From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
Name: Teresa Edmans	**Date:** 15 October 2019 **Age:** 62
Key issues: Self-discovery. Nursing. HIV/AIDS. Lesbian bars and clubs. Lesbian Strength. Feminism. Political organising. Finding and forming community spaces. Gays the Word. Lesbian discussion group. Sure Start. Changing identities and definitions of gender.	
Narrative summary An early connection to girls during her childhood and teenage years, and confusion about being uninterested in boys. She had a gay female friend in Sixth Form, but this was hard to understand because of lack of representation of gay women in the media. Also her mother is Chinese, and gayness was not recognised in Chinese culture. After thinking about her sexuality, she approached her friend for advice and was introduced to gay and lesbian spaces in London. In 1980she started nursing and was warned about lesbians at the hospital, making her concerned about how it was looked on. At this time men started nursing and most of them were gay, but for some reason this was more accepted. While at nursing school she began having relationships, but when she was found out she was threatened with dismissal over concerns that she wouldn't be safe looking after female patients. She argued and was reluctantly allowed to finish her training. In the early 1980s she continued nursing and started to explore her sexuality and met other lesbians through Gay's the Word. She was introduced her to many pubs and clubs – you could go clubbing somewhere every night of the week in the mid eighties. She was involved with the Lesbian Strength marches and speaks about feminism at this time. She nursed during the HIV epidemic and soon became very involved in HIV education. She did counselling at the Lesbian & Gay Centre, founded PACE and her job at Islington was to lead on HIV and AIDS. She tearfully recalls the young men who died and the gay men and lesbians who supported them, often with criticism from other lesbians and recounts the near dismissal of her partner from the Nursery school where she worked because of Teresa's connection with AIDS. She was a government advisor for the Sure Start Programme; bringing in the lesbian and gay perspective and discusses deprivation, life outcomes, and lesbian and gay parenthood, including the beginnings of adoption for same-sex partners and alternative parenting structures. Since her retirement she's set up a local Lesbian Tea Group and the Pink Growers Group as opportunities for staying connected, particularly as people age. She has concerns over the fact that there is silence over many of the negative things happening to lesbian and gay people. Wonders if this is because there's nowhere to meet and talk. Finally, Teresa speaks about her mother being Chinese. There was no word for lesbian in Chinese and so had no way of talking about it. She returns to the importance of activism and how a lack of spaces must make it challenging for young people to come out and find themselves now.	
	Length of interview: 1 hr 17 mins


CRAGHOPPERS

Evelyn: This is an interview for From a Whisper to a Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is the 15th of October 2019, and I am interviewing the delightful Teresa. Teresa, could you start by telling me just a little about your early life and how you came to an understanding of who you really are?

Teresa: I think when I was younger ... I can't remember any images or anything about lesbian and gayism, but I remember going through my young childhood with no interest in boys particularly, but I suppose a warmth or a connectedness to other girls, and that may be completely natural in young people's development. But, as time went on, I was aware those connections were becoming stronger with other women and other girls, particularly when I was at school, so I was much more connected, wanted to be in their company, started to have more connected feelings with them. But still, I don't think it was in my vocabulary or knowledge about lesbians and gay people.

When I then got into the sixth form, or just before I went into the sixth form, all the girls were always talking about boys. They were putting on their makeup, and they were doing their fashion clothes and all of those sorts of things, and I just couldn't understand. It just didn't connect with me, and I kept on thinking, "Well, it will happen," but it just didn't. I didn't understand what all that was about, but still having closer feelings with other girls in my class and almost ... Not relationships, because I wouldn't have said they were relationships. They were like connectedness, but probably going a bit more than just being friends like hugging and stuff like that, so a bit more physical.

Evelyn: A bit more intense.

Teresa: A bit more intense, emotionally intense, a bit more physical, stuff like that. And then when I used to go to school I used to always pass a boy's school. It was a Catholic all boys school. I went to an all girls school. I remember walking past the boy's school, and I remember vividly standing there overlooking their playing field, and all the boys were out on the playing field. And I remember looking at them thinking, "Why don't I feel any connectedness to these boys? Why don't I feel like the girls in my class that are always talking about boys and everything else?" And I just said, "Well, I really don't know."

And then when I did get into the sixth form, there was another girl in my class, and we were very, very, very good friends, and we'd hang out together. She did very different subjects to me. She was much more into Latin and all of that lot, and I was into sociology, and home economics. So we used to get together, and she used to try to play more cultured music, rather than pop music. I can remember her saying to me, "Are you gay?" And I said, "No, I'm not gay. No." She said, "Are you sure?" She said, "Because you know that I am." I said, "Are you?" And I said, "No, I'm not gay."

And then I went away and thought, "What does being gay mean really, because there were no role models?" You didn't see anything on television. You didn't have people talking about it.

Evelyn: Particularly about women.

Teresa: Yeah, you heard about gay men sometimes because there was the occasional play or something on the telly, but nothing to really help you to understand. Well, was certainly not me. Although my father was English, my mother's Chinese, so in her culture gay doesn't exist, and the word gay doesn't exist. I can remember going away after this conversation, and she was in the lower six, and I was in the upper six, so I left school just slightly early, and going away and thinking about it.

And meeting up with somebody after school and getting quite involved with her, and then that ended, and I thought, "God, what's this about?" So, I rang up my friend from school who had said to me, "Are you gay?" And said, "Can I come and speak to you? I need to come and talk to you." I went there, and I talked to her, and I said, "I think I might be, but I don't know because I don't know what it means."

Evelyn: And what to do about it.

Teresa: And what to do about it, or where you went, or what you did or anything. She took me to Gay's The Word, and she also took me to see a film. I think it was called Lianna, which was the first lesbian film I had ever seen where I'd seen women together, so it was a really big eye-opener for me. So then I understood what being a lesbian was about.

Evelyn: A whole new world opened up.

Teresa: It was a whole new world, and then I realised why I didn't like boys, because it never clicked for me. It was never the thing that I wanted to do. There was a time that I went out with a couple of boys, but as soon as they wanted to be physical, that was it. I just stopped it all. I really didn't like it. I knew it wasn't what I wanted, and it wasn't who I was, but I didn't know who I was. I know that sounds a bit of a contradiction, but I didn't know who I was.

Evelyn: You know what you didn't want, but you didn't quite know what you did want.

Teresa: Yeah, exactly. Soon after leaving school I started nursing.

Evelyn: What sort of year are we here?

Teresa: Many years ago. I might have to work it out. Gosh, I'm 62 now, and I was about 23 when I started nursing, 22, 23 probably [1980]. I remember going into the hospital and people saying, "Oh, you got to be careful with those lesbians. You know there are lesbians over there." They were talking about senior people in the hospital, and I thought, "Oh, this is obviously not a good thing to be." I thought, "Oh, I better be very careful and not say anything or

do anything because obviously it's not looked upon very well." I care to think that there's an awful lot of people here, a lot of women because it was a student nursing hospital, so there was hundreds of us really.

Evelyn: On the law of averages, there's bound to be a few lesbians amongst them.

Teresa: Yeah, but they were also the beginnings of men starting nursing. It was in the early days when men started nursing. People knew near enough all of them were gay men. I think all the men I knew they were gay men actually, but that seemed to be okay for some reason. It was accepted that all the men that were nursing were gay men, and that's okay, blah, blah, blah.

Evelyn: But the lesbians weren't okay.

Teresa: But the lesbians weren't. It was not an okay thing to be. The hospital I trained in a lot of the student nurses and subsequent when they stayed on nurses were recruited from Ireland, and they were Catholic. I think that that probably influenced that negativity around it. It was very clear to me that being out or saying that was not good. It doesn't take two and two to work out that after a while of being in the nurses home you get quite friendly with different people, and I did have a couple of relationships while I was there, which was a great hoot because when I started nursing you had to live in the nursing home. It was compulsory, but you had to get a permit to go out at work and weekends.

There used to be a matron sitting at the door, and any person coming in had to be signed for and signed out, so it was very strict, so we used to find windows that we could sneak in and out of, so we did have an absolute hoot there. But during the time of my nursing career, one particular relationship that I was having with a fellow student nurse finished, and she must have gone to our tutor, and I was summoned to the office to say that it had been reported by this other student that we were having a relationship and blah, blah, blah. That he would need to ask me to leave, and I said, "But why?" "Well, we can't have you working on the wards." I said, "Why not? Because I haven't done anything. It's not malpractice or anything else. It's my private life."

Evelyn: Haven't killed any patients.

Teresa: He said, "No, I'm afraid we're going to have to ask you to leave because we don't know whether you'll be safe to look after the female patients." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, I don’t know..I don't know whether …you're having this relationship with this woman. We can't leave you on the ward with these women patients." I said, "But when men look after men or men look after women, do you say the same thing?" He said, "Well. Well" I said, "Why are we allowing men to nurse other men then or men to nurse women? What has that got to do with it? What do you think I'm going to do?"

He sent me away, and he said he'll have to think about it. And then I was summoned back some days later, and he said I could stay on and finish my

training. But then I was near the finish of my training anyway, and as soon as I could leave the nurses home I did. I moved out because gossip had gone round the hospital, and it wasn't a pleasant place to be. It was a difficult place to be working, so I moved out. Funnily enough, I bumped into some people who had gone … students thereafter. After I'd left apparently they had sent out some memo about, "You can't have people in your room, not even fellow students, blah, blah, blah. That there was this scandal with this nurse." I thought, "Oh my God, that was me." After that I realised that being out in the nursing profession wasn't necessarily the best thing.

Evelyn: And this is late '70s.

Teresa: Yeah, I'd say '70s.

Evelyn: Very early '80s.

Teresa: Yeah. I carried on nursing for some time and also outside of nursing trying to explore my sexuality, meeting other lesbians partly through Gay's The Word. I remember Linda said to me, "Oh, I'll take you to this pub," because I said I'd never been anywhere. She said, "I'll take you to this pub." She said the name of the pub's called The Bell, and I said, "Oh, right." I know I was really not worried. We walked into The Bell, and I thought I'd walked into a regular pub because there were lots of people in suits, and ties, and jackets, and trousers and everything else, and I thought-

Evelyn: Was it just a very ordinary looking pub, normal bar?

Teresa: Well, it looked ordinary. It looked a little bit sleazy, not sleazy. What I would call a workman's pub. If I went locally to our local pub, it's like everybody-

Evelyn: A bit rough and ready.

Teresa: Yeah, a bit rough and ready. Yeah, that's a good way of describing it. I remember sitting there and thinking, "God, I'm sure that person looks like a woman." I remember looking at these people and saying to Linda, "Why have you brought me to a place full of men?" She said, "No, they're all women." I went, "They're women?" She said, "Yeah, they're all women. It's a women-only night." I remember thinking, "Oh, right."

And then I remember…when I think about it, it sounds absolutely ridiculous now. She said, "I need to go to the bathroom." I said, "You're not leaving me, are you? You can't leave me here on my own. You can't." She said, "You'll be fine. Nothing is going to happen. What do you think is going to happen to you?" I said, "I don't know. Somebody might talk to me." She said, "You'll be fine. I'm not going to be long. I'm just going to the bathroom," so she went off to the bathroom, and lo and behold, somebody came and sat down.

I just remember feeling scared because I didn't know what you're supposed to do or how I was supposed to relate, because I remember seeing the film Killing of Sister George, which was the only film I'd seen where there were

two women. I could remember thinking, "Well, that's not me. That's not how I see myself, but I don't know how I see myself." And then I was in this room with people who looked like men, and I didn't want to be with a man, so I was completely and utterly confused.

Anyway, Linda came back, and this person went, and I said, "How could you do that to me? The minute you went, somebody came and sat with me and started talking to me." She said, "So? You just talk back to them," and I said, "I know, but I was frightened." Of course, she told me I was a daft bugger, but I can remember that experience very-

Evelyn: So, everyone's wearing suits and ties.

Teresa: Yeah, or just ties.

Evelyn: Slick back hair, no make up.

Teresa: Slick back hair. Trousers. I hadn't seen anything like that at all other than that little snippet from Killing of Sister George where she's all in the tweeds and everything.

Evelyn: Where was The Bell?

Teresa: The Bell was in London. I don't think it's open anymore. It's a very old haunt, a very famous haunt for I think lesbian and gay people. I mean, I didn't go there very often.

Evelyn: I wonder why?! This is the day before internet and mobile phones, so it's quite interesting how you find your folk.

Teresa: Yeah, exactly.

Evelyn: Was it all word-of-mouth?

Teresa: Well, then Linda took me to some other places as well, so I think it's partly word-of-mouth and also meeting other people who go to different types of venues. We went to the Fallen Angel, which was wonderful.

Evelyn: What was the Fallen Angel like? When you walked in there, was there a different feeling?

Teresa: Completely. It was very mixed. There were women-only nights as well, which was a Tuesday, so we tended to go on a Tuesday when there was women-only nights. I remember it was the time of the miner's strike as well.

Evelyn: This is around about '84 probably.

Teresa: Mm-hmm (affirmative). There was lesbian line then as well, so there was always collections for all of that.

Evelyn: For the miners, yeah.

Teresa: For the miners. There were very eclectic women. It was casual chairs, it was a big bar, it was very relaxed. There might be a bit of music. It was very, very different, and we used to go to a club called the Ace of Spades, which was in central London in the arcade near Piccadilly, which was a basement club. We used to go clubbing near enough every day. Once I started coming out when I was nursing, everyday we would be in a different bar. There'd be bars, there'd be clubs, we'd be clubbing. Sometimes I clubbed all night and went on to work the next day, not often. I couldn't do that too often, but we did do it occasionally.

But there were a lot of venues that you could go to, and people would know about them. There was a couple of places in Islington, a place in the Angel, Islington. I'm getting old, so I can't remember all the names. King Edward, and then there was some bars in Islington as well. There were lots of places you could go. It was wonderful because you met new people. They would know different things. You'd meet new friends. You'd start doing things together, things that were regular things, you know, going to the pictures.

You didn't have to be frightened. You didn't have to talk about ... ‘cause when I used to mix with my friends from the hospital, it was always, "Oh, who are you going out with? Are you married, blah, blah, blah?" It got quite difficult because that's what people's focus was about, especially as a young woman, about, "Who are you dating? Are you getting married? Are you married? Do you have children?" Patients would always ask you those sorts of questions. It was really nice to be in an environment where you didn't have to respond to those. Nobody asked you those questions actually, so you could just be yourself. You didn't have to talk about what's in your house and what curtains you were going to be putting up. It was much more relaxed.

You did have to be mindful because sometimes people would be a bit ... I think predatory is a bit of a wrong word because that's quite stern, but people would use it to pick other women up, and I think that there were lots-

Evelyn: They push you with it.

Teresa: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Unless you were quite confident, you could feel a little bit threatened, I think, by some other women who were looking to pick up people. I got introduced to doing Lesbian Strength, which was before the lesbian and gay march, so we used to start marching on Lesbian Strength Day, so you'd march, but what was fascinating was, or what you discover is there isn't one lesbian. That there were so many different types of lesbians in different groups with different politics, so it was like learning a completely different language.

There were women who didn't like young boys or men in their groups, so if you had a boy child of a certain age, you'd be excluded from groups and events and things.

Evelyn: It was separatist women [crosstalk 00:22:11].

Teresa: Yeah, quite separatist.

Evelyn: This is within the-

Teresa: Within the lesbian community.

Evelyn: ... lesbian community.

Teresa: You'd have multiple fractures of different women, so you'd have what they call diesel dykes, dykes on bikes. You'd have like your-

Evelyn: Just the very butch end of things.

Teresa: The butch end of things. And then you'd have your very butch hard butch dykes that wasn't quite diesel dykes, but probably the ones I met in The Bell, because the dykes on bikes wore leathers, and chains and big bikes. And then you'd have people who used to be described as vanilla dykes, so you'd have people who were not into any form of penetration, that things were supposed to be mirrored, so that there wasn't an imbalance of power.

And then you'd have people like me who just wandered through life the best they can with people. It wasn't particularly here, or particularly there or any particular group, but wanted lesbianism to be an okay thing, that we wanted rights, we wanted things to be more equal, that I could actually be a lesbian at work, and I shouldn't be frightened to say that, and that I could walk down the street like other people holding hands, that I wouldn't have to have safe spaces to be in, because sometimes even at Gay's The Word men would try to get in, and they'd shout abuse through the door or throw things at the window, which is why we had to keep it boarded up.

Evelyn: Gay's The Word was the lesbian discussion group.

Teresa: Yeah. That was it. And why people needed safe space, because a lot of people had not necessarily had very good experiences with men in various ways, whether that was through partners, or friends, or families or just random acts of nastiness. Therefore, having a safe space for lesbians was very, very important because you could go there, and you didn't have to worry about being hassled or anything else. You could be who you wanted to be.

Evelyn: Did you have … was there a crossover with feminism at the time?

Teresa: There were a lot of groups that were feminists. I didn't join the feminist movement because there's also a lot of conscious-raising groups at the time, a lot of people who were protesting around Greenham Common, so there was a lot of that going on. I didn't necessarily feel that that was me partly because I think I hadn't worked out what my own politics were, and people who were in those groups were very passionate, so if you said something that wasn't quite right, I think you got a bit of a hard time. There was a part of me that was like that, but I wasn't a separatist, so that didn't seem to fit.

And then there was a view that a lot of the women in the conscious-raising groups were women who were ... How can I put this? Who were heterosexual women. No, who were leading a heterosexual life but were probably lesbians, but were needing a transition process to come to that view or that realism because, like me, a lot of those people probably didn't have any role models, and a lot of those people were probably slightly older than me and felt that the right thing to do was to be married and have children. Maybe that felt the right thing for them too. I think it was one avenue for their journey of that, not necessarily totally, but a lot of people who I know or that I was aware of that went to those groups are now lesbians or declare themselves as lesbians.

I didn't personally get involved in a lot of those groups. I knew people in them. We did talk about it. We talked about lots of the different groups that were around across the sectors, but I didn't necessarily feel that I wanted to be identified as this group, a person in a group with this label. I felt that I was me, and I was trying to find me rather than have a label of saying S/M dyke, or vanilla dyke, or whatever.

Evelyn: Lipstick lesbian.

Teresa: Yeah, lipstick lesbian, or butch lesbian. It was just like, "Oh, no." I just wanted to be with the people I was with and find my own way. I was still nursing at the time, and I was a senior person by this time in the hospital I was working in. It was around this time that HIV and AIDS started to rear its head I guess.

Evelyn: So, we're into the early '80s.

Teresa: Yeah, I was the district infection control officer, and then I was doing some senior project work for somebody. The hospital that I worked in was one of only a couple of hospitals where HIV testing could take place because we had the labs there, so we did a lot of the testing in those days, which meant that we had to do a lot of the notifications and things like that. In those early days… At the beginning it was tough, but then as things become unravelled it got worse. It got very, very bad.

The gay men that I talked about that were in the hospital working were ostracised. That everybody thought that if one of the staff had an injury, would this mean that everybody got AIDS? People were going into panic. The government wasn't doing much good.

Evelyn: And there wasn't a good understanding of how it was-

Teresa: Transmitted, no. Also, the fear factor because at that time if you got HIV, you got AIDS, you died, that's it, and it was a short space of time. Everybody was playing the blame game, the government was fuelling the blame game. It was early days, so we didn't have the evidence of lots of things because we were learning ourselves, so it was a really, really bad time, and it was getting worse, and worse, and worse. I was involved in putting on training

for people at work to understand about HIV and AIDS, and then the bigotry started to come out. The whole thing it was terrible.

After a while I took a job in Islington leading on HIV and AIDS, and I was also involved at that time. Just prior to that, I was doing a lot of counselling work and was involved at the lesbian and gay centre in Farringdon. I was one of the founders of PACE, which was a counselling service, so I was doing voluntary work at PACE as well and helping to set up PACE.

Evelyn: Was PACE centred at the lesbian and gay centre?

Teresa: It was, yeah, on the second floor. We were based up there. We were a couple of people to start with, and we developed the project by getting more people on board, so that we could provide a more specialist counselling service for lesbian and gay people that was free, because it wasn't very much. We knew that a lot of lesbian and gay people had high rates of smoking, alcohol, suicide, mental health, depression, et cetera. The mental health system didn't really help them. I mean, they helped them but didn't really understand about lesbian and gay issues within the mental health system. It was quite difficult, so we wanted to set up something for lesbian and gay people where they could come, so PACE was set up there, so we were based in the lesbian and gay centre.

I took on the job in Islington. It was really, really hard because in my voluntary life working at PACE at the lesbian and gay centre, which was an absolutely wonderful place. It was magic the lesbian and gay centre.

Evelyn: Describe to me walking in the door of a lesbian and gay centre.

Teresa: You'd walk through the door, and there would be people on the reception. It was only a small reception, and everybody would say, "Hello, how are you? Can we help you? What would you like to do? You have to sign in. There's this on this floor." There were about at least three floors and a basement, and they would say what activities, or you might say, "Oh, no, I've just come for the café," so on the ground floor there was a café and a little restaurant. And then there was a women's bar on the next floor. There was lots of rooms, so there were different groups that could meet. There was a garden. In the basement we'd have discos sometimes, women-only discos.

It was wonderful because if you ever met with anybody or you were meeting, you would go, "Okay, we'll meet at the centre." That's what we called it. We meet at the centre, and then everybody would then go off either do something at the centre, or they'd go off to a bar, but that was like the pinnacle, if you like. Everybody would meet, even people from all over the world. We had people from all over the world that would meet there, and there'd be notice boards with things that were going on, different groups across London, activities that you could do not just at the centre but outside. People would post things, flat shares. It was a real hub, a buzz hub. It was live, it was vibrant, it was wonderful, it was safe.

Evelyn: How did the different groups get on? Did the women get on with the men? Did it all work out?

Teresa: There were some tensions obviously that had to be resolved sometimes. There were tensions,such as, there were …. I'm not even sure that I'm going to get this right, but there was a group that met that were kind of like S/M men who would come in with chains and different coding for handkerchiefs in the back pockets.

Evelyn: And what they were open to.

Teresa: Yeah, and it was to signify what they were doing. I suppose some women found that quite offensive if they sat in the coffee area where everybody else was. There were some tensions between groups. When we had lesbian-only events, we would sometimes get people who were transvestite and transgender people, so there was a very big discussion about all of that, so there was a lot of politics around are they allowed in lesbian-only spaces, et cetera. There was always politics going on, but at the heart of it, it was a warm, and caring and good place to be, because no matter where you go, when you have so many different groups of people, you would always get tensions and disagreements.

Evelyn: Yes, of course.

Teresa: But it was about how you work them out. If there was something like vanilla dykes on a Monday, you wouldn't put S/M men in the same time slot. You'd try and work it out where you knew there might be difficulties and tensions that you avoided them, but overall, it was a lovely place to be, and it was great because there were rooms for counselling, and we ran groups from the centre. Everybody knew where it was. It was easy to get to. It was a really good place, but at that time, for me, what I began to see was a lot of people .. because I'd been going there for years by this time, and I knew a lot of people because I'd been doing voluntary work at the centre and would go there for my own social life as well, so I knew lots of people.

But it was very difficult because we saw people dying constantly, people that you knew. You'd go there another week, and it was like, "Where is so and so?" "Oh, they died." What was once a very vibrant and lively place became a very ... It was very quiet and sad.

Evelyn: A bit hollowed out.

Teresa: A lot of people died. My work was to do with HIV. We used to get people involved in the care, and a lot of those people died. And then outside of that there were lesbians saying, "Why are we helping gay men?" I would say, "What do you mean?" Because when people started to get very sick and die, it was a lot of the lesbian women who were carers, who were social workers, who were in all sorts of professions would come forward to volunteer because in those days you could volunteer to care for people with HIV and AIDS. They didn't make it: "This is a service. You have to do it."

A lot of people refused to provide services to people with HIV and AIDS, so a lot of people who came forward, not everybody, but a lot of people were lesbians and other gay men. I remember [tearfull]-

Evelyn: It's very distressing to remember even at this distance of time.

Teresa: Yeah, because it was like a whole group of people were wiped out, and lesbians were saying, "Why are we doing this. Why are we helping them? Gay men wouldn't come to our rescue if it was reversed. If it was us dying, do you think gay men would come and help us?" It was very hard because workers like myself and others who were really good we were being attacked by everybody on all sides. We were being attacked by everybody, by our own organisations, by politicians that we worked for, by the press, by everybody.

We would always be fighting the politics of things when people wanted to not provide services. That it should be voluntary that you provide services, and we would be fighting to say no. If somebody comes for a service, we have a duty to deliver it because I used to say if a person came and said I need a home carer, and they were a black woman, would we say, "Well, you'd have to have a black carer," or they wanted a black carer, or they didn't want a black carer. We would not tolerate that kind of discrimination in that way. Therefore, we shouldn't do that in this case.

On every corner we were fighting politics all the time. I worked for Central London as well, so I did a lot of work with some others. There was a group of us that came together across the London boroughs to write a lot of the policies, and a lot of the training and a lot of stuff that we had to do and push through government. It was really, really hard. You had to fight everybody even our own community. That was very tough. It took its toll personally on me. Not that I regret a moment of it, but the sadness. Seeing so many people die was very tragic. It was soon after that that the lesbian and gay centre closed partly because there were very few staff there then.

It went from this vibrant, buzzing place to almost an empty shell, which was very sad. I was involved in the council. We tried to keep it open. We managed to negotiate keeping the centre open when we went there to talk to the management of the lesbian and gay centre to say, "Look, we've got it through committee. You can keep it." They said, "We're really sorry, but we can't manage." A, they didn't have any staff, and B, there was a bit of corruption going on.

Evelyn: There was a bit of a problem with the money [crosstalk 00:42:20].

Teresa: Yeah. The two things together it closed. It's a huge loss to London and to the lesbian and gay community worldwide, I think, because it was a very good place to go. It's a huge, huge loss. I think from that was a lot of my fight for other things. I cut my teeth on the fighting front.

Evelyn: There was no stopping you.

Teresa: Well, I don't know about that. I've never seen myself as a political person with a capital P. I've always done things, and people say that's political, but okay. I would always look at ways of getting lesbians and gay people together in groups. When I used to do lots of work as an advisor to government offices, I always used to bring the lesbian and gay position to the table because by then I wasn't scared about being out to anybody. I was totally out, and everybody knew that I was a lesbian, and I was in a relationship.

My partner at the time worked for a small children's nursery, was the manager of the nursery, and they caught wind of the fact that my partner lived with and was in a partnership with what they called a gay doctor, and they wanted her sacked. Either she was sacked, or they close the nursery, or they would withdraw their children from the nursery. There was a lot going on then because of the discrimination to her because of me. We had to get specialist people in to talk to the parents because they did a petition to say that they wanted her out, and that she couldn’t come and make the kids sick. They didn't want all their kids dying of AIDS. It was bad. It was on all fronts, so we had to manage that.

In the end, we went in, and somebody I knew was a medical doctor and went in and did some teaching with them, so I'm talking to them, explaining things, et cetera. They were very good after that, and they said that they were sorry. They bought her flowers and apologised for all the stress and pressure they put her under and everything else.

Evelyn: Because at the time it was feverish panic and really fuelled by the newspapers and things like that.

Teresa: Exactly.

Evelyn: Crazy stories partly from ignorance because people didn't really understand so clearly how it was passed on.

Teresa: Even when they did understand, it was still-

Evelyn: It still persisted the myths and the-

Teresa: Blaming and where did it come from, and it's just a gay disease.

Evelyn: It was known as the gay disease.

Teresa: It's God's retribution, and the Catholic church they didn't help at all, and they didn't help in terms of the prevention because, as you know, the pope said in the end because we were lobbying the pope about being able to use condoms and stuff like that. In the end, the pope came out with the fact that you could use a condom, but you had to make a hole in it first. I went on holiday, and the press would get headlines, and I'd see myself splashed across the tabloid press about something that I was doing in the place that I was working. What was it? Condoms for talks on the ... It's not called council tax, What was it called before council tax. The-

Evelyn: Poll tax.

Teresa: Poll tax, yeah.

Evelyn: Condoms for talks on the poll tax. Oh my days.

Teresa: Yeah, it was all sorts of crap-

Evelyn: Bizarre things.

Teresa: ... in the headlines. I could remember being on a beach in Greece, and some person was reading the Daily Mirror or one of those papers, and I could see it. I was thinking, "Oh my God, what am I going to go back to?" Those days were very dark, but they're not dark now. That is the good thing because people now live with AIDS, and they've lived a long time. Having said that, do you know even people that I worked with, gay men, would still have unsafe sex even though they were HIV workers? It's like, "Come on!"

Evelyn: It did take a long time to-

Teresa: It's like, "I can't believe you're doing this." But it's changed, and I'm really glad. I'm glad to a degree, but I'm also concerned that we don't sweep it too far under the carpet because people are still being infected, but it's different. People live with AIDS, they're surviving into old age with AIDS, and there isn't this kind of fever every time anybody mentions it, and we don't see people dying all over the place, which we were doing then. Yeah, it's a good story now. It's a much, much better story, but it was a hard story.

Evelyn: It must have taken a huge toll.

Teresa: It did emotionally when you see that many people die and so many funerals, but it's always been important to me to keep the lesbian and gay ... ‘ cause as I started to say, I started to say that I started working for government offices, so I made sure the perspective of lesbian and gay family comes into it.

Evelyn: Which corner of government were you in?

Teresa: Well, I was advisor for a part of the Sure Start Program, so I mainly worked for the office of the deputy prime minister, and the programs that he rolled out as our New Deal for Communities and things like that but also Sure Start

Evelyn: Sure Start Program for the sake of the future….

Teresa: For nought to five I think.

Evelyn: It was getting nurseries established.

Teresa: It was having good starts for young people, so if you have a good start, you should a good adult. People with poor starts often had poor outcomes.

Evelyn: It's about early intervention.

Teresa: And supporting.

Evelyn: Sure Start was often tacked onto primary schools to help them-

Teresa: Yeah, nurseries or in the communities, so breastfeeding.

Evelyn: For younger and younger children and young mothers.

Teresa: And teen births and trying to prevent teen births as well as supporting teen births and giving people good starts, so helping with parenting skills, helping with feeding skills. What do you do if you're maybe in a deprived neighbourhood where you don't have easy access to healthy, fresh foods and things like that? How do you wean kids, how not to wean kids as well about sweet drinks. It was a lot of education, and how do you play, what's good play, what can you do to help improve the development of your child, what's normal, baby massage.

It was all those kinds of, it's a whole array of ... Meeting other mums, having their children interact with other children, so to socialise them, so many programs. Some linked with schools, some linked in the community, all over the place really. It was a big program. So making sure that lesbian and gay parents weren't missed out on that as well, so thinking about what might need to be different, what would you need to do if you were doing this with lesbian and gay parents and families and actually acknowledging that lesbian and gay families exist, which was becoming more of them, because when I was first coming out there was no expectation. If anything, you were expected not to have kids.

If you were in a lesbian couple, then that was it. You wouldn't be having children as with gay men. Gay men how can they have kids? And then adoption started to come in a little bit, so people would start to adopt-

Evelyn: This would be across the '90s.

Teresa: ... children. Yeah. Late '80s, '90s you're beginning to see the beginnings of adoption, but the children who tended to be allowed to be adopted were children with quite severe difficulties, whether that be physical, mental or whatever, but people who might be not have been adopted for some years that were difficult children. And then that changed as well, and then women and gay men were having children themselves, and the turkey baster came to fame where people would inseminate either through somebody they knew or through getting semen from abroad or whatever it is, although that took a little bit of a setback because of HIV, and testing and all of that lot.

But there was a head of travel in terms of beginning to see and beginning to believe that lesbian couples and gay couples could actually have children, whether it's from birth, i.e., from maybe a gay man and a lesbian sometimes would share the birthing and share parenting, so there was a multitude of ways that lesbian and gay people were starting to have children. As time

went on, it's kind of like almost when people get married, "Are you going to have kids?" It's almost come as more of an inevitability for young lesbian and gay men thinking, "Are you going to have children in your family?"

Evelyn: Once people commit to a marriage or a civil partnership, it's the same expectation as in the past over heterosexuals.

Teresa: Heterosexuals. It wasn't this assumption that lesbian couples and gay men just didn't have children. I can remember my dad saying something like, "Oh, so I won't have grandchildren," when I came out. Even amongst ourselves we didn't expect to have children. So, that changed. That coming into Sure Start was really important because now there were many people with children with different kind of makeups of families. As I said, sometimes it could be gay men and lesbian couples coming together for some agreement.

Evelyn: And co-parenting.

Teresa: And co-parenting. There were very different blended families, people coming to relationships from previous heterosexual or non-heterosexual marriages with children. It's very different. We'd come into a world where children and lesbian and gay were said in the same phrase rather than not. There were things like that we had to think about, New Deal for Communities as well. I was involved in that, so again, it was making sure that when we were looking at improving the nature of deprivation and some of the things that are surrounded ... You know there's lots of factors that make life difficult for individuals, and that we needed to bring in the lesbian and gay part to that because, as I said before, there were many people who were lesbian and gay who either drunk too much, smoked too much, committed suicide, had mental health, blah, blah, blah, didn't get very good employment, et cetera.

You would find people in deprived areas who were lesbian and gay because of that experience for them, so we needed to make sure that that was considered in the mix.

Evelyn: Those percentages of that sort of deprivation and issues such as mental is higher in the LGBT community than in the community at large.

Teresa: Particularly lesbians because gay men tended to be more affluent work or financial work just because men were paid more for a start. So women would, lesbians would tend to find themselves in the lower paid caring roles or unemployed.

Evelyn: Because they were victims of the gender pay gap.

Teresa: Yeah, there was disparity in pay and also how lesbians and gay men, but particularly lesbians, saw themselves in terms of being not very confident, not very assertive, lots of things that would put themselves down, not necessarily rightly, but a lot of people did. That's not true for everybody. There would be people there that would need particular help. And then I

served three years on the National Lottery Board, giving grants to voluntary organisations.

It was important that when those applications of which we got hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of them, which you would expect, ensure that lesbian and gay needs were considered in that mix and that there was a proportion of successful bids that came from lesbian and gay communities as well. I would take that in my mind's eye when we were making decisions about things and would fight for and support bids from the groups of people. I suppose it's like anything, isn't it? If you were from a different type of community, you would be mindful of that community, so I was their kind of check and balance for lesbian and gay communities and speaking up at committee for applications.

Evelyn: Community champion.

Teresa: Yeah. Okay. I said it wasn't political with a big P. I'm a small p person.

Evelyn: It's very important.

Teresa: Yeah, so making sure that there was some kind of equity across. PACE was there when I helped start that up. Since my retirement, I've set up locally something called the Lesbian Tea Group, and that's just the people who live in the borough that I live in, so it's a network of people. It's shared by word-of-mouth. We meet up every couple of months on Sunday afternoon, and we have tea and cakes and some savouries. We meet people we don't know. We chat. We meet people we do know. Lots of good friendships have stemmed from that outside of the tea group, so that goes on. I think there's something like ... I can't remember the last count. A hundred and something on the network group.

Evelyn: Wonderful.

Teresa: Yeah, there's quite a lot of people. Because I am a keen grower, vegetable grower particularly. I enjoy gardening but grower, so we've set up the Pink Growers Group so, that's a Facebook group with other lesbians who like to grow vegetables, whether it's allotment garden, window box, whatever, but want to do it but might need some help and support, or might be great and want to share their skills and support. We meet up a couple of times a year and share seeds, and advice, and what went well, what didn't go well, go and visit one another's plots or gardens or whatever it is that they've got.

We also go out. There's another kind of group that I'm involved in and co-organise where it's people who have retired, and we organise outings. It's a part of the tea group and the growing group and everything, but we might to go museums and go and visits gardens, exhibitions, go for lunch, play bowls.

Evelyn: Fantastic.

Teresa: We might say, "Oh, at our local cinema on a Wednesday for £3.50 you can see a current movie with a cup of tea and biscuit."

Evelyn: You fill the cinema.

Teresa: We fill the cinema. We go there and we watch movies, and then we might go and have lunch together, so it's making sure that people are connected. That's what's important to me is helping ways where people have got skills to share skills with other people, and where people might need help or some support, they can ask other people, but to not be isolated. If you move somewhere, and you don't know anybody, it can be a bit lonesome.

Evelyn: It's really hard.

Teresa: And particularly if relationships don't quite work out the way you hoped that they will work out.

Evelyn: Absolutely.

Teresa: And you need some friends and support, and it's not always your closest friends that you always need. Sometimes it's someone saying, "Oh, come on, there's this film up here. The group's going out. Come on." It's about trying to have those close networks because people do make very close friends from the groups but also having the broader network as well that's there when things aren't right.

As we get older, we're getting a bit ill. There's a lot of people across our friendship network who've had cancer and have cancer and are being treated, or other illnesses, or broken their legs, so we do those sorts of things, you know, "Are you okay? Do you need someone to keep in and do a bit of shopping?" It's a little bit of that kind of support as well locally, which I like. It's good fun. It's meeting new people, different people.

Evelyn: Fantastic. So, over all the years, there's been successful legislation and so on, and attitude and all changes. Do you feel you've really felt the impact of these?

Teresa: Well, my partner's quite a lot younger than myself, so I go out socially sometimes, but not very often, with her circle of friends. I'm somewhat bewildered by the fact that ... I'm not saying that people should be, but it seems like they have no politics at all. It feels like they take where we are for granted, and that they don't have to do anything about it, so I hear things like, "Oh, we don't need women-only spaces or lesbian-only spaces. Why can't we just go and do X, Y and Z?"

I think because they haven't been through the struggle that we had been through, and what worries me is that that will be stripped away from people. That will be stripped away from women. We won't have safe space for women because some of the things that go on and went on in our generation; harassment, abuse, lots of other things where you might ... Confusion about yourself, somewhere you want to go and talk. Those things

don't change. Those things haven't changed, so I think you do need safe space, and this whole new language, and I won't even try to talk to you about it because I don't even understand it. I have no … this binary. Well, I thought that was a maths thing. I did binary in school, and I thought it was a maths thing and non-gender.

Anyway, there's lots of this kind of modern language that I haven't got a clue what it actually means and what it's about. I kind of sense that it's meant to be that, but it's a way of not discriminating against anybody and their gender. I couldn't say that that was what's true. I'm just saying that that's kind of how it feels. And that people don't necessarily feel they belong in any particular gender. That they don't belong in any particular gender. That's all I can say. But I can't begin to say that I necessarily understand that.

Certainly, when I was coming out as a lesbian, I always felt that there was a spectrum of our gender. That sometimes some people did feel more feminine. Then you had the lipstick dykes who were much more feminine and wanted to wear lipstick, and dresses and all of that lot. You had the diesel dykes who didn't really relate to that at all.

I do think things are on a spectrum and that we can move in and out of the spectrum. But they don’t seem to … There's no voice. I don't hear ... It's like they say, "Well, why do we need that now?" That kind of frightens me in a way. That worries me. Because they've grown up or have landed where we are now. We have gay marriage, we have civil partnerships, we have discriminating laws or anti-discriminating laws in the workplace, et cetera. But we're not there. We're by no means there because people were attacked on a bus not many months ago.

Evelyn: Yeah, two women attacked.

Teresa: And injured. People are still killed. People are murdered all over the world. The church won't acknowledge things. There's still a fight to be had. We're not equals by any stretch of the imagination. I just feel like there's a silence. There's a silence that nobody is talking about, the things that still aren't right, the distance we still need to go, the wrongs that are still happening to lesbian and gay people.

There doesn't seem to be a voice anymore, and I don't know why that is. Is it because there are no places to gather, and meet and talk? Because many of the places that I went to don't exist anymore. I don't know whether Pink Paper still exists, but some of the newspapers that we used to get, some of the venues we used to have would be places to meet, to talk, to challenge, to think, because I had to learn to think. When I was first coming out, as I said, I didn't know what a lesbian was, I didn't know who I was, and I grew by talking, and being challenged, and looking and seeing what was happening. I'm not sure where people do that now.

I feel there's a silence or a whisper. There's just a little whisper out there in the younger generation. When I speak with them, they'd say that they don't see any need. They don't have a problem. I don't know. I'm a little

bewildered by that kind of view or where that view comes from, and are we using up a lot of time and effort talking about gender identity and losing sight of the bigger picture? I don't know. I'm not in those circles anymore, and they will have to know for the future because it may be their loss.

Evelyn: There's still a community to protect as a whole.

Teresa: Yeah. When I was born into the lesbian and gay community, women before me and men before me had gone through a lot to get me where I was, if you see what I mean. We've recently seen Gentleman Jack on the television, and we've read and heard about other people who have come out of the woodwork because they have been gay and lesbian that we probably wouldn't know about. It was those people who went through an awful lot to start moving us forward, and then we took up the challenge.

I'm not sure if anybody or many people out there are taking it forward. I don't know whether we've become complacent, that we think, "We've arrived." We haven't arrived. We find that if we think we've arrived, we will be vulnerable to people taking away what we have, that it'll be easy like in America where America have withdrawn gay marriages. It's a very slippery road that we are at. Unless people think about it and talk about it and start to do something about it, I do worry for future generations and the young people.

Evelyn: Yes, indeed, it's a worry. When you were thinking of me coming along today, is there anything else that you were thinking that you wanted to talk about that we haven't touched on?

Teresa: Gosh, I seem to have talked about a lot. I think I had touched on a bit at the beginning about how my mum was Chinese, and I couldn't tell my mom I was lesbian because there wasn't a word, it didn't exist, and my mother didn't speak a lot of English, so I had no way of knowing how to talk about it. I think we are comfortable here because we don't have the laws in other countries where we frequently see people being hung up, imprisoned, killed, tortured, whatever for being lesbian and gay, but we have to be aware that some cultures still don't have the words-

Evelyn: To even begin to think about it.

Teresa: Yeah, and we're privileged here. If you think of other people in other countries, they probably wouldn't have even seen The Killing of Sister George, never mind anything else. I think that we need to mindful and not to be too cozy about where we are because there's a bigger fight out there than our own doorstep. If we want freedom and equality hopefully for everybody, but particularly lesbian and gay people, we have to have our voices. We have to put our voices out there.

Even if you think we're done here, we're not done here, and we're not done out there. I didn't know that there weren't words. In terms of other things, I think once I actually came out and found a community, found places I could go, found places who were like-minded, the rest of life was a lot easier. And,

and that's another thing. If people can't find places to go and hang out, and meet, and socialise and have fun, how do people come out and follow that path? I don't know how people do it now. I must say, I don't know how people come out now because we had loads of places to come out.

Evelyn: And discover yourself.

Teresa: And discover, and explore, and sometimes you might explore and you realise, "Well,actually, that's not me." That's completely fine. But if it is you, how do you find you? I don't know.

Evelyn: A big question. We'll have to leave it to the younger generation to tell us maybe. Finally, thinking about that little Teresa at school with her connections and not knowing, what would you say to her?

Teresa: What would I say to her? I don't think I would have done anything different because the environment I was in shaped me then, but I would say try not to be frightened. Go out and find places that you can go to and meet people. Find a way of meeting people who are like-minded. Be brave, be proud, and don't shut your mouth. Speak. Don't lose your voice.

Evelyn: Speak out.

Teresa: Speak out, yeah.

Evelyn: That's fantastic. Well, Teresa, I think the community owes you a little gratitude for everything that you've put into it over all the years, and even now you're retired, you're still out there pulling people together and giving them safe spaces. Fantastic.

Teresa: And networking is really important. Connecting people is wonderful.

Evelyn: Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time.

Teresa: You're very welcome.

Evelyn: Thank you.