

Oral History Interview: Barbara Satin

Interviewee: Barbara Satin

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

Date: October 16, 2015

Mark B. This is Mark Bowman. It's October 16, 2015. I'm here with Barbara Satin. We're at Pacific School of Religion at the Multi-Faith Transgender Summit. And so Barbara, thank you for taking the time to talk. I'll ask if you would begin just by saying your name and spelling your name for the transcriber.

Barbara S. Barbara Satin, S-A-T-I-N, and Barbara, the full Barbara, not Barbra Streisand. It's B-A-R-B-A-R-A.

Mark B. Thank you very much. And as I said, we just really want to hear your life story, Barbara, so if you'll sort of begin with origins, sort of family and birth, and tell us about your development.

Barbara S. Okay. Grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, in a family of four kids and a widowed mother. My dad died when I was a year and a half old and my mother raised the four kids under some challenging circumstances, but with some really supportive uncles who sort of helped her financially. We were raised Catholic, went to Catholic schools, both grade school, high school and college. Very involved in the Catholic church. And knew

early on that, maybe about age five or six, that I had something going on that was different from what probably other kids were going through.

Mark B. This is when? You were born around what time?

Barbara S. I was just going to say. And the reason I wasn't able to do more with it was simply because we didn't have any vocabulary. I was born in 1934, so about 1939, 1940, which puts me now at 81. We didn't have vocabulary. We didn't have any understanding. There was a word transvestite in the dictionary, but that was the only word. And there was things like transition and gender reassignment surgery, and Christine Jorgensen. None of that occurred yet.

So I knew I had something going on, but I also knew just instinctively that probably it's not something I wanted to share with other people. I sure didn't want to share it with my mother. She was going through an awful lot on her own just trying to raise us. Knew I didn't want to share it with my family doctor, the pediatrician that we went to, because he probably didn't know any more about it than I did. And I surely knew that I wasn't going to share it with the parish priest. I knew the response would be stop doing it and it's bad, it's sinful. So I just...mostly just pushed it aside.

And I think it's important to realize that I had these feelings, vague as they were, about my calling towards femininity, well before puberty. So the idea that puberty sort of fuels that is not...doesn't bear out in most of the

conversations I've had with trans people. They came upon it very early, well before the sexual hormones started raging.

So I spent most of my life hiding it. And probably—I had two sisters, and occasionally I would find myself stealing into their closets and at least admiring their clothes. But when you live in such close quarters, there wasn't much opportunity to do anything to explore that. I went to the seminary for a period of two years.

Mark B. What seminary did you go to?

Barbara S. Nazareth Hall Preparatory Seminary. The Archdiocese of Minneapolis-St. Paul had a preparatory seminary where you actually, after grade school, you left home and lived in the seminary setting. So at age 13, 14 years old, I left home and lived in the seminary setting. Was there for two years. My brother was four years ahead of me in the seminary. And I think part of my calling was the fact that I wanted to be like him.

And I realized early on, after about a year and a half, that this may not be the best place for me. Part of it came—we used to have visiting Sundays. Every other week the family could come and visit. And that was a big day for us because we sent home our laundry and in return we got all these goodies, cookies and all that stuff, plus a chance to visit with family.

So visiting Sunday, one time in the wintertime, we were playing basketball in the gym. I was a pretty good basketball player. I was a

sophomore, and we were playing the juniors, and we were doing quite well. And somebody threw me a pass, and I missed it completely because I was paying attention to something I shouldn't have been paying attention to, and I felt very embarrassed about it. And as I jogged back up the floor, I realized that, you know, I think maybe I need to leave.

And the reason I was distracted was there was this girl standing in the balcony looking onto the gym floor cheering. And to this day I can tell you exactly what she was wearing. I can't tell you what she looked like, I just can tell you what she wore. And I thought, oh, that's lovely, I would love to have that outfit. It was a blue coat dress, navy blue.

And I realized that, you know, this isn't going to work. It's just going to be unsettling for me and for others as I got older. The black cassock and the white surplice wasn't going to satisfy me, even though it was a long gown. So I left and went to a Catholic high school to finish, and went to St. Thomas College / University in St. Paul for my college education.

Mark B. What did you study there?

Barbara S. I started out in philosophy, because I wanted to be a creative writer. And a teacher at Cretin had said, you know, you need a really broad educational background, not specializing in any particular field, and thought philosophy would be a good door to open for me. So I went in the philosophy department.

At the end of the second year, we got a new director, head of the department, who said I don't want anybody in the philosophy department who's not going to teach, so if you're not going to be a teacher, if you're in here for something else, find another major. And his reason was very pragmatic. If you're not going to teach, you're not going to make a living as a philosopher, so go find something where you can make a living.

Mark B. So about what year is this?

Barbara S. That would be 1952, '53, around there. One thing that happened in my freshman year, walking to biology class—this would be 1952, I graduated high school in '52—probably the spring of '53. Walking to biology class, somebody came running up next to me and said, did you know that there's this guy that went to Denmark and now came back as a woman? Name is Christine Jorgensen.

And he was just...thought that was hilarious. And I thought, oh my god, there's somebody like me. And I obviously laughed along with him because I didn't want anybody to understand. This was sort of eye-opening to me because I thought I was the only person like this.

Mark B. Did you read up on Christine? Did you follow up on it?

Barbara S. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yeah. So I got out of the philosophy department at the end of the second year and went into the psychology department because the credits sort of moved well. And then at the end of the junior year, they

announced that they were going to disband the psychology department. So here I am going into my senior year. I wanted to—and I think this is somewhat trans related—I wanted to graduate in four years because I was in the Air Force ROTC program, and I was going to go into flight school, and I needed to graduate in plenty of time, in the four year period, to get my commission, so I went into the sociology department. So I have a B.A. in sociology which I have never used. Probably I've used it, but I didn't realize I was using it.

And I graduated, went into the Air Force. Partially, I think, like so many trans people of my age, it was a way in which to keep people from getting any inkling that there might be something going on that's not quite right. So if I'm flying a jet plane, obviously you've got to think of me as pretty macho.

I tell people, when I tell my story, I say I could probably, in time of national emergency, could probably raise a brigade of trans Marines, because I know so many who went into that field simply because who's going to question me? Who is going to say anything but oh, that's a real guy?

Mark B. Did you feel at this time that you were having to—was it hard work to present as male, to sort of do the image you thought people wanted?

Barbara S. Not really. Not really.

Mark B. That wasn't necessarily, okay.

Barbara S. There still was this unknown element of me that I hadn't yet given an opportunity to come out. So I didn't, you know, I occasionally found a way to dress and enjoyed that. But it wasn't something that just was a daily issue for me. But I knew it was there. So I went in the Air Force, came out, and decided that I should probably get married because that seemed to be what everybody my age was doing, and maybe that would solve all of my problems.

Mark B. Air Force duty was where?

Barbara S. I was actually in Texas. I actually got out—at a year and a half I had a kidney infection and got washed out of flying.

Mark B. You went back to St. Paul or...?

Barbara S. I went back to St. Paul and have stayed there basically all my life. So I came back, met a lovely woman, we got married. We still are married, and I'll get into that, but we just celebrated our 57th wedding anniversary. And so we got married and had four kids—I'm sorry, three kids. And I realized that I thought this was going to solve my problem, but after about three or four months I realized no, my issue is still there. And so...but I was committed to this marriage.

So basically for the next 30 to 40 years I raised my family and committed myself to that, and had a successful business career. Worked in public

relations for a major international corporation. I was the director of public relations. I was very active in my church, very active in the archdiocese, very active in the local community. Was asked to run for mayor of St. Paul. Said absolutely no because I knew that if anybody was ever to find my stash of secret clothing that my secret would be out and I would be disgraced. And that was one of the—

Mark B. Have you shared this with your wife? Have you and your wife talked about this—

Barbara S. No, but I tried sort of passive-aggressively to dress for my wife to get a reaction, and the reaction I got, not unexpectedly, was I don't want any part of this in my life. So I realized that that was not going to be a part of her life, and so I pretty much have lived by that.

So I had this lovely career, lovely family, great kids. I'll tell you a little bit about my kids in a moment. But at the end of...I was 54 and I'd been working for about 30 years doing public relations work and had an opportunity to take early retirement, and I did. And so I was retired in about—one of my kids came to me and said, Dad, we need to have a conversation, and I need to talk to you.

And here's what I'll tell you about my kids. My oldest son is a physical therapist, my second oldest son is a psychotherapist, my daughter was a cosmetologist. And if you think about that, I have the best of all worlds. If my body goes, I go to my oldest son, if my mind goes, I go to my

second oldest, if I need my hair done, which I do occasionally to color it, I go to my daughter. Best of all worlds.

But my second oldest, the psychotherapist, was the one who said I want to talk. And I thought, well, this is a son wanting advice from Dad, the wisdom of Dad. Well, it turns out that what he wanted to do is find out what's going on, because you're not the same guy that we've known. You're not as easygoing, you're not as fun to be around.

Mark B. When was this?

Barbara S. This would be when I was fifty—by this time now I'd been retired for a couple of years, so probably about 58, 59.

Mark B. You're retired, okay.

Barbara S. Right. And so I said, Jamie, I'm going to tell you something I have never told anybody. I said I'm transgender. His response was to put his hand on mine and say, Dad, thank you for telling us. We've been waiting for you to say this to us. So they knew. But they were willing to sort of let me do it at my point in time.

Mark B. How did you know transgender? How did that identity develop for you that you can claim that?

Barbara S. The start of it sort of came with the Christine Jorgensen thing when I realized that, oh, there's more to this than just this word transvestite,

which really didn't mean much to me. So I did some research. But there wasn't really very much available to tell you anything more about it than what Christine Jorgensen did in Denmark. Read a lot about what the universities here in the United States sort of jumped on. After Christine Jorgensen, they all realized that, oh, people are having to go to Denmark to do this, maybe we should look at this. And so a lot of universities, sort of as educational / medical specialties, began doing trans—

Mark B. Sexual reassignments?

Barbara S. Mm-hmm. The University of Minnesota was one that did that. And if you stop and think about what happened, and it's been fascinating to watch it, there are no more gender reassignment surgeries done in hospital settings or at university settings. They realized that at the very beginning they jumped into something without having a lot of knowledge about what the outcomes could be and what the ramifications were.

And so many of them, the University of Minnesota included, basically walked away from it. But not before they began doing the work around establishing some standards, which are called the Benjamin Standards, that basically put in place some gatekeeping around who gets to have these procedures done, and hormone therapies and such.

And I know that there is a lot of pushback now from the trans community about why should somebody be the gatekeeper of my life. But at the time I think it was essential that that happen, to at least give the educational

institutions an opportunity to sort of really explore what this was all about.
Let's take a break for a moment.

[*Part 2.*]

Barbara S. So my son asked what was going on. I told him I was transgender. And his response as a therapist was, would you consider talking to a therapist? And I said I never have, but I would be willing to. And so he actually worked in a clinic where the head of the clinic was sort of a guru around trans issues. And I couldn't go to their clinic simply because it would be a conflict, but they did find me a therapist.

And it was a significant change in my life in that the therapist asked me to tell her what's going on. I basically laid out for her 60 years of things that I had kept in my head and never shared with anybody, and my feeling about all this. And at the end of it she said, you know, I can sense that you have really thought of this that you've been cursed by God. And she said, have you stopped to think about the fact that maybe this is the way God made you, that rather than being a curse, this might be a blessing? Would you ever think about trying to explore what it would be like to live this life as a blessing from God? I said, well, it hasn't been much fun living it as a curse, so I said sure, let me explore that.

And that's basically what has changed my life. I came to realize that I have...that my feminine self is a value that I can bring to the world, and my being able to be out was something that could be a blessing to others.

And so I decided that I needed to leave my marriage to figure out who this person inside me was. I had a name for her. Barbara Satin's been at the very beginning.

Mark B. How did that come about?

Barbara S. I found...well, before the Internet there was what was called...what were they called? I've said this so many times. Community bulletin boards. And there was a community bulletin board in Mendota Heights, Minnesota, which is a suburb of St. Paul, that was attracting—I found it and I found that it was attracting international interest. People were calling in from all over.

And they didn't have any sort of fee, it was all free. But to sign on you had to have a name and a password. And so I took the name Barbara Satin. Barbara was the name of the first girl that I felt attracted to, and satin is the fabric of my life. You always find something satin on me. You may not see it, but it's there. So that's where the name came from.

And I decided I had to figure out who this person that God created really was. So I did leave. And being Catholic, my wife and I being Catholic, we never divorced. And I moved to a northern suburb of Minneapolis to be a quiet suburban housewife that nobody would ever know or hear about. And that didn't work out. I became well known and notorious, whatever.

Mark B. You decided to live as feminine—

Barbara S. Barbara.

Mark B. Okay, as Barbara. You made the decision, when you moved out, to start living as Barbara.

Barbara S. Right, yeah. I lived full-time as Barbara, except when I was with my kids and grandkids. I have seven grandchildren, too. And I realized that at this point, my discovering who I am and they knowing who I am is fine. They don't...I'm still, to all three of them, my kids, they're all very supportive of what I do. They worship with me, they spend time with me as Barbara, but I'm their dad. And I was the one who raised them, and they're the ones who really look to me as the father. And so I realized that, you know, I don't need...it's not tearing me apart to not be Barbara.

I did some really wonderful things as David, my masculine side. I have a list of accomplishments as David that I'm really proud of. And since Barbara came into my life, I have a list of things of Barbara that I'm very proud of. So I'm proud of both things of who I am.

I've been through counseling, and my...the first therapist I had retired, and I found another one that was very good. And she basically diagnosed me as transsexual. And I said, but I don't feel the inner conflict that tears some people apart. She said, you know, that's...you are a transsexual; you just don't have the necessity for changing your gender, changing your

genitals and all. And part of my decision not to pursue that comes from the fact that I came out at 60, so...

And my health has been really, really good. My physical condition is such that I can't complain about anything. I didn't want to mess with that. And so I decided, you know, it's not something that compels me to go through this, so I'm not going to do it. So I'm in the category of a significant number of trans people, transsexuals who call themselves non-operative, but still live primarily in the feminine self.

Mark B. You moved to the northern suburb to be the quiet housewife.

Barbara S. Right. And I also left the Catholic church. I realized that I didn't know—I knew that there was little place for a woman in ministry within the Catholic church, and I knew there was probably no place for ministry within the Catholic church for a trans person. So I left the Catholic church and decided I would be spiritual on my own. And that lasted for about four months, and I realized no, I need community to make my worship experience worthwhile.

Mark B. Through all the years you had maintained active going to mass in a parish through your adult life?

Barbara S. Oh, yeah. I was chairman of the archbishop's Council for the Archdiocese of Minneapolis-St. Paul, so I was—

Mark B. Mr. Catholic.

Barbara S. I was very Catholic. And so I decided I was going to be spiritual, and it didn't work, and I decided I would look for... I knew that there were two queer churches in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, All God's Children, which was the Metropolitan Community Church of Minneapolis, and Spirit of the Lakes United Church of Christ, which I found out was a spinoff from MCC.

And so I was sitting on a Sunday morning, dressed as Barbara, sitting in my car out in front on Lake Street, trying to figure out where I should go. And I had the gay publication in front of me with the two ads, and one of them said worship service was at 10:30 and the other one was at 10:00. It was five to 10:00, and my car was parked right out in front of Spirit of the Lakes church, which was the 10:00 service, so I walked in there.

And to this day the music director keeps reminding me that this was a GLBT church, but they had never had a T person as a member. And so I walked in the door and he came up to me six months later and said I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I thought to myself he—*he*—shouldn't be here. He should go someplace else. And he put his arms around me and said, and you're the best thing that's happened to this church. So I found Spirit—

Mark B. Do you remember what year that was?

Barbara S. That would be 19...probably 1996.

Mark B. '96, okay, good.

Barbara S. Yeah. So I went to Spirit of the Lakes and sort of taught them how it was to have somebody who was T. And they were in the process of calling a new pastor, and she came about a week to two weeks after I started going there. And she came and did her candidating service. Her name is Rebecca Voelkel, Rev. Rebecca Voelkel. And she gave a good candidating service around the gay, lesbian, bisexual people and their being loved by God. And I went up to her afterwards and said... Let's take a break.

[*Part 3.*]

Mark B. So Rebecca gave this lovely sermon, and I went up to her afterwards and I said, you know, it was a beautiful sermon, but I wasn't in it. And so we had this long conversation, and she admitted to me that that was a mistake that she would never make again, and she never has.

But from that, it sort of opened some doors for me that I hadn't realized were going to be open to me. She was on the Program Committee for the National Gathering of the United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns, and they were having a national gathering in Chicago at the University of Chicago. And I got an invitation to come and make a presentation on being transgender in the church. They had never had that conversation. And so I said yes, I would do that, although I was a little apprehensive because I really was brand new at this.

So then I got a follow-up message saying, oh, we would like you to do it in song, dance, poetry, dramatic reading, something entertaining. And I thought, wow, okay, I don't do those things. I'm a great audience. If you do those things, you'd want me in the audience because I enjoy that, but I don't do it myself. But I thought it was too important an opportunity not to be involved, so I said yes, I'll figure out something.

So I came to the group in Chicago, the plenary session right after the worship service. They had just...the communion table was still on the stage. They had taken off the vessels and the altar cloth. And so I came out on stage and I had my makeup kit and I came out as David. Was wearing a long black terrycloth robe. I didn't wear my hair long at the time. It was short and I had a wig in the back table behind me.

And I started telling my story, and as I told my story, which you're hearing right now, basically, as I began telling my story, I began making up. And by the end of my presentation, I dropped the robe and I had on a fabulous outfit, and put on the wig and presented them with Barbara Satin.

Got a great deal of response from it, and a great deal—still, to this day, a lot of people say, oh, I was there, it was really wonderful. But the most important part of that story is the fact that when I came back to the Twin Cities, about six months later, we have a Thanksgiving day...Thanksgiving evening service with a number of churches, and part of that was...

[Part 4.]

Mark B. So you came back into this Thanksgiving evening community service.

Barbara S. Oh, that's right. So we had this Thanksgiving evening service, and a woman came up to me before the service started and said, can I talk to you at the end of the service? She said I have to talk to you because you changed my life. And so at the end of the service we went out into the hallway and she said, "I was in Chicago and I saw your presentation." She said, "My dad is transgender, is a cross-dresser, and I have known that for years, and I wanted none of that in my life, and I cut myself off from him, and I hadn't talked to him in years until I watched you in Chicago and I realized that you were telling my dad's story. That was my dad up there. And I realized that I needed to reconnect with him."

And she had, and it had basically renewed her life. She didn't say changed it, but it renewed her life, and she was so thankful. But it renewed my life also because it made me realize that what I was able to give was this ability to be present as a trans person and that that was an important element for a lot of people to be able to hear my story, see me. And so I basically, since that time, which would be, you know, for probably the last 15 years, 16 years, I've sort of lived this ministry of presence, trying to be a trans presence in places where people wouldn't normally see a trans person.

And I want to be seen as trans. Within the trans community there's a lot of push to try and be...to pass so that you can be yourself and nobody would ever know that you're a trans woman, you're just a woman, or a trans man, you're just a man. I really want to be seen as a trans woman so that people can sort of try and deal with that in their own mind, and also to ask me questions if they want to. And I have that happen a fair amount of times.

I will have to say I've been blessed that I haven't had a significant amount of hassle, and so it's been a relative—and some of that I think comes from the Minnesota culture, which is sort of a little bit of don't ask, don't tell. It's Minnesota nice. So I don't get a lot of negative pushback, but I do get a lot of affirmation.

And it's been important, I think, for me, but it's also been important for a lot of people who just have never thought about a trans person, and then all of a sudden there's a trans person at the Guthrie, or there's a trans person at the Minnesota Institute of Art, or there's a trans person at the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. So it's important for them to have that opportunity to see a trans person in real life. So that's been sort of my role, my mission.

And going back to the National Gathering of the United Church of Christ, from that event I was then asked to go on the board of the Coalition, and then became the chair of the Coalition. And at the time that I was the

chair, we lost our executive director, who had been sitting on the Executive Council of the United Church of Christ, the governing body of a church that doesn't like to be governed, so I went on in her place. And so I became this trans woman member of the Executive Council.

And it was quite fascinating because I went to my first meeting at the UCC headquarters in Cleveland, Vatican City UCC, and I realized, as I started walking into the door, I thought, oh, this is going to be different than what you normally... Normally you go into places where people are prepared for the fact that you are going to be trans, and that's okay. You're going into a church place where a portion of the church is very open and affirming and a portion of the church is very not open and affirming, and the others are sort of we don't know where we are, so how is that going to play out.

Well, two things happened. The moderator, a lovely woman, wanted to introduce me as the new member to the hundred, two hundred people that were there, and so she got up and she said I want to introduce you to our newest member, Barbara Satan.

Mark B. *[Laughs.]*

Barbara S. And, of course, you know, there was this real quiet, and then all of a sudden everybody just roared. And she was obviously embarrassed, and I thought well deserved. No, I thought it was well played. I thought it was really beautiful.

And then John Thomas, who was the president and general minister, was coming up after I finished greeting people. He walked by me and he put his fingers up into a cross sort of like, you know, Dracula or whatever. It sort of broke the tension.

But the other thing that was fascinating was before I had come down to the meeting, I had seen the HBO magazine on top of the television, and it was mentioning the fact that that night was going to be the premiere of an HBO special called “Normal.” And it was Tom Livingston and Jessica Lange.

And it’s a story that I didn’t really know anything about, but I read the review, and it was a story about a man who, after 25 years of marriage, decided that he really was a woman, wanted to transition, was very active in his church, and all that went around that. It’s a beautiful—if you never have seen it.

Mark B. I’ve not seen the movie. I’ve got to.

Barbara S. It’s marvelous. It started as a stage play, and I’ve seen the stage play. It’s very good. But the movie, it’s really good. And so I said to them, I asked for a moment of personal privilege and I said if you’re going upstairs tonight and wondering what you might want to watch on television, you might consider watching HBO and watching “Normal.” And if you have any questions, I’ll be happy to answer them tomorrow, come and see me. And a lot of people did. And it was, thankfully, really, really well done.

And it was sort of like the telling of my story and other people's story around what it means to figure out who you are and coming out. So that was very helpful in making the transition to the broader church.

What was fascinating also about my work on the Executive Council, I realized that there wasn't much for me to do because my presence was enough for a lot of people who already had very significant feelings about the church's role in support of LGBT issues, that they could talk, and so I didn't have to be the thorn in the saddle. Most people, the denomination was such that most people were very happy to sort of—now we can't forget the trans community, or we can't forget LGBT on this. So it was really a fascinating experience.

I've also been, besides my church work, I've also been involved—well, I should say not in spite of my church work, but part of my church work. We had a trans member who started coming to Spirit of the Lakes Church who, on a Sunday evening at home, she suffered a stroke. And she had to go into the Hennepin County Emergency Center, and they basically de-gendered her. She had to go back to being—her name was Gail and she had to go back to being Glen. After she was stabilized, she was sent to the Veteran's Hospital and they did the same thing. Gail had to be Glen. And in rehab the same thing.

And so we had a long conversation, Rebecca Voelkel, myself and another member of the congregation, about these issues being ones that are—this

was specifically for the trans community, but these were issues that LGBT people, as they age, were going to be facing. Maybe not so much the mis-gendering, but at least the fearfulness of having to come out as going to a hospital and being found out to be lesbian or in a relationship of whatever it might—a lesbian or a gay relationship. So we decided, you know, there's not much work being done around aging issues, at least in the Twin Cities area, and we needed to do something about that.

So we started an organization called GLBT Generations. We started basically based around the church, and then we decided we didn't have enough expertise, so we reached out and sort of separated from the church to be a more nondenominational program and brought in some experts. One of the results of that has been that we did a lot of work around educating the broader community around LGBT aging. We also did work within the LGBT community about what it's going to mean when you age.

We did a survey of the Twin Cities LGBT community around aging issues, and one of the big things that came from that was people saying that they were concerned about where they're going to live as they age. And that gave rise to the fact that the church, Spirit of the Lakes Church, was a very small church building on this very large parking lot that wasn't being used as well as it should be. So we basically proposed that we would turn the church into—we would give the property over to a project to build senior LGBT housing. It took a long time, but it finally opened about three years ago.

Mark B. Wow. Okay.

Barbara S. It's 46 units of affordable rental. It was originally going to be cooperative ownership, but the housing market collapsed and that changed. And our church building collapsed. We had to find another place to worship. So we eventually merged with Minnehaha United Church of Christ and became Living Table United Church of Christ, and we stayed in the Living Table church building. Originally we were going to come back and be on the first floor of the housing.

But the housing opened as affordable rental. It's filled. But it's a mixture of both LGBT and, because of the Fair Housing Act—

Mark B. You cannot discriminate.

Barbara S. You can't discriminate, so we have, surprisingly enough, we have this really interesting confluence of LGBT seniors and East African Muslim Somalis who are living in the building and getting along just beautifully. We also have...five of the units are designated for people who live with HIV and AIDS and have been homeless, and so that has worked beautifully.

Mark B. Remarkable.

Barbara S. Yeah. And so I'm really thrilled about that. I ended up being sort of the one consistent person that made that happen.

Mark B. That's a major task to do all that. Just working with a developer to do all that is huge.

Barbara S. Right, right.

Mark B. The funding and the building and the construction, everything else. Talk a bit about Institute of Welcoming Resources and your engagement there, and your ministry there.

Barbara S. Okay. That comes, again, from my relationship with Rev. Rebecca Voelkel because as part of—when I was chair of the board of the Coalition, we were looking for a new executive director. We decided to hire an interim. Rebecca was leaving Spirit of the Lakes, and so I suggested that she apply for the job, and she became the interim.

She left the interim position and then she went to lead the Institute for Welcoming Resources, which is a program that was established originally as an independent organization that was made up of the major Christian denominational programs that were providing welcome to LGBT people within the denominational program—Reconciling Ministries Network, and More Light Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ Open and Affirming movement—all of those major groups were part of the IWR.

Shortly after Rebecca went there, the IWR was approached by the National LGBTQ Task Force, at that time the National Gay Lesbian Task Force, asking whether they would be interested in a merger with the Task

Force. And that's an interesting position for the Task Force to take because they had been heavily dis-involved with faith community. They didn't see faith as being something that was strategically valuable for their on-the-ground activism within state and local campaigns. Until they began losing state and local campaigns.

And probably one of the biggest breaks for them was the fact that we had one summer, or one election cycle in which 13 states had constitutional amendments against LGBT marriages and they lost every single one of them. Every single one of them passed and the opposition lost. They realized that they had lost simply because the faith communities didn't understand what was involved.

And so the Task Force approached the IWR, the IWR said yes to that, and it sort of shifted what the role of the Institute for Welcoming Resources was. It was no longer just about welcome, it was about welcoming and then what are you going to do with that welcome outside the church walls. So my involvement...Rebecca decided she wanted to have a family, so she decided to have a child. She went on maternity leave and she asked me to be her maternity fill for the period of time she was gone, which was about six months.

And so I led the Institute for Welcoming Resources during that time. Then, when she came back, they kept me on as a consultant and then asked me to stay on as an employee, and I work half-time doing faith work

around transgender welcome, around faith and aging, and a trans religious leadership cohort that we helped start, and other things that I get myself involved with.

And the aging issue has been a significant—you know, the Task Force had a major role to play in LGBT aging with the publication of “Outing Age,” which is sort of the bible of LGBT aging issues. And then they stepped away from that and sort of ceded the field to SAGE. But there still is a significant role to play around faith and aging, and that’s the role that I have taken on for myself.

And one of the things I feel very proud of, I was invited to two White House conferences. One was a conference on affordable housing for LGBT people in February, and then I was invited to be one of four LGBT people to be invited to the White House for the White House Conference on Aging, which happens once every ten years and is a very significant event. So that was in July. It’s been a fascinating journey.

Mark B. It has been amazing. Just a little bit of reflection. If you look back over the past 15 to 20 years on this emerging trans religious movement in many forms, and diverse, as you’ve mentioned, who would you say are some of the key people who have been role models, or thinkers, or resource developers who have had significant impact on what’s evolved the last 15, 20 years? Where have you seen the breakthroughs happening? Like

Christine Jorgensen 40 years ago, what's been happening more like that recently?

Barbara S. I think that a lot of it has come out of the UCC. And Bill Johnson from the UCC basically started a transgender consultation in which he brought about a dozen of us to Cleveland to meet with the leadership of the church to talk about our issues and talk about our concerns.

And from that came a resource called "Call Me Malcolm," which is a film around the life of Malcolm Himschoot, a trans man who was part of that consultation. And Malcolm has now gone through a whole variety—at that time he was a seminarian. He's now a minister. He's been in a church in Colorado and now is in Cleveland leading one of the departments of the denomination. So Malcolm has been a leader in the faith movement. Transfaith Online, which comes out of...

Mark B. Chris Paige.

Barbara S. Chris, thank you. Chris Paige has been a significant impact to take an issue online that has—you know, a lot of trans people have been stigmatized badly by the churches, no matter what denomination they come out of. And many of them don't want to even set foot in a church again. But for many of them, they have a faith life. They have a connection they want to have, and Chris has allowed that to happen through Transfaith Online. And Chris's denominational background is United Church of Christ.

There are a number of other people within the various denominations that have—Vicki Gray who's here, Nicole Garcia from the Lutheran Church. It's been a slow process simply because so many trans people have been so devalued by their denominations that for many of them there's not been an opportunity to explore their faith and to allow their denominations to see what it might mean to have a trans person as a clergy or as congregational leadership.

And I was having a conversation just this noon with a young Korean seminarian who is trying to develop a theological basis for trans inclusion in churches because so much of what she sees is that her role as a trans woman is devalued within the church because they don't see a theological basis for it, and she wants to try and develop that. So we're making progress, we're making steps.

For myself, I wrote a curriculum called Trans Action which has been used throughout churches across the country. And it's based on the...or it's designed to be used within the congregational setting to help congregations understand, first off, what gender is and is not, and that gender, as a social construct, is more than the polarity of male and female, which is sex, and it's more than just woman and man, it's a whole variety of different things, and try to take them through an understanding of what gender is, and then what it means to be transgender in a three-step process. And then once you accept that and understand that, how do you live it out and affirm it, and how do you affirm it just not within your own

congregational walls, but outside the walls? What do you do to live that out outside in the world? So I'm very proud of that.

Mark B. So you've had a long, rich, full life. Any aspirations yet? Things you might like to accomplish yet or see happen?

Barbara S. We're moving forward. We're moving forward slowly. Unfortunately, so much of the progress we have seen, particularly in the last eight years, much of it has happened on the local basis. A lot of it has happened on the federal basis because of the Supreme Court decision on marriage equality. But also on the federal basis a lot has happened because we have an administration that is very supportive of LGBT rights.

My concern is that that becomes very up for grabs, depending upon what you have as an administration. If you have a conservative administration, a lot of those activities will go away. And that's going to be challenging for our community, who has begun to realize that, oh, there are some things that we can do that we never were able to do before. And to have that taken away is going to be challenging.

So I think that I'm not a political activist, I'm not an organizer, but I'm a political activist from the standpoint of making sure that we need to be concerned about what the political climate is. We need to conserve the rights that we have at the moment. So that's going to be a challenge.

Mark B. Thank you so much for the time. Any last word or words?

Barbara S. No. I thank you for the opportunity to be a part of the archives. So much of the wonderful work that you have done over the years. I feel honored and proud to be asked to be a part of that.

Mark B. Thank you very much, Barbara.

Barbara S. You're welcome.

[End of recording.]