

## Interview Summary – Trans Activism Oral History

Interviewee name:	Joanna Clark
Interviewer:	Evan Taylor
Date of Interview:	December 30, 2019

### Summary:

Joanna Clark, formerly Sister Mary Elizabeth, is a trans woman and military veteran who describes herself as being “81 and a half” years old on the day of the interview. She deals with a number of disabilities and physical impairments - many of which were caused by being exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam war. In 1974 Joanna moved in with her parents to take care of them because they were legally blind and needed help. During this time, she lived with them and they supported her during her transition. Joanna’s great aunt was the first woman to be elected to public office in the USA, in Topeka, Kansas and she tells the story of how her great aunt came to be the elected mayor after a prank.

Joanna describes her military and work history from around 1960 in Bermuda, to leaving the military in 1969, and then about 5 years in a few short jobs before she decided to transition in 1974. She successfully advocated for the right to change her birth certificate gender and tells the story of getting the right in the legislature to change this ID – it was her first experience of activism. Then goes on to detail her experience in the military of being promoted, being open about her trans status, but then being discharged when her new management realized she was trans. She challenged the decision, eventually writing a letter and putting together a package that she sent to the White House to President Carter. The reply from the White House cleared her of all allegations against her.

Soon after, she made her vows as Sister Mary Elizabeth, but the church didn’t support her transition, so she was “out of the church.” She volunteered with the homeless and also worked with a youth tutoring program - she recalls a couple of notable students. After becoming involved in HIV/AIDS activism in the late 80s, she secured \$109,000 in funding to start an online HIV educational website, Aegis. She also received another \$200,000 from the NIH. She was running the organization out of her home and had 5 people working there, with enormous electric bills and equipment set up in every room. After they lost a grant, they went to a wide area network and everyone was working from home. She then talks about the transformation of Janus Information to the introduction of J2CP with Jude Patton - around 1987, and then got hired by the ACLU for a couple years and had a significant case with an imprisoned trans woman in San Diego.

She talks about her fear and concern for the future, based on the current president Trump and his discriminatory politics. She is often involved in political activism online - and reads a recent Facebook post she is proud of - but is concerned for her safety so she doesn’t make her location known, after a shooting incident on her home in the late 70s. She talks about her hopes and fears for the next generations of trans people - that they will take an active part in society and not have to live their lives in fear. She is concerned about childhood bullying and the role of difference (gender, race, ethnicity, culture) in social relationships.