Oral History Interview: Deborah Johnson

Interviewee: Deborah Johnson

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: October 31, 2017

Monique M. My name is Monique Moultrie, and today is October 31st, and I'm here with Rev. Dr. Deborah Johnson. We're going to conduct an oral history to supplement the biographical statement that's up on the LGBT-RAN website. So typically an oral history begins early in life and it hits milestones along the way, but feel free if you have any questions, feel free to choose what you want to elaborate on, and if you at some point want to go back to something, if something occurs to you, you remember, feel free to do this. What's important in an oral history is that you tell the story you want remembered.

It's going to go up with your audio and then there will be a transcript of the actual audio, so it also adds a little more depth for some scholar, some student, some clergyperson who has some questions, and you'll be a voice that they can hear. It'll embody you in ways that we're really proud of. So I always start very early on, just to throw a question out and let people start talking. But really, you go where you want to go. You lay the map out.

And then I'm going to ask questions. I sort of interject along the way. That sort of helps time. Was this in high school, so this was when you were in

college, so that I can help people have guideposts to the narrative. And typically we're done within two hours. I had some today that went about an hour. So it's up to you. So my first question I always start folks off with is can you tell me about your early life? What type of neighborhood you grew up in.

Deborah J. First off, I'd like to just acknowledge what's coming up for me at the moment. I'm feeling very emotionally full that this interview is taking place and this project is even happening. I'd have killed to have this when I was a kid, anything that was evidence of LGBT life. I mean, there was nothing. You say what was it like. There was nothing.

I am at the tail end of the Baby Boom, was born in '56, Los Angeles. Very—[*laughs*]—bourgeois upbringing, as they would call it. My dad was a pharmacist, my mom a teacher. And in the African American community there are all of these society groups. And not that my parents were like big society. I did the Jack and Jill.

Monique M. Jack and Jill?

Deborah J. Yeah. I was a Links debutante, all of that. As just sort of like a frame of reference for my background. The house that I grew up in is still the family house. My mom's still there. She just turned 92. My dad died a few years ago at the age of 90. It was a very stable kind of upbringing. Deep values about education, about religion. My mom was Pentecostal—is Pentecostal, and raised me that way. Dad was a lot more liberal. And I did

the family tradition, which was to go to USC. I'm third generation USC. I guess we'll talk about that later on.

But it was a life that was very sort of traditional, you know, Girl Scouts. I was a Scout from Brownies on up through my—that troop actually stayed together that we started 40 years. We retired that number. And Boy Scouts, and, you know, drama club and music. I played the piano and the guitar and all those kinds of things. So it was a very…by those standards, like black upper middle class kind of background is what I grew up in.

Monique M. Mm-hmm. So can you talk a bit about what a typical fun day was for you in elementary school, what you'd do for fun?

Deborah J. I first started off in private school.

Monique M. Private Catholic, private Lutheran?

Deborah J. No. It was kind of a version of black Montessori at the time. It was called Mary Clay School. I was there from preschool to the second grade and then I went to public school through high school. And I loved sports, so I liked to play ball and do all the rest of that. And I was also very strong in academics. I loved learning. So my afternoons and my evenings were often spent with workbooks, or particularly math. My mother was a math teacher. You know, doing those kinds of things. Like I said, I was in Scouting. So I loved to be active, l liked to be outdoors, and I liked for my mind to be engaged. And I often would play music for solace.

Monique M. You mentioned some of the family values that you grew up with. Were they perceptibly religious values? Were they a part of that Pentecostal upbringing? Or was it a strong work ethic because that's what the family does?

Deborah J. It was a little bit of both. I come from a very long line of educated people on both sides of the family. On my mother's side of the family they are educators. She's like one of the few that didn't marry an educator, too. So the whole idea of education was just fundamental. I was in college at 16. My mom was in college at 16, and her sister. It just…it's what you did. But we also loved it.

And what I was taught, they never explained who the "they" was. It was subtle. But what we were always told is get a good education, it's the one thing they can never take away from you. There wasn't a lot of talk in the family about racism from the standpoint of really being discriminated against. It was more positive, upbeat, you can do whatever you can, lots of stuff about black history.

And it was at a time where there was a lot of pioneering, so around in my upbringing I was around the first whatever, the first black council people, the first black judges, the first black this or that. It was still a pretty segregated world back then, so if you were black and you had a doctor, your doctor was black, your dentist was black, your lawyer, anybody. It's like that's what it was. So I grew up around that.

And the religious values were very, very overtly religious. I mean, religion was something that we talked about all of the time. All of the time. My parents weren't as much social justice activists, per se, but the rest of the people in my family were, like my grandmother, my aunts and uncles, so I was around a lot of that—the plotting, the planning, the organizing, the unions, the marches, the demonstrations. All that kind of stuff was…it was what I was exposed to. So that idea that you make a difference and that your Christianity impelled you to make a difference, that it wasn't good enough for you to just have a good life if everybody around you is suffering, that you needed to use your power, your privilege, your money, everything that you had to make life better.

Monique M. Okay. Let's move into high school. So we've sort of leaped through the middle school awkward years. And you graduated quite early. So what was your high school experience like? What were activities that were interesting to you?

Deborah J. I was always very active socio-politically, so I was student body president in junior high and elementary school, too, as well as high school. I was student body president in high school. I was involved a lot in policymaking and even on a larger scale. I was president of my high school, but I was also vice president of all the student body presidents in L.A. County, and had a student seat on the Los Angeles County Board of Education, first student seat.

This was late ‘60s, early ‘70s, with the Black Power movement and all that, so a lot of my activities in school had to do with empowerment, and once again, social justice. I did a lot of that. That really was my passion. My goal was to be a civil rights lawyer, so I did a lot of that.

There was also the angst around my sexuality, which was something that was a bone of contention within my family it feels like most of my life. I had a girlfriend from the tenth grade—actually, the same girlfriend from the tenth grade all the way through college. And because I was so young, the arguments and debates and just out and out drama about my being gay was pretty high, and that occupied quite a bit of my high school years as well. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. I read in the bio that you said to Mark the tensions between the COGIC doctrine around same sex attraction and your seeming outness and despite of this doctrine.

Deborah J. Yes.

Monique M. So as a burgeoning young adult, what did you do to help yourself stay whole, to see yourself as not what the church doctrine was telling you, but something more?

Deborah J. Well, it was the church doctrine, but it wasn’t only the church doctrine. In terms of history, to locate this, so in the state of California the sodomy laws were on the books until 1974. I’m halfway through college. So that any sort of affection, sexual activity between same sex individuals was 20

years. I mean, we're talking felony crime. This isn't even a misdemeanor. So you're illegal. And at that same time, '74, the American Psychiatric Association reclassified homosexuality because it had it as sick and depraved and deviant, you know, you aren't capable of being a parent or holding a job and all the rest of this.

So it's this triple whammy. I have the law saying you're a criminal, the church saying satanic, and the psychiatric association saying I'm sick, so I really felt like I didn't have any other choice. It was like fight or die. So my activism was really about you're wrong, all of you are wrong. I don't know how I knew, but I just knew, and in my mind I could see a day. It was almost like the slaves that could see freedom. I mean, I could literally see a day when it would be okay to be open, I could be proud, I really could be in a relationship, the world would accept me, I wouldn't be a second class citizen. It was so real to me that I was willing to fight for that.

On the religious level, that didn't come with a lot of…it didn't come easily. There was a lot of struggle with that, particularly because I was raised fundamentalist, Evangelical, charismatic Pentecostal. That idea that the devil had me and that I was satanic, that there was really…there was no place for gay people in the scheme of things. Which I can't begin to tell you what that's like, because even with things like discrimination, racial discrimination, you could be a slave if you're black. You know, there was like a place for you in the world. But this idea that you shouldn't even

exist was really hard. That's a lot for a ten-year-old. You know, I mean, that was really, really painful.

So for me it was kind of peeling away at it. My theology had to change. But first I had to literally, in my mind, be willing to go to hell for my authenticity. And that was the conclusion that I came to around 14 or 15, that if there was a hell, then I was just going to have to go, because if I lived the life that they wanted me to live, I'd have been in hell here and still had gone to hell, because I knew who I was. So let me at least try to have some joy, some pleasure here because I just couldn't do it. There was just no way.

Monique M. Okay. So you get to college. You survive and you get to college. Talk about your undergraduate experience. You were a political science major.

Deborah J. Political science, polysci, yes.

Monique M. You're still thinking you're going to become a civil rights lawyer.

Deborah J. That I was going to be, like so many others. I did the whole thing. Yeah, I did the whole nine yards. So I went to USC, which is a private college in Los Angeles. Very conservative campus. And it was there that I first started to actually come out. I had a girlfriend and some people knew, but I wasn't active in the movement or anything like that. So when I got to college is when my activism started and I started participating with the gay group on campus and became part of the really, really, really early days of

the Los Angeles Gay Center. Eventually wound up on their board of directors.

And college was a real kind of tumultuous point for me. Halfway through college, when I turned 18, I moved out and my girlfriend moved in with me, so we started living together. I started working, having a job then. But at that time there were other family members who were on the campus. My brother was in dental school and there was a cousin of mine who lived with us through high school and college, and we were classmates there. Actually, the three of us graduated the same day. And I felt a lot of pressure back then to really lay low, to not kind of impact them.

We did the whole Greek organization things as well. I pledged Delta Sigma Theta and I was president of the Deltas on SC's campus, Delta Upsilon, and my brother and my cousin were Kappa Alpha Psi men. And so it was tough because I stayed in the closet even with my sorors. And it was hard trying to pass off my girlfriend as just a friend.

Monique M. Girl friend, mm-hmm.

Deborah J. Yeah. So I did some cover stuff. There were certain guys that were friends of mine who knew I was gay, but I would go out with them in the college scene or whatnot just to kind of keep the suspicions down or whatever. And that was very painful. I mean, it was very painful. It was very hurtful for, you know, for everybody. But, you know, I did it, because at that time it didn't really feel like I had a whole bunch of choice and options.

Monique M. So did the group that met on campus meet clandestinely?

Deborah J. It's funny you should mention that. The group that met, the gay group that met on campus met at the religious center, which technically speaking was off campus, although physically it was in the middle of campus. That building was not owned by the university. So for me that was just an oxymoron to have the gay group there. And I couldn't deal with it. I mean, I was so closeted back then that even just to get the flyer to see where they met, I came up against the table that had the flyers and I backed up and deliberately knocked everything on the ground so I could pick up a flyer and it not be noticed. But I freaked out and left everything on the ground and came back in the middle of the night and took a flyer off a tree. [*Laughs.*]

And then I worked it out, once I found out that the YWCA on campus was the same thing, technically off campus, but in the middle of the campus, I became the first student president of the Y and moved the gay group to the Y building, to the YWCA building so I could go to the meetings there without it being obvious that I was going for that purpose, so… [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. That's elaborate, but efficient.

Deborah J. It did. You know, that's, like that's what I did. And like I said, I started going to the meetings and the groups that the gay center was having early, early days, when they were just meeting in these old houses with no

furniture, and we used to sit on the floor in bean chairs. And now they're like the biggest gay institution in the planet.

Monique M. So I'm assuming at this point, since you just mentioned the tension you had with going into the religion center, that you're exiled from your community of faith, or participating actively in your community of faith.

Deborah J. You know, no. That didn't happen to me. I feel like I was really fortunate in that my pastor was Bishop Samuel Crouch. He was a very big name in the movement. Was vice president of the world Pentecostal movement. But he wasn't a hell and brimstone kind of guy. He was actually very quiet and soft-spoken, like a Howard Thurman. But he was gone a lot because he traveled the world. So when he was gone, and because we were like a mother lode church, we had a second building where the convocations and whatnot used to be held by us. So all the traveling people and whatnot, they were the hell and brimstone. But I'm sure that he always knew that I was gay. And I felt like he did subtle things to affirm me.

Similarly with the youth choir. The directors of the youth choir, a husband and wife team, were also pro gay. They had a gay brother. They were friends with my gay uncle, whom I didn't realize was gay at the time. And even now—and that couple's still alive. They nurtured me and they protected me. But I also stopped going to church once I got into college. I just stopped going. If I had continued to go, who knows? Maybe they

might have tried to. But when I was in high school nobody tried to throw me out or anything like that. I wasn't out.

It was very difficult on my mom because she was president of the Women's Christian Council, which she held for like 45 years or something like that, so my being gay was the last source of embarrassment along everything else. And for her, I mean, she really thought that God was going to kill me, honestly. I got the call to ministry while I was in high school. And my mother thought that that was her answer to prayer. That was the sign to her that God was going to make me straight. That also upped the ante for me in terms of my internal struggles because there's no way I could accept my calling, one, if it meant that I had to preach a hell and brimstone doctrine that I didn't believe in on top of—I knew I'd never marry a man, so I figured that would have been like a lonely life.

So for her, she really thought the devil had me. And I didn't find out until after I moved out of the house at 18 some stuff that had happened in the family and her beliefs. But she really thought that if I did not accept this call to ministry, which meant also turning straight, that God would kill me, because she thinks that's what happened to one of her relatives, that that relative was gay, and didn't accept their calling, and that God killed them. And because I was a minor, she believed that God would send her to hell, too. So I might have thought it was okay for me to go to hell. [*Laughs.*] But she wasn't going.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Deborah J. She wasn't going to go on that ride with me. So she was all about the religious stuff. My dad was more from the moral thing. You know, he just thought that homosexuals were just absolutely despicable and of low character and low repute. And being a pharmacist, he wanted to go the medical route. So we did a lot of fighting around that. I finally hit a compromise and subjected myself to psychiatry as long as it didn't include shock treatment or medication. I was not going to do that. But I did do the psychiatry until I just had enough and left, because it just…there was nothing wrong with me and I didn't want to do all that anymore. But back in those days it was a lot. They evolved through the years that they later, but back then it was on. It was very, very tense. Very, very tense every day.

Monique M. So for the record, you hear a call very young, by about 15. So you hear the call, but it can't be created in the way it's expected. Although I'm really intrigued because you didn't mention, I mean, the calling in COGIC for you as a woman would have been to be a missionary, right?

Deborah J. Well, it wasn't—see, the idea of call and a denomination to me, I didn't make that leap. That's the leap everybody else made. I knew that I was called to serve God. And I can't explain it. It felt like a minister. So I promised God at 15 I'd do something about it by the time I was 40. So

literally the night before I turned 40, I started the vision core for the ministry I have now. [*Laughs.*] Literally.

Monique M. Got to keep a promise.

Deborah J. I mean, I had done other things and, you know, schooling and whatnot, but I literally did that the night before. So for me being—well, even today COGIC doesn't ordain women, so…yeah. And I never imagined that. That wasn't even an issue for me. I knew I was never going to be a Pentecostal minister. Because I just, I didn't believe it. I mean, I just never believed their doctrine. There was always something whispering to me telling me something else. You know, I'm a much more metaphysical, universal spirituality in my heart.

Monique M. So let's wrap some of that for the listener. College you have just described. At what point do you become more of a seeker and become open to New Thought and differing religious perspectives? Because as you said, you heard a call to serve God, but it wasn't tied to a denomination. So you were exploring?

Deborah J. Yeah, pretty much right after I got out of college. And, you know, that's not completely accurate. I had my first breakup in my senior year in college, and it really threw me. And I picked up a bunch of incompletes. So although I marched in the ceremony in 1976, I didn't actually graduate. I took a year off and went back to school and switched to economics, and actually, technically graduated in '78. And it was in that time period right

there when I took off, got off the treadmill of racing, racing, racing, you know, college at 16, you know, do it by the book, and it was like no, you know what, this isn't working for me. My life is blown up in my mind. I was so brokenhearted. We're friends now, though. And I just, I was like rethinking life.

And that's when I started, in the late '70s is when I discovered actually Religious Science, or Scence of Mind, in particular. There were four or five different churches I would go to and different programs that I would listen to. And I made it into that. So by the time I got my MBA from UCLA—so I finished high school in '72 and I got my MBA in '82. And that's when I formally started taking the religious classes, after I got out of graduate school.

Monique M. So what are you doing in between? What are you working at as your first post college gig?

Deborah J. So I got into real estate sales at that particular point in time.

Monique M. A very different path.

Deborah J. Yeah. And when I went back and got into economics, when I came back, I was recruited by Proctor & Gamble, so I was on their sales force. Actually, it was—backtrack. I was on their sales force first before I started residential. Because I realized I liked sales, but I didn't like consumer products. Oh, you know what? I'm forgetting something really big. Trying to go back in my life.

So that time in between when I theoretically graduated from college and actually graduated, from ’76 to ’78, I started working for an entertainment company called Maverick’s Flat. I was the secretary there. I was in another relationship then. And I started an organization called Debreta’s, which was a combination of our two names, Deborah and Bobreta. And essentially it was a social club that put on events for black lesbians. When I look back at it now, it was really the beginning of my ministry because I created all these environments and things where we could go with dignity and pride. I’m in my early 20s now, like 21, 22. Dinner cruises, plays with champagne brunches, I mean, like all these different things that got me out, involved and getting gay out of the bars and out of that seedy kind of back room. You know, these were things where you could dress up, you know, look good.

And the movement was pretty segregated back then. It was very difficult to find anything for people of color. So I came out very strong in that, and kept doing that for many, many years. Even when I went back to finish my B.A. I was doing it. And that’s pretty much how I was making my living, was throwing these parties and doing these different things. And because I worked for the entertainment company, I had access to all the best music. The Soul Train gang used to rehearse where we were. And I started my first business, which was an after hours club—not liquor, but selling them refreshments and all the rest of that kind of stuff.

And that kind of catapulted me into some of the activism that stayed with me through my life. This marriage between my idea of being able to just be okay, you know, and accepted, and respectable, and not second class citizen, or second tier. And if I had to make the environments myself, so be it. Because I didn't find them anywhere. So that's what I was doing.

Then when I got into real estate… I got my acceptance at UCLA, to be specific, in 1978. They told me that I could sit it out for three years. Literally the same day I got my acceptance at Proctor & Gamble. So UCLA said go to Proctor & Gamble first because if you get the on the hands experience it'll make your MBA that much more relevant. So that's what I did. I went into that corporate world. But I didn't like selling soap, bar soaps and household cleaning products, so I switched into real estate. And I was doing real estate, and I got into the MBA program in 1980.

And I specialized in that. I specialized in urban land economics and real estate finance. Started working for an urban economist as an assistant economist. And I did that through my graduate business school years while I was also selling real estate. During that time and that relationship with Bobreta, I was raising a deaf child. She had a two-year-old when we first got together, so I was being a parent throughout that time as well, which played a big, big part in my life.

Monique M. So in your bio you talk about in that interim as well there being, you being asked to serve on boards and beginning to work both at the local level, but

also networking outside of the local level. Can you talk a bit about what motivated you in that space?

Deborah J. Yes. So I got recruited onto the board of directors of the Los Angeles, what was then just Gay Community Services Center based on that work that I had been doing with the black lesbian community. It was unprecedented. Nobody had been able to reach and mobilize that community before. So they were like, well, you know, "Hey!" I was very young. I was only like 23 or something like that. And I went onto that board. And they eventually, they later on hired me as a consultant to come and completely assess them. And I literally revamped the whole thing, their outreach to women, to people of color. I actually got some nice awards and proclamations for that work with the city.

And that catapulted me on a career as a diversity consultant and trainer. So back before it had a name, and even back before anybody was really paying for it, out in the movement I became one of those people that was helping people get over cross-cultural issues and doing diversity trainings and sensitivity stuff and whatnot. I was doing that in the '70s, in the '80s, and got a good reputation, in fact, of doing that. But I was doing it more on the side. It wasn't my profession yet. But I did serve on numerous boards. I got on the board of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force as well and served as a co-chair on that board. I've served on a lot of boards in my life.

Monique M. So what leads you from the MBA, doing activism, some consultancy within that, to thinking about full-time ministry, other than this understanding you had with God?

Deborah J. Well, there were some things that I was doing parallel. So when I got my MBA in ’82 is when I started taking the formal spiritual classes. And I was studying in Religious Science. And there’s a four-year program that you go through to become a lay minister. It’s called a Practitioner. So I did that. And then as soon as I finished that, I went straight into ministerial school. This is another five years after I’ve gotten my MBA. During that same stretch of period I was working for Prudential in real estate. I was a Real Estate Investment Manager and whatnot with them and did that for whatever, six or seven years or something like that.

And when I became this Practitioner, you’re like a healer, you’re a counselor. You see clients, you teach classes and all the rest of that. So I had basically a dual career. While I was in Prudential I was also doing all of that. And I knew at some point, in ’88 actually is when it was, that I couldn’t do that corporate thing anymore, that that call that I had internally to do ministry was greater. But it was lay ministry at that time. I wasn’t ordained. I didn’t plan on doing a pulpit at that time or anything. So I was teaching spiritual classes, I was counseling people, very active in my church.

I also helped to found, at that point in time, what's grown to be a mega church now with Michael Beckwith in Los Angeles called the Agape International Spiritual Center. He's one of Oprah's folks. Actually, he's Oprah's spiritual leader. And I was doing that. And I was still running, though, from that idea of being a minister. Somehow that was contained enough for me to be all right with that. I still hadn't surrendered to this idea of really being a minister. This was still under my control. [*Laughs.*] I could say when I had a class, I could say when I saw a client. It still gave me that illusion basically doing that.

But when I left Prudential in '88 this idea of seeing the classes and doing all that, it got married with all of that social activism work and whatnot that I was doing, so almost immediately I started to have this burgeoning career on the corporate level through the LGBT organizations. So everybody—and doing diversity trainings in the corporations, most often around LGBT issues. So I had huge clients like MCA, like training 5,000 people, MCA Universal, Hewlett-Packard, AT&T, Apple, SBC Communications, Kaiser Permanente. I mean, like I had all these big corporate clients where I was doing diversity training and almost always around LGBT issues. Not exclusively. Like the University of California, I was with them about 13 years around racial stuff. But that was really kind of like a lead in that. And that work continued for many, many years. Many, many years I was doing that.

And for me that was ministry. For me that was all about the Oneness. It was about how do we love and respect each other, how do we transform the work environment so that it's open and inclusive for everybody. And because I'm a woman and because I'm black and because I'm gay, I was able to be positioned, particularly in teams where we would cross over those issues around their similarities and whatnot, and I could bring a lot to the table. So even though I might have gone in like as, "the gay person," I was able to bring all of that to bear, and that really became a platform for me for a really long time.

Monique M. So was that in the spectrum of where your social activism around LGBT concerns was then animated? Because you're only one person, so where were you prioritizing your energy?

Deborah J. Well, they intertwined. So I'm doing that. So I leave in '88, corporate, and in '90 I joined the board of directors of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force that I served on for at least seven or eight years, and I became co-chair of them. There were all these different arenas in which I could play out. I was hired a lot, and still am, by foundations to convene think tanks, like progressive think tanks that work at those intersections of religion, sexuality, social mores and public policy. So I've done a lot of work around shaping public opinion. You know, how do we move an issue from here to there, and all of the organizing that it takes to do that, whether it's on the political side or the religious side.

So you take something like the marriage equality issue, for example, not to jump over decades, but we're here at this particular conference now, this Rolling Away the Stone conference. And those were parallel tracks. When it comes to doing the work on an issue like that, there was all the legislative stuff, but then there was all the stuff that was happening in the religious camps.

And my activism as well, I would be remiss if I didn't bring in what was going on in my personal life. In '84 I won a lawsuit. My former partner and I won a lawsuit that set the precedent for the inclusion of sexual orientation in California's civil rights bill. It was a huge case, this really big case. And it was also a national test case for the right to be out. We won at the appellate level, unanimous decision, and it's in the law books. The California Supreme Court would not overturn it. And that set the precedent for a lot of the things that were going on with putting LGBT issues under the umbrella of civil rights. It was like huge, like this really, really huge win to do that.

So in terms of who I was and what I was about, I had my lawsuit. I was doing a lot of media work. Like I was on the "Phil Donahue Show" back then. I've been with Showtime, "Jumpin' the Broom," as a couple, that there was my work, but there was also me, and it was like who I am and what I am doing that was also fundamentally part of my activism, not just how I'm working for somebody or with somebody, but what I'm doing with my life.

Monique M. Can you walk us through the psychological, spiritual, social shift from being under the radar at 20 at UCLA to being the face of the case in California? Being on the national scene on Phil Donahue?

Deborah J. Yeah. So what I grew to believe was that I couldn't be the only one, that I just couldn't. You know, it's like at 10 or 11 I just couldn't believe that I could be the only one. There had to be somebody out there who was going to love me, somebody out there, and that I just couldn't be the only one. And what I grew to understand, is that it's like the theory of change, that idea of the early adapters, that there's some people who jump out there first while everybody else is just looking. Or the canary in the coal mine kind of thing.

And the turning point for me really was there was a magazine that was printed then called "The Lesbian Tide," and it used to come in this plain brown paper envelope. It was a joke amongst the lesbian community even then about the plain brown envelope. And I used to look at these pictures. I used to look at these women—and I since became friends with most of them afterwards. They were just playing softball, and like just being out there. And what I realized was that there were a lot of people who were fighting for me. There were a lot of people who were taking the heat, who were being out in the public, and I was riding on their coattails. And it felt like I had some kind of moral responsibility to not be just a taker, but to also give something.

And with this idea that I couldn't be the only one, I had this theory that the more of us that came out the easier it would be to come out, that one of the things that we had learned in all this activism stuff, particularly with the case, with the bill that was in 1978 here in California, Prop 6, that was going to take away the right of LGBT people to be teachers, was that people who said that they were going to vote for that bill all said they didn't know somebody who was gay. And that kept coming up in surveys over and over and over again, that people were more able to do harm to the LGBT community when they didn't think they knew one. So coming out became like a political strategy, more than just like you and what's happening with your family.

So I got to the point where I felt like my presence—and also on the gender issue and the racial issue. The males really dominated the early movement, and it was very hard for us as women to get a spot in that. And then AIDS hit. AIDS hit with a vengeance in the late '70s, early '80s. And I'm not kidding. It was like the men were sick. They were just really, really sick. And it was almost like World War II where the women came into the factory. It was like that, where the men were so devastated the women came into power within the movement. And so much of the public perception of the LGBT community was around gay men, which had nothing to do with our lives. Even like the whatever, heightened sexuality business, like "Please…!" It just wasn't our life.

So it felt kind of incumbent upon me to tell the truth. Like there was a lie that was out there that needed to be debunked. There weren't many of us that were female that were the face, and certainly not people of color. And I felt it was just really important for the world to know that we're there, we exist. It was like this archive project or this oral history project that we're doing now. It is to say, "Hey, we're here, you know? We exist." And if it wasn't any more than just an affirmation of my own life, that I could no longer collude with the invisibility, because the invisibility was as oppressive as overt discrimination.

Monique M. Can you talk a bit about how you balanced and merged your spiritualist belief and inner doctrine with often these very secular, secularized movements?

Deborah J. Yes. So in terms of my religious upbringing, my mom was Pentecostal and my dad was actually raised Methodist, but when he did go to church he would go to a Baptist church. And his mom I grew up with in Los Angeles, and she went to a church called Second Baptist. Her pastor was a guy named Thomas Kilgore, who was president of the Board of Trustees of Morehouse. There's even like sculptures of him on the Morehouse campus. And he was a really big wheel in the Civil Rights Movement. As well as my other cousins that went to this other church called Holman Methodist, where James Lawson was at that church. And that's almost right around the corner from me.

Monique M. Oh.

Deborah J. So, you know, Kilgore, Lawson. I'm growing up with not my mother, but like my broader family, like I said, who believed in a liberation theology and that really believed that God frees you from the captors. [*Laughs.*] Like that's what happens, and that it's incumbent upon you to do that. So for me, I listened to King a lot. I was very influenced. I remember him saying that he didn't think "God would burden or saddle any group with the burden of a permanent yoke of inferiority." And I knew that he wasn't just talking about black people. So as I listened to him I would translate it. And for me it was all the same. It was the feminist movement, it was the women's movement, the black movement, the LGBT movement. It was all happening at the same time, and I could see it's the same issues. Over and over again, just like different cast of characters.

So one of the first things that had to shift for me was I had to stop believing in the devil, which was huge for a little Pentecostal girl. But I just became utterly convinced that it's not a dualistic world. I believe in Oneness. I didn't think there was a god of good and a god for bad, that there was only one god. I believed that everybody was equal under the eyes of God, and that because they were equal under the eyes of God that everybody deserved a chance.

My religious upbringing did not back that up. My religious upbringing believed that there were certain, God had certain chosen people, and God

hated some people, and disapproved and all the rest of that. And it's like I just didn't believe it. So I had to make some deep decisions. And for a while I was outside of the black church. And that's very painful. I happened to find a black Religious Science Church, which was good, that helped feed my soul in terms of that. But that was hard. But in my own mind, I personally felt like Jesus was my main man. I didn't necessarily believe all of the doctrine of salvation the way that it was taught. But when I look at his life, to me here's a man who talked to everybody. Here's a man that respected everybody—the riffraff, the prostitutes, the tax collectors—and that he could see, even in the Roman emperor, even in the enemy, something good. And that's how I tried to live my life.

So in my mind, I didn't think that Jesus was against me. I believed that if Jesus was alive, that Jesus would see I was a good person and would be welcomed under his embrace. So I had to make a distinction in my mind between the religion about Jesus and the religion of Jesus, but there was all this overlay, like the post Easter Jesus, like all this overlay that I just…I just had to believe that's man-made.

So when I found metaphysics, it really appealed to me, because in my mind I believed that if there was a god that God had to be consistent, that God had to be everlasting. That God had to be eternal. That God couldn't be changing its mind here and there based upon historical context. That just didn't make any sense to me whatsoever. So the idea of us being co-creators with God and how we use our energy to me spoke to what Jesus

was talking about, how it's done unto you as you believe. So ironically enough, in my mind, this more metaphysical version of Christianity to me was truer to Jesus. So in my mind, I didn't see myself as walking away or leaving my Jesus. I felt the opposite. I felt like going this direction honors more of the legacy. It's like that old hymn, you know, "Do you know my Jesus?" So that's how it looked to me, like I was actually being a better Christian, not leaving my Christianity.

Monique M. Okay. So let's skip ahead to the mid '90s when you found Inner Light. What animated your heeding the call to serve in that way, and then that particular community?

Deborah J. I had a midlife crisis. I had the existential 40-year-old, you know, "What am I doing with my life?", and it hit me with a vengeance. I had another really bad breakup after 14 years. And my life just wasn't working. I was out of alignment and out of integrity. What I found was that neither my Pentecostal upbringing nor the way in which I had been studying my metaphysics actually dealt with deep internal healing, that they were both engaged in a kind of spiritual bypass. Like in my Pentecostal world, if you did all the right things and showed up at church, you could still be way out of alignment, but if you save enough souls, you're good with God. It was like a lack of accountability. There is this way that you could always project your sins off on Jesus without ever really digging deep. And it was kind of similar with the metaphysical stuff, where I was affirming my way out of everything. I was doing a lot of spiritual bypass.

And I hit the dark night of the soul. It was just really the dark night of the soul where I was lost, I was confused. All of my standard go-to defense mechanisms and ways of coping and being in the world just seemed to be failing. I'm suddenly getting introduced to all of this shamanic spiritual world stuff that I don't know anything about. My little world's just blown up. It's just blown up. And I kind of recognized, at that point, that I was running from something and if I did not surrender, it just wasn't gonna be pretty. By this point in time, in the mid '90s, I discover my prophetic voice, which I didn't know I had, and which I didn't even believe in in other people.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Deborah J. I didn't. But it's true. I get these prophetic messages, and they come to me in the form of a letter, just whole and complete. I have since published about a hundred of these in a series called "Letters From the Infinite" with Sounds True publishers. The first book is called "The Sacred Yes" and the second book is called "Your Deepest Intent." So by this time I'm literally having this really direct, divine contact and getting all kinds of guidance and input, and recognizing my life just is not my own. It was that humble pie, because my ass had been arrogant, clearly, clearly, *clearly*. You know, always successful, always able to work it out or whatnot. I was like uh-uh. It just wasn't that kind of party anymore. And I got to that surrender place, that spiritual surrender, where you lay yourself, you lay it *all* on the altar, you know, the :"Have thine own way."

So I wound up with a pulpit. During this whole dark hour I served as an interim, like the interim senior minister at my home church and then the same thing at a Unity church, so I was doing pulpit about two years before I actually opened up my own in 1997. I actually finished ministerial school in ’96. Once these letters started and I wound up in that other bad breakup I said “Oh, what the heck!”, and I just finished ministerial school. I commuted every day back to L.A. and finished ministerial school. So I finished ministerial school in ’96. And I started the ministry. I was still doing the consulting work, still traveling around a great deal. I went independent initially, which is not for the fainthearted at all.

And I have a very eclectic community. We’re celebrating our 20 years right now. And we’re a cross section of all kinds of people and all kinds of faith, which is true to my diversity inclinations, feeling that I want a church that looks more like the world and work it out. And I think King said “At 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America,” which still tends to be true. And there’s nothing wrong with that. I think there should always be keepers of the culture. But I think it’s really important that your heart be stretched and grown and that you learn how to work with and be in community with people who are not like you. So…

Monique M. So why base that church in Santa Cruz? What drew you to those people?

Deborah J. You know, I went to Santa Cruz initially because my former partner got a job there. No, that's not true. I was running away from home at 35.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Deborah J. And I said get me out of here. And we moved there. We were moving into my grandmother's house, like literally. We were all packed up. I spent a year cleaning that place up and everything else, and just hit the fan with my father about inheritance and stuff. And was like fifth generation L.A., and like somebody's got to get out of here. So we moved. We moved very, very quickly and she got a job up here. I had put her through chiropractic school and she had just passed the board. And the only person I knew up there was the minister of the Religious Science Church.

And I really didn't know what I was going to do when we split up. I thought I was going to come back to L.A., I really did. But it became clear that I needed to stay there. It really wasn't like I chose it. I feel like it chose me. And I didn't have a clear path. I really didn't know what was going to happen. At first we had services twice a month, like second and fourth Sundays for, I don't know, like the first few years. I still didn't want to have like a pulpit and all the rest of that. But eventually, you know, eventually we did.

And in 2003 I bought. It's so funny. God, it's so funny. I wound up buying an Assemblies of God church. Assemblies of God was as close to Church of God in Christ as you could get, just one black and one white. And

Assemblies of God was headquartered there up in my area. And I bought one of their flagships, 3.5 acres, 16,000 square feet. Unbelievable. Like all the way around the mulberry bush just to wind up buying a Pentecostal church. And it wasn't just any old Pentecostal church. Literally my pulpit was one of the founding places of Exodus International, the big pray-the-gay-away ex-gay movement, Exodus, right there. [*Laughs.*] God has a sense of humor, has a real sense of humor. But yeah, I've been in Santa Cruz. Actually, today is 27 years that I've been in Santa Cruz. I moved on Halloween.

Monique M. Wow. Mm-hmm.

Deborah J. And I get it. I get why I had to be there, and I get why it had to be that community. It's very unusual. One, it's very, because of the demographics, it's predominantly white. I don't think the black community is like a full 2% in Santa Cruz County. It's unusual to have a black pastor of a predominantly white church. And similarly, most of the gay, out pastors are like somehow gay congregation or something like that, but I don't. I don't. My congregation is predominantly straight. It has a larger percentage, I'm sure, of LGBT people just because I'm who I am. It's probably like 30%, maybe, or something like that. But it's a real eclectic group.

Monique M. So in one of your bios you talk about beingOmnifaith.

Deborah J. Yes.

Monique M. And that was part of the intent the community. Can you can talk about how that has animated or in any way been aligned with the types of activist orientations you had?

Deborah J. Yeah, so the idea of Omnifaith was actually a term that was coined by some of my former students. I teach at a few ministerial schools, and this group was starting a corporate chaplaincy. And I liked that term because I thought it was really more what we were about. The term interfaith conjures up major religions all coming together, and I'm not really about religion, per se. I'm fairly indifferent about that. Not that I don't respect them, but I have no need to feel like I'm promoting religions. So where Omnifaith really spoke to me because it speaks of the ever presence of faith wherever that is and however that comes.

So I have people who are in fact connected to other faith communities like Jews or Catholics or Muslims or whatnot, or Buddhists, but I have a lot of those non people, or spiritually unaffiliated, and I have a fair number of people who are atheists who come and really like it. And people who do Wicca and Burning Man, and who are more Pagan, earth-based, that kind of thing. It speaks to my activism because I believe in the oneness. I believe in the wholeness. I believe in the integration of us all and that if we're separate and we're siloed, we can't heal and we can't get the synergies that happen in community when there's real communion. I'm all for put the commune back in communication and community.

So for me the activism part of it is that we are firmly committed to environmental sustainability, we're firmly committed to social justice. I tell them sometimes that, you know, we've got everything up in here. We've got homeless people and millionaires, we've got carnivores and vegans, and 12 steppers and club hoppers, you know. [*Laughs.*] And we're going to work it out. I say we're going to work it out. Somehow or another we're going to work this out. And to me, that's what the activism is about. I'm not about just promoting this group, that group. I'm not about just the civil rights for this group. But I am about the beloved community. That's what I'm about. I'm about bringing forth that world where everybody can excel and be who they are.

And I feel like if I were to segregate or only minister to a certain socio-demographic profile, then I wouldn't be true to myself. I kind of feel like when King started speaking out against the Vietnam War, and he says, you know, if you even question why I'm doing this, then you don't know me. You don't know who I am. Because I have to. I have to do that.

Monique M. I've got a couple more questions, and they all sort of dovetail sort of at the later stages where we are contemporarily. So I ask a question about identity and identity formation. And I like to put on record how persons identify. So do you identify as same gender loving, as a woman identified woman, as queer, as pansexual?

Deborah J. I'll tell you how I identify and some of my spiel about some of that stuff. I identify as a lesbian. And I was part of the movement that pushed for that to be part of our name as a movement. In fact I was on the L.A. Center board and actually did the motion to change the name to Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian. For me that word is a cultural term. It actually doesn't have anything to do with sexuality, as far as I'm concerned. Not nothing to do with it, but that it's not confined to sexuality.

The origins of the word Lesbos is to be from the Greek island. Lesbian is to be from the Greek island of Lesbos. In the early days, like Aristotle, Socrates and whatnot, the Greeks were not homophobic, but they were very misogynistic, so women were not allowed to be artists and in the theatre and all of the rest of that, so they were banned and exiled to this island. And then eventually people started going there and it became a woman-centered culture. And one of their most famous poets was a woman named Sappho.

So what happened for me with identity formation was seeing what happened for us in the black movement, where, when I was growing up, black was a dirty word—it was a fighting word. If you wanted to start a fight, you just called somebody black and it was on. And we had to ask ourselves why were we fighting, and why was association with Africa something to fight about, or how did that become a bad word. So I felt the same thing about lesbian, like why is that a bad thing to come from a culture like that. We've got to reclaim something here.

And what I know about identity formation as a professional diversity trainer is that one of the first things groups do is rename themselves. They have to figure out who they are because they've been carrying all the identities that have been put on. So for me, I identify as a lesbian, I identify as a feminist, I identify as a black person by race and African American by ethnicity.

I personally don't go for the same-gender-loving concept. I think it's a misnomer and that people who are using that actually don't necessarily really mean that, that we sometimes confuse sex and gender. And gender is more of how you integrate within your own self your relationship to masculine and feminine in whatever combinations those are. And I find, for the most part, even in the LGBT community, same genders actually don't have relationships with each other that much, that there's some gender complementariness that happens between them. They might both be the same sex, but they're not the same gender. They're not relating to their maleness or their femaleness in the same way, that there's a balance between the two. So like the same-gender-loving doesn't really cut it for me. I don't, like, go for that.

I believe that everybody probably—well, I don't know. For me, I've always been a lesbian. I have never fallen in love with a man. I have had some sexual encounters in my late teens that just were like guys who knew I was a lesbian. And I think I was just really trying to prove that I, like, could so that I wasn't like some freak of nature or something. But I've

never awakened to a man. I've never spent the night with one. I'm 61. It's just never…just for me it's like it doesn't. But I do believe that there is a whole continuum of gender. I believe there's a whole continuum of sexual orientation and everybody's got to find themselves.

Monique M. Okay. You haven't talked about your Ecuador project. What leads you in those directions? You mentioned the church is interested in environmental things.

Deborah J. Yes. So I'm on the board of directors of an organization. For the past five or six years I've been on the board of an organization called The Pachamama Alliance that's headquartered out of San Francisco. And we are in partnership with indigenous tribes in the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador around preserving the rainforest and also the sacred headwaters there. And part of that partnership with them is not only working with them in Ecuador, but coming back to the more modernized world and helping us awaken from the dreams of materialism and everything—the trances of materialism and everything else that we've been doing that has led to such environmental degradation.

I feel like I had the most profound religious, spiritual experience going to Ecuador to the rainforest in 2011 that really was life-changing for me in terms of my understanding of who I am in the world and who I am in relationship to the earth. My Pentecostal background pretty much had the

earth somewhere almost like a commodity, you know, like it was a resource, that human beings were—

Monique M. Dominion.

Deborah J. Yeah, dominion. You know, there's this thing there. But we weren't part of the earth. And I grew up in L.A., where at least particularly back then there wasn't necessarily a lot of environmental and social consciousness. In Santa Cruz that's a really big deal. It's like a really, really, really big deal.

But when I got out of Ecuador and being in the rainforest, we're from the earth. I mean, like we're really from the earth. I got it. It's like I really got it. Talk about humbling. That was like, that was just wow. And it's shifted my sense of who we are as humanity and my deep, deep, deepest respect for Mother Nature we better recognize. [*Laughs.*] She's been having a few things to say lately.

Monique M. Yes. And the earth groans.

Deborah J. Yes.

Monique M. So the final questions that I ask all of my participants are questions that look through the life span. So I ask a question about what you're proud of and I ask a question about where you find joy. And then I ask a question about what sustains you as an activist, what keeps you on the journey.

Deborah J. I try to keep my connection to the divine as my utmost priority. I pray all the time. I meditate all the time. I live in a very beautiful area, about six minutes from the Monterey Bay. It's just pristine ocean, the Redwood Forest and the trees there. Part of me is in my state, in Santa Cruz. I really find God in nature a lot.

And I live in stillness quite a bit these days, that "Be still and know that I am God." So I steal away, I get away from the busyness and the activism and really try to ground myself. I listen to good music. I listen to influential preachers and speakers, and sort of like the Oprah folks, you know, and make sure that my mind is fed. I'm a poet. I'm a spoken word artist. And I write. I like to drum. I am kind of a closet percussionist, and I particularly love my djembes. I have one from Burkina Faso and one from Ghana.

And as far as what brings me joy, I'm simple. I make bubbles at the beach. Somebody made this contraption for me and I make up the formula, and it's very simple. It's just these poles and these strings that come down. There's always a good breeze. And when the wind comes through, it makes this long, long—it's not like just a round—this long strand that just morphs and shifts and changes, and iridescent with the colors and whatnot that can go on for 60 feet or 70 feet. And when they break off they're huge, and these different sizes, and when there's a good wind they can go for blocks and blocks, and like up over the hills and everything. And I take extra wands of these for other people to come along, and it just gives me

such a bang. Most people like to take photos or whatnot, the kids like to break the bubbles. But I go to the beach a lot. I go to the beach at least three times a week or something like that, and quite often will have my bubbles.

I like the sunsets. I like a nice laughter and some good music with friends. I don't need a whole lot to…you know, I'm like low maintenance. [*Laughs.*] I'm like low maintenance, yeah. That sense of wonder and awe, the connectedness stuff is what really brings me joy.

And what I'm most proud of? Probably that I'm still here. That somehow I've managed to traverse life and not succumb to cynicism and substance abuse, or depression, or all the things that can… I'm healthy. I do the work. I mean, I do the forgiveness work.

I think I'm probably most proud of the fact that I've accomplished many, many things, but more than anything, I think I'm just—this may sound really strange—but that I like me now. That I can look myself in the mirror and say you know what, "You're not perfect, but you're all right," where I'm not in a lot of… I've worked through so much, you know, pain, and guilt, and shame, and regret, and just stuff. And I feel…it's like I feel clear and clean now. And that's taken a lot. So I feel like if I didn't wake up tomorrow, I'm good.

Monique M. Well, I want to say thank you—and we do want you to wake up tomorrow—

Deborah J. [*Laughs.*]

Monique M. —for sharing your story with us.

[*End of recording.*]