

Interview Summary – Trans Activism Oral History

Interviewee name:	Nicki Ward
Interviewer:	Evan Taylor
Date of Interview:	January 27, 2020

Summary:

Nicki is a 57-year-old white trans woman living in Toronto, ON, Canada. The recording opens with a brief discussion of tech and Nicki mentions her graphic novel called “Jackie’s Not a Real Girl”. She has been involved in activism since coming out as trans – she defines that date as Feb 29, 2000, but was “cross living” long before that. She lost a lot in transition: marriage, children, job. And feels she was thrust into activism. She attempted to access the Gender Identity Clinic at CAMH in Toronto and talks about sitting in the same intake with forensic patients, and being denied care because she “wasn’t wearing a dress” (which is in her chart) – so she voices numerous critiques of the assessment process. She became an activist to “preserve what little dignity I had left... not by choice. Advocate or die”.

She talks about the beginning of the Sherbourne Health Centre, and being part of the advisory and education team there – and says it saved her life after being refused care at CAMH. She has a background in medical information and medical documentation, medical and technical writer and journalism, so she wrote an early guide on hormonal treatment with doctors and it was used in clinics around Toronto (St Michaels, etc.). She recalls working on the shelter and training programs run out of the 519 to increase access to the shelter system in Toronto (circa 2004), but she resigned from 519 – and had to sacrifice a few hundred dollars of income, which was a huge deal - in order to join the board of directors, which didn’t have a transwoman on the board.

Nicki sees trans people as “canaries in the coalmine” or as the “early warning system” and “sentinels” of society (ie. AIDS) and talks about the role of isolation in safety, suicide, and mental health for trans people. The loss of Kyle Scanlon to suicide was particularly devastating to her as they were quite close and had been in touch in the days before his death. She believes that Kyle’s death was preventable with better attention to resources and burnout, health care insurance, poverty. “If it’s predictable, then it’s preventable”. Set up a Trans memorial in Toronto, across from the AIDS memorial and stewards this “temporary” memorial, despite there being an unused memorial fund.

After a discussion of human rights and approaches to civic activism, Nicki describes the 2009 Trans March south down Church St. which wasn’t authorized by Pride Toronto and was regulated to the sidewalk. Nicki walked the banner out into the street to create the front of the march. At Church and Wellesley, there was a barricade across Wellesley. This was not long after G20 policing issues, which increased the sense of risk. The cops pulled the barricade back and let them march down the street and people cheered outside businesses.

From 2009-2013, Pride Toronto directly opposed implementing a trans march. In 2013 - Nicki goes to a police station and asks about getting a permit for the march and then files a Notice of Demonstration for a trans march - sets the day, time, and route. Davina Hader also signed. They were denied permission to use public park space to gather the march, and had ongoing issues with Pride Toronto. The march was supposed to be 1 lane, but the organizers veered out into the other lane while the Bike Pirates group provided traffic control. About 5000 people attended and marched down Yonge St. - and they all had to stop at a parking meter outside the park to avoid liability, but a bicycle cop waived them into the park.

Nicki talks about the support from leather and BDSM communities for trans people and the lack of support from gay and lesbian activism, and particularly the history of the lack support from Pride Toronto for community based, grassroots political organizing.

In 2014, Nicki was part of leading the 2014 community Trans March, in competition with the Pride Toronto event organized in the same place, with a heavy police presence. The march is being led by bicycle pirates and officer Biscuit. Melissa Hudson suggests that the march proceed slowly - and they slow down to a dead crawl - including stopping to ask for directions, forcing the police motorcade to speed up past them. In 2006, Nicki ran for city council in Milton, and was out as trans during her campaign. She then moved to Toronto and ran for Toronto City Council. Some of her other activism has included being part of the movement for getting gender identity covered as a federal protected ground: C-389, C-279, C-16 (has a signed copy of this) and talks about the process of getting Parti Quebecois support for bill C-279 by changing the phrasing of bill due to translation issues.

She discusses her gradual change of name process, as well as various issues with legislation that trans people are subject to around ID and access to care. When Nicki was applying to the gender clinic, she recalls being rejected for the Real Life Test for being a freelance writer, which wasn't considered a real job. Nicki is 15 years sober and volunteers in recovery community. She is very emotional discussion about her recovery process and her memories being rejected from a treatment program for being trans, then later coming back as an honorary member. She believes in making political change from behind the scenes and discusses theories of difference and oppression - and approaches for new generations to address social justice. She is concerned with the complications of trans representation on boards and advisory groups, community relationships with police, and the lack of rape kit capacity for trans women. She is keenly aware of the impacts of tokenism on trans people and the vicarious trauma that comes with doing training. Although she intensely dislikes the term activist, she is proud of the term advocate.