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Rebecca Heart oral history interview by Jessica Merrick, March 11, 2009

Rebecca Heart (Interviewee)

Jessica Merrick (Interviewer)

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Jessica Merrick: So, I’m sitting here talking with Rebecca—is it Heart?

“Rebecca Heart”: Heart.

JM: Heart. Okay. Um, so to start out, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself and how you grew up?

RH: Well, I grew up in New York, in Queens County, Woodside. I was born into an Irish Catholic family. They were very, very religious, (laughs) very strict in their beliefs. The whole idea of homosexuality was never—I don’t even think I knew what gay meant or homosexual was until I was in nursing school. It was just—you know, something they didn’t talk about, something they didn’t experience. And, it was a strict Catholic family. I went to a commercial high school, and I didn’t like commercial studies, and I—

(to cat) You better not do that.

(talking about cat) She’s thinking about it.

I had three options: to be a teacher, a nurse, or a secretary. I remember talking with my mother about that, and she said, “If you become a nurse, you’ll always have a job.” She didn’t say anything about the teaching, but I realized I couldn’t do it. I was too shy at that time. I was really shy. And secretarial work—I was dyslexic. I didn’t know it at the time, but I got everything all jumbled up, and we were doing shorthand and—oh! What a mess
that was. And typing—oh, my God! You know, we’d taken Regents Exams, which were state exams, and I remember when—(thumping noise, cat meows)

(to cat) You better get down.

JM: (laughs)

RH: (to cat) No, you better get down. Go down. Go ahead. No!

JM: (mimics cat) “But Mom, I want to be the center of attention!”

RH: Yeah, she is, always.

JM: (laughs)

RH: [to cat] That’s a good girl. Get down.

I remember taking that Regents Exam, and when they put the timer on, I went (whooshing sound), and jammed all the keys. It was really tough.

JM: Oh, no.

RH: I knew I couldn’t be a secretary, ’cause I didn’t like it. And the only thing left was nursing. I looked into some nursing schools, and I liked the one in St. Clare’s in New York, and I applied and I got in. So, I went there for three years, and got a diploma in nursing. And after that, most of my friends were getting married, and I knew that wasn’t an option for me. I didn’t know why, but I knew I would never—I couldn’t. I had dated the world, I think. I had gone out with so many different men—or guys—and I didn’t have any feeling for them. I thought, “How could I build a marriage on nothing?” You know?

So, I didn’t. And actually, what happened was I was very depressed. I don’t particularly think I liked nursing, but I did it because it was like the least of the worst choices, because they were so limited to women. It was the fifties [1950s]. I was depressed through nursing school. I had a headache for three years. And then, when I got out, I was good at it. It wasn’t hard to do, and I liked the patients and all. I didn’t have a problem with the work or anything, but I was just depressed, so I went on retreat. That’s what good Irish Catholic girls do. So, I went on retreat. I made an eight-day retreat, because I had—I knew I had to make some choices in my life, but I didn’t see too many options. In that retreat, I had an experience of God, and it was a very powerful experience and it really turned my life around. And I realized after that that I wanted a spiritual life more than I wanted a married life or any other kind of life.

I started exploring different religious communities, and I ended up in the Franciscans, the ones that taught and ran the hospital that I worked in. I read the Life of St. Francis, and I really liked his belief system, his philosophy. I applied, and I was accepted, so I went off
to Alleghany, New York, when I was twenty-four, ’cause I had worked a couple of years after nursing. I was in there for fourteen years, and it was really a very pivotal experience for me. It was a really, really good experience, and I came out to myself during those years in the convent. I really got a grip on what homosexuality was, who I was, and that I was really a very good person trying to lead the best life I could. So, nobody could tell me I was evil or bad, or any of that other crap that you hear.

When I left, I was in a good place. Most women, I don’t think are, but I was. I went into therapy—I guess for a year before I left. And you know, I was able to start a life. You know, I met some gay women, and I got into the circles, and there was quite a few ex-nuns in the group I was in. There’s a spirituality circle—actually, I met Allison in the spirituality thing. We would meet once a month, called it Catholic Conference of Lesbians, and half of them were ex-nuns! I was amazed. But I think that they were in for the same reason, you know: they couldn’t deal with their homosexuality, and they went to God about it.

JM: Was that something you ever talked about with the other women while you were there? Was there anybody, you know, at the time that—?

RH: I wasn’t—I didn’t talk about it to anybody in the convent. I talked about it to—I had a priest, a therapist, and I talked to him about it. I don’t know if I really talked to him about it, either. It was something I was working out myself. And I wasn’t—when I left the convent, I wasn’t—actually, when I was leaving, I had an affair with a volunteer that came for the summer. And it ended quickly, because she was involved with somebody else, and that was really sad, because I really, really, really loved her. So, I actually found out what love was, on the way out of the convent.

Um—did I talk to anybody about it? No, I don’t think I did. I don’t think I did. It was something I was working out for myself. But, I left in a very good spot, you know. I felt very confident and very okay with who I was, which I needed to be. And then I went—I met many different people, and I eventually ended up with a woman that I was with for fourteen years. We just broke up in 2006. And since then, I’ve been single, and I haven’t met—I mean, I’ve met a lot of women. There’s a lot of women around here, retired women or semi-retired. But I haven’t met a life partner. So, hopefully I will at some point, and maybe not. You know, that just may be the way it’ll be, and I’m okay with that.

And, that’s why I value community, because I don’t have a partner that’s going to be available to me if I need help physically or mentally or any way. So, the community is available, you know—in maybe not as personal or intimate way as a partner, but they’re helpful. Like, they’ll meet you or take you to the doctor or pick you up or drive you if you have to bring your car down, they’ll follow you down and bring you back. There’s always friends and people around. Or the airport run, from here to Tampa. I think that the longer we’re here and the older we get, the more we realize that we need each other.
And that was the whole essence of [the neighborhood], was to help each other with the aging process. I thought it was really a wonderful concept. And I think it’s coming more to fruition as we get older and have more needs. You know, like Carme in the hospital now. People are really—they care about Evelyn and we’re trying to help her out, like walking the dog and all that—you know, bringing her meals, or having her for dinner, or—it’s all kinds of little things that support each other. So, I think that’s the basis of this community—

JM: Yeah.

RH: —which is really nice and really good.

JM: You were telling me you found out about it online?

RH: Yeah, I did. I went online. But then, also, the other reason I found out about it was Allison over there. I had known her in [New] Jersey, and the word was out that Allison had bought a place in Florida, which surprised a lot of us, because she had a really nice house in Jersey with a heart-shaped pool, and we had a lot of our services, our meetings, there. She was always offering her place. You know, we were really familiar with it. And then, she came down to—what was the name of it? Silver Threads¹. And, she came on a little side trip to [the neighborhood], because she met the women that were in the end house. She liked it so much that she put an offer on a piece of property, and she got it. And then, she actually built a place, and then moved. We were all startled to hear—“Allison’s moved to Florida!”

I guess it was like almost a year later. I called her, and I said—I was with (…) at the time, and I said, “We’d like to stop by and visit you, because we’re looking at the west coast.” We had looked at the east coast, and I didn’t like it at all. It was just too busy and too crowded, and a lot of New Yorkers.

JM: (laughs)

RH: You know what I mean? They brought all the chaos of the city with them. So, Allison invited us. I actually rented the guesthouse, which was—it’s not on the property anymore; they sold it since then.

But, I think I stayed there for two weeks, and I got to meet everybody, the people that were living here, and I thought they were really nice. I got to see a lot of the homes, because they were having parties. They had all kinds of things, and I got invited. Actually, I went to one party, and I didn’t know anybody! (laughs) They had invited me, because they knew I was visiting Allison, and she couldn’t go. So I remember meeting (…) and (…) who used to live next door. They were just a nice group of people. And I liked (…) and (…), because they had a Down syndrome son, and I thought, “Wow!” that

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¹ The Silver Threads Celebration is an annual event targeted at older lesbians.
they had room in the community for [their son] who was Down syndrome, and everybody really liked him. He had a little job of delivering the *Watermark*² to everybody’s home.

JM: [Their son] lives here, too?

RH: Yeah, [their son]’s here. (...) and (...) and [their son]. I think [their son]’s like fifty-eight, and he has difficulties with speech. He’s really impaired. But you know, he loves everybody. He loves to give everybody a big hug and kiss. He’s really sweet.

So, I met all of them, and when I was leaving, I said very nonchalantly, “If anything ever comes up, let me know,” because nothing was available. There were no houses for sale, and they hadn’t developed the back. They only had the very small triplexes, and I knew (...) and I could never make it in one of those little houses. We just had too much stuff.
So, I said, “If anything’s available, let me know.”

So, that was—I think that was February that I said that, and in like July, I was in Rehoboth Beach and I got a phone call from a friend down here—who hasn’t lived here, but she knew everybody. And she said this place was for sale, (...)’s—(...) and (...). This was one of the only places I hadn’t been in, and I said to myself, “How different could it be?” All the other homes are so lovely, and everybody had kind of—like there’s the same floor plan, but when they were building them they could move rooms around, or put doors in different places. But, basically, the floor plan was—like the bedrooms are on one side, and the garage and guest rooms on the other.

I thought, Well, how different could it be? So, I put an offer on it. This was all over the phone and the fax. And I got it. I don’t know how I ever got it, but I got it. I—[the previous owners] lived here from September to January, and then they moved to the back, and they rented from me. The house took care of itself. I didn’t have to worry about a thing. When they moved out, I asked the realtor to advertise for another renter, because I really wasn’t ready to retire. I figured I had another four years. The community here saw the sign—or saw the ad that was in the newsletter—and they were wild, because they said there’s something in the condo regulations that you can’t rent on this side. And I said, “Well, what do you think we were doing for six months?” (laughs)

But, anyway, they got really livid. Some of the older people here, they didn’t want any part of renting—my renting. In the meantime, they did have somebody renting over here. I was furious with them, but—and then there were some people telling me I had a case, a court case; I could bring it to court. And then I thought, Do I want to do this? Here I’m starting out my life in a new community. Do I want to start it with a lawsuit?

JM: Yeah.

RH: And I thought that wouldn’t be really good, and I needed to make a decision. And then somebody else was saying, “I’ll buy your house from you.” I hadn’t even been in it. I’m getting a call, “I’ll buy it,” you know? And I thought, “Do I want to hang onto it, and

² Watermark is a Florida-based LGBT publication.
try to make this work for me, or do I want to just get rid of it?” And I thought—and that went on, that question, back and forth for months. At work, people were laughing, because they were saying, “What are you going to do today, Rebecca? Are you buying? Are you selling? Or are you going to stay?”

JM: (laughs)

I ended up keeping it, and I took another little job to pay the mortgage. That went on for a year, and then I thought—

JM: So, you kept it, but with no renters.

RH: No renters. It was empty—it was empty—

JM: Jeez.

RH: —which was terrible, because—you know, look at the news and people are starving in the world—

JM: What were they concerned about? What did they think—was it about who you’d rent to?

RH: You know, it really is a non-issue, because the renters have to be approved by the board of the association, so they have a lot of control.

(talking about cat) She’s loud, isn’t she?

JM: She’s a really loud purrer.

RH: (laughs) She’s awfully sweet.

JM: Sounds like a bird, almost, the noise she’s making.

RH: She’s really loud, yeah.

JM: (laughs)

RH: Actually swallowed something. (laughs) But she is a cutie. She is really a sweet little kitty.

But, anyway, after a year of it, I decided I’d just try to sell my house, and if my house sold then I’d come down. Well, I put my house on the market, and it sold in a week. So, I came down in September. (laughs)

JM: (laughs) Sorry, it’s so funny. (talking about cat)
RH: She’s so funny. She is funny. And she loves to lick. She’ll give you a bath.

JM: She thinks she’s a dog.

RH: Oh, she doesn’t stop licking. She’ll just drive you nuts with the licking. Oh, my. (laughs)

JM: (laughs)

RH: She’s so cute. And the other cat is the total opposite. He didn’t purr for three years.

JM: Really?

RH: It took him three years to have a little purr, and it’s so low you can hardly hear it. And he doesn’t want any affection—

JM: (laughs) What was the occasion for his purr?

RH: I don’t—I was really working on him, you know, telling him how beautiful he was and how much I loved him. Finally, he started to purr a little bit.

JM: (laughs)

RH: You know, it’s strange. They’re at opposite ends of the continuum of responsiveness, like she’s over the top and he’s not even on it.

JM: Are they a couple at all? Do they, like, lay together and stuff?

RH: She loves to do that, but he takes it—very small doses of it. Very small doses. He gets annoyed with her, ’cause she’s just over—she’s over the top. She wants to give him a bath every time she sees him, and he doesn’t want any part of it. No part of it at all. He just pushes her away, fights her.

JM: (laughs) Aw.

RH: And every time she sees him, she just gives him a full body rub, a swipe, and he backs away. You can see him back into the wall.

JM: I’ve never seen such an affectionate cat before. She really is.

RH: I know. She is. She’s a sweetheart.

JM: Right in my lap.

RH: She—I actually took him to the pet psychic at church. They had a pet health day.
JM: (laughs)

RH: There was a pet psychic and animal communicator. He was so unhappy! He was so unhappy. He never purred. He was just terrible. She said he wanted a fun female. That’s what he told her. He told her his whole story, which was tragedy. He was totally traumatized. No wonder he didn’t purr.

JM: (laughs) From what?

RH: He was very abused. He was abandoned and abused—oh, it was terrible! And when I got him, he was really ill. He was very, very sick. I mean, I think we spent over a thousand dollars at the vet trying to get him healthy. His eyes were red; he had so much inflammation in his body.

JM: Did you find him out on the street?

RH: He was roaming around the neighborhood here. Nobody wanted him. I was still up in Jersey—it was 2003. I had just had surgery, and I was coming back in January, and my partner at that time—we got a phone call from (...) and (...) that there was this really very nice little black cat wandering the street and needed a home. Would we take him? And I really didn’t want another cat, ’cause I wasn’t feeling well, and (...) said yes, ’cause she thought I would, ’cause I love animals. And after she hung up the phone, I said, “I really didn’t want a cat, but now we got one.” He came before I ever came down.

JM: He was the first person to live here.

RH: And he was sick as all get out, and it took him a long time to get well. And then like three years later he’s still not purring—maybe it wasn’t. It was a year, and I took him to the pet psychic, and she said he wanted a fun female. So—do you know what kinesiology is?

JM: Uh, yeah.

RH: Muscle testing? My neighbor, who’s not there now, is a chiropractor, and used muscle testing—for supplements, for food supplements. I said, “(...) will you come with me to the animal shelters, because I want to find a cat that Fluffy will like. I want to find the fun female that he wants.” So, we went and we tested all these cats. I was Fluffy, and we muscle tested.

JM: (laughs)

RH: I tried to get into the Fluffy mode, you know, into his space, and muscle test. And a couple places we just didn’t find any. We kept going back, a couple of different days, and some of the—

JM: What do you do to test the muscles on a cat? How do you do it?
RH: Well, I held her, and then (...) tested me. Is this the best cat for Fluffy? She was yes—

JM: (laughs) It’s a very holistic approach to that.

RH: Mm-hm. She was a “yes,” and there was another one that was not quite as gregarious as her that also tested—and actually, the first one would have been better. She was the second choice. The first one would have been better, because she was more subdued. Fluffy does not need this high-powered cat. She’s an alpha cat all the way, takes right over. And he didn’t want any part of that. He will not give up the throne.

JM: (laughs)

RH: I don’t know if he’s there. He’s not there. But she—you know, she takes right over, steps right in like she’s always been there. I love her totally. Fluffy tolerates her. He didn’t get the fun female.

JM: (laughs) She’s really fun, though.

RH: She is fun. She’s a lot of fun.

JM: Maybe the psychic got it wrong?

RH: I don’t know. He wanted a fun female, somebody that he could lord it over, and she’s not the one. (laughs)

JM: (laughs) That’s too funny.

RH: Yeah. But I think he does like her, he just doesn’t want to admit it, and she totally adores him. She just adores him. As soon as she sees him, she’s right there.

JM: (sighs) Sorry, we got a little off (laughs) subject.

RH: Yeah. I forget, what were we—I was talking about. Oh, the community. Yeah, it’s actually a good community. There’s a lot of people that are very willing. And you know, it’s very friendly. As I said, when I came down I didn’t know anybody, and I just was welcomed.

I got the house—well, anyway, I got the house. I hadn’t seen it. When I walked in, I thought, “Oh, my God, what did I do?” ’cause it looked like a warehouse. It was all white. Everything was white, and it was very large—you know, the interior. But I’ve been trying to work with that, warm it up, and paint it, arrange furniture. So, you know, it’s been through different evolutions. That’s where it is right now.
(…) and I separated in 2006. She—you know, she took some things with her. She actually rented in the back. It was very amicable, the breakup, and we’re still good friends. But—you know, at this point in life, I’m not into fighting and arguing about stupid stuff. We’ve maintained a pretty nice friendship.

JM: And she still lives here?

RH: She did live there for a couple years, and then she met a woman in [nearby location], and she moved in with her. Probably, maybe, a year and a half ago. They’re very happy. And I did have—I was in a relationship with a woman from Jersey, who’s still working and living there, which was really hard. We broke up, but we’re friends, too. So, you know, I’m kind of on my own right now, without any really close attachments, just friends.

JM: Is that—I mean, I don’t know, if this is maybe a typical question; but is that hard or good, being in this kind of community? Because on one hand you could say—

RH: Oh, I think it’s good, I do. I think it’s good because you’re a part of things—you know, like when there’s a party you’re always invited. You know, I have friends within the group that I’m more close to, like Evelyn and Carme and I used to always go to the pool together. Every day, we would be swimming. So, that’s nice. And I’m friendly with Allison. I think Carme and Evelyn and Pat and Marge are my closest friends, and then there’s like levels of friendships, you know, and then there’s acquaintances, and then there’s people you just say hello to. (laughs)

But, they’re all very willing to help if you need anything. Everybody is. They’ll call up and ask—“I’m going to the store” —if you’re ill, if you can’t do it yourself. When I had surgery for a basal cell carcinoma—and I didn’t think it would be very big, but it was huge, and I had a big pressure dressing on it. I really wasn’t up to going to the grocery store. People would call me and say they’re going out to the store, did I need anything? So I put my order in, and they’d bring it. It was nice.

JM: That’s nice.

RH: It’s very nice. You know, you didn’t have to ask people, they would ask you what you needed. And they do that a lot; if they know you’re ill or if anything’s going on with you, they’ll step up to the plate. That’s a real plus—particularly when you’re single. Even as a partner, it’s good to have friends that’ll help out, because it can get overwhelming. It has advantages.

I think we’ve got the concept of what we wanted, which was aging together as gay and lesbians. And, it’s so nice to be able to be out. You don’t have to worry about—you know, people not accepting you. Everybody just accepts everybody.

JM: Right. Were you out before you came here?
RH: Mm-hm.

JM: You were.

RH: Yeah. Yeah, I finally came out at work, and a lot of them knew. And I was pretty much out to my family. So, yeah, I was generally out to most of my friends.

JM: Does it—your neighborhood before, though, did you have to act differently then than you did when you first moved here?

RH: Uh—you know, where I lived in Jersey, I only knew my neighbors on either side of me. I was working so much I really didn’t see them very often. Here, I’m not working, and you see each other much more often. It’s a different—it’s a whole different situation. It’s a whole different setup. It’s much more social and more leisure, which is really nice; whereas, in Jersey it was just work. Mostly my focus was working. And the social end of it would be with my gay friends, who didn’t live in the neighborhood. We’d have to have parties, or—we did a lot of the spirituality thing.

(to cat) Are you gonna purr now? Come on, let’s hear you.

JM: (laughs)

RH: He’s so low. He’s so—you really have to listen really, really hard. But he’s a beautiful cat.

JM: Yeah, he is.

RH: He’s a perfect gentleman. Perfect. Muffy is a little wild, but he’s not. He’s perfect.

JM: Did he break his tail before?

RH: He was injured as a kitten. I think it was in a car. It’s really bent—you know, the cartilage is really all damaged. It must have hurt terribly. He was very traumatized.

JM: We had a cat that—he always liked to be around the windows. We have those blinds where you pull—Well, one time we heard him just meowing so loud, and we ran in the room and he was hanging. His tail had gotten—

RH: Oh, caught in there?

JM: —tied somehow, tied around his tail, and he was hanging.

RH: Oh! God. Must hurt.

JM: It was really bad after that.
RH: (to cat) What are you up to here, Muffy?

So, I know. He’s been traumatized a lot. But—where did he go? I guess he’s gone.

I forget—what were we talking about?

JM: Um— Well, I think—

RH: Just the community?

JM: Yeah. How has your view changed since you moved in? How has it changed over time?

RH: I think I had a very idealistic view when I moved in, and I think the reality is that no matter who you are, there’s still the interpersonal—you know, like pulls. It pulls and tugs. It’s just people with different opinions and different views, and trying to live with all that, trying to work it out. I think sometimes gay people are a little bit—I think straight people are more, in some ways, easier. Sometimes gays get very—they’re very adamant and very fixed in their opinions on things sometimes.

JM: More so than—

RH: More so than heterosexual people, sometimes—they go with the flow more easily, sometimes. I mean, we’ve had some issues and arguments and discussions that, you know, I thought, “My God, we’re all crazy!” (laughs) What are we making such a big monumental thing about? I don’t know. I think if you were in a straight community, it wouldn’t be so such a big deal.

JM: What kind of things get to be a big deal?

RH: Oh, you know, one time we had an issue about a sign over there. They were advertising, and it was like a big meeting and a big—I thought, “Oh, my God, we’re all crazy.” You know, a sign—we’re trying to sell homes, so of course you’re going to advertise. But this part of the community didn’t necessarily want the sign there. So, we had big—we went around with it, you know. It was kind of nuts, I thought. And in a straight community, I don’t think you’d have all that. But, I don’t know.

JM: Do you think maybe it has to do a little bit with size, too? Because this is smaller, there’s more—people know each other better, so there’s just bound to be more tension, naturally.

RH: Yeah, it could be. You know, we do know each other, and we do—we meet—well, we have meetings four times a year. It’s not that much. But you know, it’s just rubbing shoulders with people. And everybody has their own ideas and opinions. It’s not as idealistic as I thought it would be. It’s more real. It’s reality. But still, there’s an awful lot
of goodwill, and that’s the bottom line. People are really there to help each other. Even though, you know, sometimes we have some pretty heated arguments, but it blows over.

JM: Yeah.

RH: It seems like things happen and people flare up, and then they calm down. It’s almost like a way of operating.

JM: Oh, okay.

RH: If there’s an issue, it’s like (hissing noise), everybody’s up in the air, and then they calm down, let it go.

JM: So, it’s kind of like a pattern?

RH: It’s almost like—it’s the gay drama.

JM: (laughs)

RH: You know, it’s not some little thing you can let it go. It’s got to be the drama, and then it settles. And I say that, too, when people—new people—coming in say, “Oh, my God, everybody’s so upset.” And I’ll say, “That’s how we do it.”

JM: (laughs)

RH: We get wild and upset, and then it’s fine. Everybody’s back to, “Oh, hi, how are ya?” You know?

JM: (laughs)

RH: Not always, but you know, it’s something that I’ve grown to—learn to expect, and deal with, and realize that it’s just—it’s how we do it.

JM: Was it not that way with your group of friends in Jersey?

RH: Mm-mm [no]. No, we didn’t have the close community. Everybody had their own little houses, and we were far apart, in different towns and different areas.

JM: Were you friends with mostly women, or men and women?

RH: Uh, both.

JM: Oh, okay.

RH: Mostly—predominantly women, but there were men, too. And I had a lot of straight friends, because of work. I was working as an advanced practice psych nurse, so I was
working with a lot of therapists. You know, I got to be really good friends with them. I’m still in touch with a lot of them, even though it’s like five years now, since I’ve been back—since I’ve been working in Jersey. When I go back, I usually try to visit, try to get together, at least have lunch or dinner or something. We call it “the alumni,” ’cause we worked in a mental health center. Oh, God. And we call it “the alumni” from the Drenk Mental Health Center in New Jersey. You graduate from it: if you come out alive, you’re lucky.

JM: (laughs)

RH: But it was good. It was—you know, it was really the dredges of practice, but good. We learned a lot.

JM: Yeah.

RH: I’m glad I’m not doing it, though. It was too much, too stressful.

JM: Yeah.

RH: Yeah. I always had jobs that were like that, that were very stressful.

JM: How would you describe your neighborhood, in terms of the kind of people who live here?

RH: Um— We kind of are homogeneous, in the sense that we’re all like relatively—within a certain age group. There’s like—most of us are like fifties, late fifties, sixties; probably at this point, I’d say the majority are in their sixties. And there’s more—there’s only one or two that are like older, and maybe a few more that are younger. But I’d say the bulk is in like their sixties.

And—uh—on this side, Phase I, there’s more men than women, which I’m not that crazy about. I’d like to have more of a balance, have more women, so I’ve been praying that these empty houses would be bought by women. But so far, nobody’s bought them, because they’re having so much trouble getting credit. The banks aren’t lending.

JM: That’s upsetting.

RH: Yeah. And in back, there’s more women, which is really nice. But this side is like more settled. Most of us have been here longer, and the energy is different. It’s more subdued, and more settled and more in place. The back—they’re newer, and they have a lot more energy, and they’re enthusiastic and they want to do things, plant things. Like, everything here is planted. You know what I mean? Like gardens and stuff.

JM: Pretty much done.
RH: Yeah, it’s pretty much done. I mean, people do—like (...) and (...) are gardeners, so they’re always transplanting and putting in new things. But back there, it seems like everybody’s doing it, you know, developing their landscaping. But most of it’s settled here. It’s a different tone.

JM: Yeah.

RH: I think that just—’cause we’ve been here longer. Is that what you wanted? Is that an answer?

JM: Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um— What do you find most important about living here?

RH: I think it’s the fact that I like knowing everybody, and just going out and talking to everybody. Everybody that you see stops and talks. It’s a very friendly place, and I would miss that if I wasn’t here, ’cause I don’t think I’ve ever lived in a community that was as open and accepting. Well, ’cause we’re all in the same situation. We’re all gay. But just—you know, accepting of who you are, just welcoming. I think that they’re all pretty welcoming, generally. There’s a few that aren’t. But you know, that’s how people are. People are different.

JM: Can you tell me about some of the functions and parties that happen here?

RH: Well, we usually have—we have the traditional, like the biggest time of year is like from Thanksgiving through Christmas—through New Year’s, really. We have potlucks, and sometimes people have just dinner parties, and they invite a few friends, different ones at each time. Mostly holiday things. They have a regatta that they do on the back, on the pond, where they have sail—little boats. They can’t race them. They wanted to, but because—it’s the same amount of energy, the same battery power for each of them, so they don’t—there’s no winning. But they give prizes, like for the most decorative or the—they make up all kinds of categories, and they give prizes for that. Little prizes, you know, but it’s fun. They have ice cream festivals in the back.

JM: Oh, fun! And you go to all that stuff in the back?

RH: I usually do. Oh, yeah, they invite—anything in the community, it’s open for everybody.

JM: How do people know about it? Is it on the website?

RH: Yeah, we have e-mail, we e-mail. Almost everybody has e-mail, and the ones that don’t, they get a handwritten—or they get calls, phone calls. But they’re gonna do a car racing thing, I think it is, in the cul de sac. That’s coming up. I don’t remember the date, but that’s on the calendar. There’s a St. Patrick’s Day party coming up on Saturday. It’s not St. Patrick’s Day, it’s the fourteenth, but it’s St. Patrick’s Day; that’s what he’s celebrating. He’s making—it’s Ernest and Max D., they’re making corned beef and cabbage, I think.
JM: Oh, how nice.

RH: I think. They’re making it really traditionally Irish. I was gonna make Irish soda bread, but I have to look for the recipes, ’cause I have some recipes, but I haven’t made it in a while. Um, a lot of good cooks, excellent cooks here—and the guys, especially. And (...) is a wonderful baker. He makes great desserts. And Matilda is also an excellent cook. She cooks Italian food; she’s wonderful. Everybody likes to know when Matilda’s cooking—

JM: (laughs)

RH: —because they’ll be here. We had a Mardi Gras party not too long ago.

JM: Yeah, I was—that’s where I first met you.

RH: Oh, you were there! That was fun, yeah. And Allison always has a Halloween party. She has a tree decorating party, because she’s disabled and she has everybody decorating her tree. And it’s a little, teeny-weeny tree, and she has like thousands of ornaments.

JM: (laughs) That’s funny.

RH: But she gets every one on the tree. I don’t know how, but she does. And she has usually a Christmas morning—like a brunch. Usually for Christmas Eve there’s no big—not Christmas Eve, but Christmas Day; there’s no big dinner. People have their friends, you know, ones that they’re closest to for dinner. And New Year’s—we’ve traditionally had New Year’s Eve, but often we don’t stay up till midnight. Like, (...) had a party a couple years ago. Everybody left at ten o’clock.

JM: (laughs)

RH: We’re not that late out; we’re not keeping late hours here. But, you know—I went to a New Year’s Eve party in the back with some of the women, and it was a pajama party. It was really fun. But we didn’t last. We started, I think, at six, and we ended about ten thirty, and I came home and I watched it with the cats coming down—the ball coming down on Times Square. So it’s—we’re seniors, you know. Even though we’re gay, we’re still—we’re at that time of life where your things are just slowing down a bit.

JM: Is that pretty normal, to have something—like a pajama party for the women, and maybe separate things for men?

RH: Yeah, they—guys—yeah, the men have their own—you know, some of them have their own. They have happy hours together at night, some of the guys do. (...) had a—I think last year he had an all guys—I think it was St. Patrick’s Day party. I think. I forget. I was doing something else, and I remember coming home late and they were all coming out.
JM: Is that ever anything that gets on anybody’s nerves, that it’s separated, or is that sort of a good thing?

RH: No, ’cause I have movie night for the women every Saturday. I don’t really care what they think.

JM: (laughs)

RH: I mean, I like to be around women, you know?

JM: Right, right.

RH: And once in a while, we do movie night and a potluck. It’s not that often, like if there’s somebody’s birthday, or somebody’s going back up north, or coming, or just arriving or something—some reason—we’ll have a potluck and the movie. And it’s women.

JM: That’s kind of interesting, ’cause you were earlier talking about [another retirement community] and you were saying that maybe you wouldn’t want to live somewhere that was all women.

RH: Right.

JM: But still, even living here, you still want to spend time—

RH: Oh, you want to be with the women! I mean, I do, and I really would like more women to live here. I mean, the guys are—they’re really—there are some of them really, really, really nice, you know. They’re really sweet. But, I don’t know. I just like to be around women. I don’t socialize with them as much as I do with women. I don’t socialize—I mean, I’m friendly with all the guys, and we work on committees together. We’re on the board together. Whenever there’s any decisions, it’s always everybody in it. But when it comes to socializing, it’s—even at a party, you’ll see all the women together and all the guys together, you know?

JM: But you wouldn’t prefer to live in an all-women community?

RH: No, I didn’t like it. Well, I didn’t like [the other community] ’cause I thought it was—I didn’t like the mobile homes. I didn’t think—’cause I would be a full-timer, and I just didn’t think they would stand up in a hurricane.

JM: What if it could be a place like this, though?

RH: With all women?

JM: Mm-hm.
RH: It would probably be all right. I think I would probably be okay. There just wasn’t anything, when I was looking. Yeah, that would be all right. I would be okay with that, all women.

JM: Because it’s just—I mean, you tend to see, you know, in the real world, or whatever, the men and the women kind of—

RH: Gravitate towards each other anyway.

JM: Yeah.

RH: Yeah. It’s kind of a nice mix, in the sense that it gives some stability to the community, the mix of men and women.

JM: You think so?

RH: I do. I do. You know, we think differently, and—I don’t know. I can’t say it’s been bad. I might not have chosen it, if it wasn’t here—you know, if there were other options. But it has advantages, it has its advantages. And the guys are really good. I mean, they’re good to us. I mean, I haven’t met anybody that’s been really a problem. They’re very nice. They’re very good guys.

JM: And how do you feel about the—that there’s a straight couple that lives here?

RH: I think that’s fine. I do. And I think eventually there may be more.

JM: Okay.

RH: I just think the way the market is. And if they want to live here—I mean, that’s fine if they—When we had the first—we actually had two straight couples, but [one couple] left; they went up to [nearby location]. They wanted a bigger house. They were the first straight couple to come in here. And there was a big ruckus in the community. It was like a big discussion and all. But actually, I thought it worked out very well. She ended up being on our board—no, not on the board, she was on the social committee. And they were really nice. They had a gay son.

JM: Oh, okay.

RH: And he lived with them from time to time. I thought it was fine. They were very—she was a very nice lady. He was a naval officer, I think, and he was a little bit more standoffish. But, they weren’t difficult people at all, I didn’t find. I liked them. And the people that are in the back, (…) and (…) are wonderful. They’re on the board. (…)’s very active. And she works up in [nearby location] and he works in [nearby location] so this was just right in the middle. And they liked the house.
JM: It’s really neat to see that—it sounds like everybody gets along pretty well.

RH: Mm-hm.

JM: Considering that people could easily say, “I came here to have gay neighbors. I don’t want you living here.” So it’s—I wonder about how it was that they were able to move in and it turned out so well.

RH: Well, we can’t discriminate. That’s what people have done to us. We really can’t, legally. I thought it worked out well.

JM: Are you involved in anything outside of stuff that goes on here? Do you do anything in the city?

RH: I don’t volunteer, if that’s what you mean. No.

JM: Or just—I don’t know if you have any clubs or anything you do.

RH: I belong to the church—MCC, Metropolitan Community Church. I help them, I volunteer a little bit with them. I mean, they would have me volunteering of every minute of every day.

JM: (laughs)

RH: They always have so many needs. But, I go down. I was helping with—like, I help with projects. They have a—what is it?—a conference, a women in ministry conference. I go down for that weekend and I help them with the nitty-gritty stuff—like kitchen, I help, or sell things. You know, I’ll just be there as an extra. And they have a cleaning day—I usually go down for that—where they do the whole place. They scrub everything that they have. And they had a thrift shop—a flea market day—so I went down for that. But I don’t like to commit to, like, every week. There’s other things that come up, and I just don’t want them to be counting on me if I am not gonna show. I just do, like, specific things, short-term.

And, I have done some past life regression. I started doing that up in New Jersey with clients.

JM: What is it?

RH: Past life regression therapy.

JM: Oh.

RH: And I continued it here, not on a very vast basis. But there’s a center in [nearby location], the (…).
JM: Okay.

RH: I actually spoke with the owner when I came down, and he invited me to practice there. I occasionally have clients—not often, but some people will want to have a session and I’ll go down and do it with them.

JM: Neat.

RH: And I’ve done workshops down there on past life regression, which have been fun, but I haven’t done any this year. The last workshop—

JM: Are you saying “regression”?

RH: Yeah, past life regression. It’s like reincarnation—

JM: At first I thought you said “aggression.” I thought—

RH: Past life aggression? (laughs)

JM: —being mean in your past life. (laughs)

RH: No, no, it’s really just delving into your psyche and finding out where you’ve been and what you’ve done prior to this life. You have to believe in reincarnation, or else it doesn’t work. But anyway, that is always fun, and I really loved working at the Center. I also have learned recently, Quantum Touch; it’s an energy modality, healing modality.

JM: Okay.

RH: I’ve been working at that. I’ve been trying to do that on anybody that wanted any kind of help, you know, with anything physical, any kind of physical ailment.

JM: Is that sort of like acupuncture, where you touch in certain parts and that responds?

RH: No, it’s not like that. It’s more like reiki, a laying-on of hands, and just working and directing energy into that area. I got certified as a practitioner, and I’d like to continue it and become an instructor, because I really love it. And I did a workshop during the—what was it?—Silver Threads, up in [nearby location] in January. I did an hour with them, with Quantum Touch, just an introductory hour to show them what it was about and how you might do it. It was pretty well received. I had about twenty-four women in that class. And then I did a past life regression class up there also, a workshop, and I had twenty-four different women.

JM: That’s good.

RH: So, I mean, there’s interest, and I put an ad in the ProSuzy. Have you seen that?

3 ProSuzy is a lesbian-oriented website and mailing list.
JM: Yeah.

RH: And I put an ad in there for past life regression, but I haven’t had one response.

JM: Hmm. That’s surprising.

RH: Yeah. And I did a workshop—well, it wasn’t really a workshop. There’s this thing called a Singles Mingle up in—[nearby location], it is. And I went to it a couple times, and then I told them what I did. And one day, she called me up and she said their guest speaker wasn’t coming, had cancelled at the last minute; would I do a past life regression? And I said I would, so I did, and a lot of people turned out for that, a lot of women turned out. That was probably, maybe, thirty. And I did it, and some of them really got into some really good stuff. Others couldn’t do it at all. But that’s usually how it is; it’s a gamut. People just can’t get it, or they don’t do it, or don’t want it, or whatever reason they don’t experience anything. And other people just run with it. They can get into all kinds of past lives or issues, all kinds of information. It’s fascinating. I just love it.

JM: Yeah, sounds interesting.

RH: I love it. I absolutely love it.

JM: So, it sounds like the area has, you know, that you can do that in [nearby location] and stuff. Are you pretty happy to be living in this part of Florida? Do you like it?

RH: Oh, I like the west coast, I do. We’re a little further north of the action. [Nearby location] has a lot more going on, in terms of activities and events and craft shows and plays and the whole thing. We’re a little bit away. And you’ll hear people say—up here, they’ll say, “Oh, it’s so far.” I don’t think it’s far, ’cause, I mean, I used to go to the (...) and it was forty-five minutes, and I just get on [Interstate] 75 and zip down. But it is removed from the—you know, from the thick of everything. But we’re really very close to [nearby location], but I don’t really hear a lot of people running into [nearby location].

JM: Really?

RH: No.

JM: I mean, I don’t know—

RH: I know (...) does.

JM: They’ve got a pretty good gay scene in [nearby location].

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4 Singles Mingle is a social mixer for single people to make new friends, network, and meet potential dating prospects.
RH: Yeah, it does. It does, yeah. I think as much as they have in [nearby location], maybe even more.

JM: Definitely a lot of people I know hang out in [nearby location].

RH: Right. And ProSuzy advertises a lot of what’s going on [in a nearby location] rather than down here. But there are some things going on here, but not as much.

JM: Are you happy with—I guess this is probably a lot more—I don’t know where you’re from in Jersey, but is this a lot more rural than from what you’re used to?

RH: Yeah. I was in South Jersey. It was ten minutes outside of Philadelphia [Pennsylvania].

JM: Okay. So, yeah.

RH: It was more city. And we were in a suburb, but it was close to everything. Yeah, this is—it’s a little more rural, you know. Lot of cows and horses (laughs) taking any of the back roads, the back streets.

JM: I saw some cows. (laughs)

RH: Yeah. I mean, that’s just the norm, the cows, you know. But with the building, it has decreased. They have taken over a lot of the pastures. But there’s still a lot of animals, farm animals, around—dairy, horses. I’m surprised at the number of horses. And I was out at a horse rescue; there’s a place out in—I think it’s [nearby location]. There was a woman has—she works at (…), and she loves animals and she rescues horses. I was out with a friend, and this woman that I was a friend with, she has ridden horses and she’s very comfortable with horses, and I’ve never. But there was one poor horse, he was emaciated, he hardly could move, so I went out and I did some—

JM: Where do they rescue from? Just bad farms?

RH: Yeah, people that just neglect them or abuse them. It’s just sad, you know? She saw this horse in the field, and she got the animal welfare people and they said they’d take the horse and give it to a rescue, and the woman said yes, because she was totally neglect—I don’t think she was feeding the poor thing. His name was (…), and he was really old. I went out with her a couple of times, and I did some Quantum T, because he was very arthritic. So, I worked on—

JM: How did he respond to it?

RH: I don’t know. He kind of was shaking his leg, because he could feel the energy, you know. And he gained—every time I went out, he had gained like fifty pounds, ’cause they really fed him. I don’t know how he is now, but he was really such—he was in such bad shape. But it was nice that, you know, that’s even that close that you can do that.
haven’t been back there in a while. My partner used to go—she had a horse, and she had
it in Pennsylvania, and she used to go up every week to take care of it. It was at—it was
being boarded. And then she brought it to Jersey.

(to cat) You better get down there, little girl. Come on. Get down. Go ahead, get down.
Muffy, go. Come on, get down.

**Cat:** (meows)

RH: (to cat) Yes, you! Down, down! No! No! Come on. Come on, Muffy.

JM: (laughs) (mimicking cat) “I’m taking too much of your attention.”

are too much! You don’t listen to your mother.

But anyway, there’s a lot. There’s a lot out there, there’s a lot of interest. And some of the
guys work at Meals on Wheels. Have you talked to them?

JM: Nobody did that, uh-uh. Nobody had mentioned it.

Cat: (purs very loudly)

RH: No, it’s (…) and (…), and I think it’s (…) and (…) do that, too. Every day, they go,
and they bring the meals around, which I think is neat.

JM: Yeah, I was just wondering about kind of how you felt about living in this area,
because within urban sociology, when they talk about gay communities, it’s always been
exclusively sort of the gay enclave, which would be like, you know, Greenwich Village
[New York], or—you know, these areas of big cities.

RH: Yeah.

JM: And there’s been nothing, really, on rural areas.

RH: No.

JM: And the assumption seems to be that gay people want to live in the city, or could
afford to live in the city and all these things, when really, a lot of people might like living
in [nearby location] and think it’s nice.

RH: Yeah. Oh, yeah. [nearby location]—yeah, it offers a lot. I mean, it’s a small little
town, but they have some really nice restaurants. They just opened one on the pier; that’s
where I was today. It’s really beautiful.

JM: Oh, okay. I think Abigail mentioned that. Yeah.
RH: Who mentioned?

JM: I think Abigail.

RH: Abigail—yeah. The name of it is—I think it (…), or (…). There’s two of them down there now. But this was just gorgeous. It was doing well until this housing boom, until that broke. Now, it’s kind of—you know, a couple places went into bankruptcy that were really beautiful buildings.

(to cat) I don’t need a bath, Muffy. I had one. Thank you, M.

JM: (laughs) So, if this place didn’t exist, where do you think you might be living, instead?

RH: I don’t know. I think if it didn’t exist, I’d probably still be working in Jersey. I think the way things happened—I guess it was the way it was meant to be, that I retired early, and I never expected to retire early. I expected not to retire. But, you know, I had the house. When I bought this house and sold my other house, I went for a physical, because I figured I’d be in Florida and I wouldn’t—I wasn’t sure I’d have to come back to Jersey for my insurance, because it wouldn’t cover me in Florida. It was one of those networks, those HMO [health maintenance organization] networks. So, I went to the doctor. I just wanted to be sure I’d be all right, because I was only going to come back like for a mammogram or something. He asked me if I ever had a colonoscopy, and I said no. I was sixty-two. He ordered one, and sure enough, I had polyps, and one was very suspicious for malignancy. I had this radical surgery, but it was negative. The polyp was nothing.

JM: Oh, jeez.

RH: I guess if I hadn’t moved here and gone through all that chaotic period of buying and selling and trying to decide what to do with this property—if I hadn’t done that, I probably would have died, because that was five years ago. I probably would have died from colon cancer, because I wouldn’t have gone and had a colonoscopy. I just never—

JM: But it was negative, right?

RH: It was, but there was changes. He did take out a polyp that he insisted was malignant, but it wasn’t. It was the very start of changing the cells.

JM: So, it could have—

RH: It could have gone into—polyps do become malignant. They do become cancerous.

JM: Wow.
RH: They are not cancerous, you know; you can take them out when they’re not
cancerous, but if you don’t get them they do become cancerous. I had five polyps. If I
hadn’t gone, I really would have been in trouble.

JM: Yeah.

RH: You might say that it saved my life, coming here, ’cause I really don’t think I would
have had a colonoscopy. It wouldn’t even have occurred to me. You know, I just went at
that point and I was talking to the doctor, and he was saying, “Well, have you ever had a
colonoscopy?” and I said no. And, there is a history of colon cancer in my family. So,
anyway—

Do you want more tea?

JM: Oh, no, I’m okay. Thanks a lot.

Do you plan on staying here, now that you’re here? Do you still think about moving
around?

RH: No, I plan on staying here—as long as the money holds out. That’s always a factor.

JM: So, I’ve pretty much made it through all my questions.

RH: Okay.

JM: Is there anything—as I said before, I really want to make sure, you know, I’m getting
your account of how it is here. Is there anything that you want to add that we haven’t
talked about?

RH: No, mm-mm [no]. We’d like a pool in the place, but I don’t know if that’s going to
happen. I’m sure you’ve heard that story, about the pool.

JM: Yeah.

RH: But, hopefully, someday we will have a pool and a clubhouse. That would be
wonderful.

(talking about cat) See this? She never gets tired of it. She could lick you all day.

JM: (laughs) So funny.

RH: And it’s like—you know, it’s so rough. Her tongue is like sandpaper.

JM: (laughs) I don’t think she knows.

RH: No, she thinks she’s doing—I don’t know what she thinks she’s doing.
JM: (laughs)

RH: (to cat) It’s really not necessary, Muffy. You don’t have to do that, baby girl. No, no, no. But anyway —

JM: Do you have any questions for me?

RH: Nope. Just good luck with it.

JM: Thank you.

RH: And I’m sure it’ll be good.

*end of interview*