you just doing it because of the visa." We weren't, actually. We were very clear we wanted to make a commitment to each other.

Mandy: So you would have done that anyway?

Sally: Yes, we definitely would've done it anyway. And the fact that we didn't have many people around, it was just her aunt, Nancy's aunt and my cousin with us, and it was a really amazing romantic, spiritual, incredible experience. I'll never forget it, really. Just being in this room in our Airbnb in this little town in the Rockies. And then we drove up into the mountains, and just an incredible feeling of life being beautiful and really lovely.

Yeah, it was literally a weekend away. We went out on a Thursday and came back on a Monday because I had quite a lot of work going on. It felt like kind of an elopement, really. Quite exciting. Whereas my original civil partnership, which was also lovely in a very different way, with my ex-partner, was more of kind of a big event with lots of people. Again, that was a very beautiful day, because there is that sense of changing history, actually when you do make a legal commitment. A bit like being in a playground with our daughter - as mums with all the straight families kind of seeing us as a sort of happy lesbian family, if you like.

But I know there is an ambivalence for some people around the whole marriage thing. We have come an incredibly long way. I suppose the worry now in the Trump, Boris, Brexit world that we're in is whether those rights could be compromised again. You see that, don't you? Certainly in Trump rhetoric. Hopefully less so in the Tories. We'll see having a conservative lesbian woman leading in Scotland, who's recently resigned. So I do worry that we shouldn't be complacent.

Mandy: And I think that's part of the purpose of this project.

Sally: Yes.

Mandy: So if you were going to look back and give the young Sally some advice or some words of wisdom from where you are now, what would you like to say to her?

Sally: I think the big thing for me, and it's an ongoing sort of therapy question for myself really, is just being too affected by other people's judgments, expectations, and not trusting one's own sense. And actually having a partner who's incredibly grounded and has done a lot at work on herself, who is comfortable in her own skin has really helped me to get there as well. Because I think all the times, there was a question for me about what other people are thinking. So I think the advice to Sally in her 20s is be less

bothered about what other people are thinking. You can only be as good as yourself yesterday or try and better yourself tomorrow. Be true to yourself. It's a cliche but it’s important. And yeah, don't look over your shoulder too much at what your parents think or what your friends think, et cetera. That actually you've got to sort of tread your own path, be kind to yourself and others and be real.

Mandy: Lovely. On that note, let's finish. Thank you, Sally.

Sally: Thank you so much.