

Interview Summary – Trans Activism Oral History

Interviewee name:	Marsha Botzer
Interviewer:	Evan Taylor
Date of Interview:	February 19, 2020

Summary:

Marsha Botzer is a 73-year-old trans woman who lives in Seattle, WA, USA. The interview begins with Marsha discussing recent political events dealing with anti-trans speakers and theorists at community and university organized events. In particular, she is concerned about the ways in which the words of community activists get manipulated into anti-trans politics and refers to a recent event in Seattle. As we take a demographic inventory, we have various discussions of demographic locations, family status, and discussions around identity and identity politics. Marsha talks about the depth of meaning in her work and the human condition and fulfillment that drive her to do activism and change work. Her work has been spread over many years – and the Ingersoll support group has been running for 43 years, consistently. She talks about the changes over time in how the “activist” label is perceived and reflects briefly on growing up in the 50s, working in construction as a young adult, and then encountered the labor movement for the first time. At this time in her life, she was learning about change processes and how this would come to form the undergirding for the Ingersoll work later on.

Marsha was in Paris for the revolution in 1968 and was present in various class, race, and political organizing in the US throughout the 60s. While in Europe, she heard about a friend whose cousin had a sex change. When she came back to the USA, she couldn’t find anyone who knew what she was talking about. She formed Ingersoll and based the name on Robert Greene Ingersoll, a civil right and justice advocate from the late 1800’s. This is part of her belief in the importance of recording activist history and of people working together for common goals in support groups. Now, Ingersoll’s programming as a whole takes on a “Radical inclusion” model which is outlined at the beginning of all programs, groups, etc. Marsha talks about intergenerational support and the need for solidarity across issues that affect trans and gender diverse people. She specifically gives an example of facilitator training as being a way to show value for the work that we do as activists and community builders and the importance of mentoring interdisciplinary professionals.

She was (perhaps?) the first trans chair of the National LGBTQ Task Force board in the late 90s and the tensions between sexuality identity politics and gender identity politics at that time were very challenging. Lessons Marsha has to share from that time are the importance of continuing to talk and communicate across difference and the tolerance of “emotional bloodshed” in social change. Marsha makes connections between activism for trans health care and the HIV/AIDS crisis activism and the conversation moves to talking about disease models, suicide, and the impacts of isolation on trans people’s health. Then, moving back to the early days of Ingersoll, Marsha talks about getting the early services started, including slipping cards inside books at the library to let people know they existed. Marsha talks about the important of hope to ongoing, sustained activism that results in “a good life” and gives advice on how to avoid burnout from change work. She has some fear for the future of trans rights in the US and talks about the importance, and her own great joy, in connecting trans activism and labour activism. She is aware of the necessity, but cautious of the constant modern imperatives to move things forward more quickly. She reflects on the changes over time in relation to trans rights, and specifically talks about the importance of language in being able to talk about and discuss trans issues, lives, and experiences - even amongst each other. Marsha also talks about the importance of knowing how to manage disagreements in a professional setting so that a diversity of voices can be heard at the board room table.

She remembers Howard Leonard, a PhD psychologist she worked with in the early days of Ingersoll and was president of the board for a time and mentions some of her other important work, including the Aging With Pride organization and speaking at the White House in 2008.