Susan Post interview

Q: Okay. This is Samantha Farmer, interviewing Susan Post at BookWoman in Austin, Texas, on November 16, 2017. Okay. So, Susan, would you like to introduce yourself?

A: So, I’m Susan Post, and I’m the current owner and operator and chief BookWoman at BookWoman bookstore in Austin, Texas. BookWoman has been around since December of 1975, and that means we’ll be closing in our 43rd year. This is our fifth location in Austin, and we’ve been at 5501 North Lamar for almost 10 years now.

Q: Okay. So, when and where were you born?

A: I was born February 21, 1947, in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Q: And did you grow up in Jersey City?

A: So, I -- my father worked for Todd’s Shipyards in Brooklyn, and during the war, he was in the Coast Guard, but never went to war, so he never came back dead or alive, he just stayed there. So, I was born, and I lived in New Jersey for two-and-a-half years, and my dad was transferred from Brooklyn to Alameda, California, and my mother was pregnant at the time, and so my parents went off to California, to Oakland. They decided they would live in Oakland, it’s very close to Alameda, and they left me behind with my Aunt.
Q: In Alameda?

A: No, in Jersey City. And they moved to California, and so I was left behind, and until I was about 27 or 28, I had no idea that this was part of my upbringing, of my growing up, of my young formative years.

Q: Oh, so your aunt raised you.

A: For -- she wasn’t sure, it was six months to a year. And so, yeah, she raised me, and her husband was an amateur photographer, and all my baby albums were photographs by my Uncle. I always thought my parents had taken my baby album, so that’s kind of another story, and apparently -- I mean, it’s still, families come in and raise children, but usually it’s if someone is incarcerated or dies, or, you know, has their children taken away, then the relative raise them, but typically people don’t just put off -- off put their children at a relative’s house when they move across the country. [laughs]

Q: So did you -- your mom was pregnant.

A: With my sister. So, when my sister was born, my -- one of my grand -- two of my -- my grandmother and my grandfather on my mother’s side took me by train from Jersey City to Oakland, and it was like three days and two nights on the train, and I have -- those are some of my first memories, of, as a toddler, running up and down the aisles of the
train. And so, I arrived, I met my new sister, and my dad had a new job, and we lived in a rent house, and as we -- as my father was more established in his job -- so, obviously, it was a step up, to move across country. They looked around, and they built a house in the suburbs, and we moved to a small place called Washington Manor, and it was in between San Leandro and San Lorenzo. It was an unincorporated area, so it was, you know, built from the ground up. It was all new construction. And, I went to high school in San Lorenzo, but San Leandro ended up acquiring our little community, and so now, I have to say I’m from San Leandro. [laughs] And so, I went through kindergarten through 12th grade in one place, and in that place in California.

Q: And did your mom work?
A: And my mom had -- she worked at Macy’s department store, I guess, probably, during high school and maybe junior high, but not when we were young. She didn’t, she was a housewife.

Q: Okay. And so, did you go to college?
A: So, one of -- yeah, I did go to college. So, I -- my dream was to go to college in California, but my dad was transferred to Texas.

Q: Where in Texas?
A: To Houston, and it’s interesting, he was -- Todd’s Shipyards had -- there was one shipyard in Galveston and one in Houston, and he had his choice where to go, and then he was looking at the weather. So, he was a real -- he was a weather guy, and there were too many hurricanes in Galveston, and so he chose Houston. So he moved while I was still in high school, and the day I graduated from high school, we packed up and came to Texas. And no one in my family had gone to college. My father was a white-collar worker, an office worker. He became a contract administrator, and he negotiated with the Navy and with other -- like, to refurbish ships, to build them, and also dismantle them, you know, take them apart for scrap.

And he took some college extension courses, but he never went to college. And I took college prep classes, and I had a counselor, and I mean, I never picked a college, I never applied to college, no one ever said, “You have to do that.” [laughs] And we ended up in Houston in an apartment, until my parents decided where they would build, and I sat around for about a month of the summer, sunning myself by the pool, and suddenly one day, the lightbulb went off, it was like, “Oh, my God, I’ll be here the rest of my life unless I do something.” [laughs] And so, I knew
I had to have transcripts, and I went to the library, and also asked my dad to ask his people he worked with, like, what colleges, what are, you know, what are the names of the colleges, where are they? So, I called my high school, had transcripts sent, I think, to three or four colleges, and I decided I’d go to the first one that accepted me. But, to back up a little bit, when we drove from California to Houston, my dad drove through Austin and showed me the University of Texas, and I just went, “I can’t go here. It’s too big.”

Q: Too big? [laughs]

A: Yeah. I mean, I just didn’t know, you know, it just felt overwhelming to, okay, do you want to go there? And I had to think about it for a while, and so I was accepted at Stephen F. Austin and Nacogdoches, and I accepted, and back in those days, you had to live in a dorm, and so they said, “We’ll admit you,” because they were starting to grow a little bit, “but we don’t have a dorm space for you. That will probably open up,” and one did, and I was put in an upper-class dorm. So basically, I went to college with one suitcase, because we didn’t know if I’d have a dorm room, or if I, you know, would have to triple up or something, for a while. So, people came with their cars full, the ironing boards strapped on top, all that, and I came with
one little suitcase. And, it’s very intimidating to come from the Bay Area into what I didn’t really realize was the Bible Belt. Our family was kind of divided. My father was very, very conservative, but my mother was liberal. But, I got a liberal education. I was in a liberal environment. All the latest.

Q: What did you study, or specialize in?
A: In college?
Q: Mm-hmm.
A: Well, that was -- that was contentious. I wanted to study art, and my dad said I couldn’t, but he said, “You could take some art classes.”

Q: As long as you don’t do art as a living?
A: Yeah, yeah. Or just, don’t take too much of it. It can’t be your major. But, if you take an art class every semester, it can be your major, so I have a double major in art and sociology. So, I took some psychology classes, and some sociology classes, and I liked them a lot, so I have the double major, and then I have a minor in psychology. And so, I really feel that it prepared me to do what I do now, because it didn’t prepare me for anything else, really. [laughs] So, my art now is kind of the store, and some advertising ideas, and building off-site bookstores, and building displays, trying to balance color design, and
things like that. Stuff I said I’d never -- I’m a fine artist. I was a painting major. Now photography is my passion. It’s portable, it’s easy. And, just interested in people, and what motivates them.

Q: And, so, your mom was liberal. What was your political compass like, as an undergrad? Or when did you get one?

A: So, I was a junior in high school when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and in that presidential election, my father was a staunch Republican, his mother in Jersey City was the Republican Party chairwoman, and so he came from a long line of really conservative, strict conservative people, and so, I remember my mom coming home and saying, “I voted for Kennedy, don’t tell your dad.” [laughs] And so, she was the more liberal force, and she came from an immigrant background, and my father’s family’s Dutch and had been in New York for a long time.

Q: And what was your mom’s background?

A: She graduated early from high school, she got a job, her -- she was totally working-class, she didn’t go to college. She wanted to be a private secretary, it was her first job out of high school, and she had no aspirations. It’s sad for my mother. My dad was able to work himself up the corporate ladder, and he was a company man. He worked for the same company all his life, until they dumped him. And
so, I remember watching the democratic national convention, where the protestors, you know, were bashed.

Q: In ’68?

A: In ’68, with my dad. We were watching it on TV, and my dad was saying, “Get ’em, get ’em. Hit ’em. These kids, they’re terrible,” and I just, I was so shocked. You know, it broke my heart to see that someone could really feel that way, instead of condemning the violence, you know? And so, that was a huge crack between my dad and I, I had to just walk out of the room. I had to leave the house, I had to go for a really long walk.

Q: And so, in college, kind of, what was the first political thing you got involved in?

A: So, I was put in a dorm with upperclassmen. I was roomed with a woman who never spoke to me. And so, in freshman orient, I knew no one. I didn’t know the culture of Texas, of the South, of anything, and there was no one in my family who had ever gone to college that said, “Hey, go join something, do this or do that,” and so, some girls from Dallas took me under their wing, and they said, “You look funny. We’ve got to get you some different clothes.” [laughs] Because I came and I had long, straight hair. Kind of a beatnik, a hippy, surfer --

Q: The California look.
A: The California, I was a surfer girl.
Q: And what did everybody else look like?
A: They had beehives, I mean, teased hair, and lots of makeup, and --
Q: The suits.
A: Yeah, and they put these rinses on their hair and stuff like that, and my friend Debby, we recently reconnected, she just said, “I need to take you shopping, make you fit in a little bit more.” But, because of the way I looked, I stood out, and yesterday I was telling someone that I was like the albino pine tree in the green forest, that people could just look at me -- I mean, I got in trouble just by the way I looked. Because I was singled out, it helped radicalize me. There was a lot of assumptions, and anything I did, it was noticed, because I looked -- I just didn’t fit in in the crowd. But also, the artists and the hippies and the beatniks, because it was all kind of mashed up still then, we all could recognize each other, and we all could hang out a little bit. But, you know, my safety guard was these girls from Dallas that knew how things worked, and then on the left-hand, I had the painters, the poets, the pot smokers, the homosexuals, the radicals. And I kind of mixed in both groups. I didn’t have one identity.
Q: And so, in -- like, you went to college in 1964?
A: Yes. And I went to a segregated town, so one of the first things, when we went to the town square, I saw on the back of the movie theater, the back stairs, and it said “colored entrance.” And I just, I was like, “What?”

Q: And you didn’t see that growing up in California?
A: No. It’s not like, my school was -- we had Mexican-Americans in our class, and I’m not sure if -- I think when I was a senior we had a few black students, but they just didn’t live near there. They were never bussed to us. And, I was shocked, and then in the front of the theater was the colored drinking fountain. And, you know, within the first week, I knew I was in a really different kind of place.

Q: And so, it was segregated, like a lot of the south was at the time, but at Stephen F. Austin, were you -- could you see kind of like the civil rights movement start? Was in active in Nacogdoches at that time?
A: Nacogdoches was the last place in Texas to integrate.

Q: Okay.
A: [laughs] So, I went to school, actually, because I failed math and French, I had to take them over, I had to go to school an extra semester, and concentrate on those things. Because, you know, I had a lot of growing up, a lot of
learning to do, so I didn’t study as much as I should have. So I was there an extra semester, and then, when I graduated, I went to Houston and I worked for a year, and I lived in the Montrose. This is kind of jumping around. I had a degree, I applied for a job, I went to the place, wherever they hired social workers. I wasn’t really trained to be one, but if you had a college degree, you could be a social worker. Because I thought I needed to get, you know, like a real job. And so I went in, I interviewed, and the man that I was interviewing with, he was looking at my paperwork, and I just, I really have never been so shocked in my whole life. He was saying, “Hmm, you’re a Nacogdoches ’64 through ’69. Hmm.” He said, “Were you one of those nigger-lovers there?” And I just, I went, “What?” And he got a phone call, or the secretary came in, and I think -- it’s hard to know, was this a test? And I didn’t know what to do. I got up and left. And I went, “Oh. I can’t ever work for the state of Texas.”

Q: So did you stay in Houston after that?

A: I didn’t. I worked for a year, and I lived in the Montrose, and I learned, doing my sociological studies down there, and I worked at Ridgeways, and I made blueprints, and I learned kind of how to -- I worked the front counter,
and helped make blueprints, and helped people decide -- it was kind of, it’s like a Kinko’s for architects and engineers. And I learned how retail worked. There was an old man there who kind of taught me the ropes, how you make change, how you talk to people. I now know that that was my first retail job, just, I didn’t know anything. How to stock supplies and things like that. I didn’t actually order them, but I learned what you do as a clerk.

Q: So, how long did you stay in Houston?

A: So I stayed in Houston for about a year, and one of our friends from Nacogdoches, he came and tracked me down, and said, “Hey, I’ve got a free house we can live in. You want to go back?”

Q: In Nacogdoches?

A: Yeah. And I said, “Sure.” You know, Ridgeways for a year was fine. Might have been a little bit more. But it wasn’t really going anywhere. I was living with one of my college roommate’s sisters in the Montrose, and she was older. She had graduated from UT and she was a painting major, so she was an artist, an intellectual, and her husband ran Pacifica Radio in Houston, and he sold pot out of his studio. [laughs] And the bar around the corner would spike the beer with LSD on the weekends. And, it was crawling with, you know, all the homosexuals were there,
and so that was really interesting, but it was really wild.
So, I went back to Nacogdoches and I got a job in the lawn chair factory, and that’s where I was when Nacogdoches integrated.

Q: Like, the whole town?
A: Yeah, so, Mickey Leland came to town, so there were -- the cafeteria workers at the university protested, and professors were protesting, and this -- I can’t remember the name of this protestor, but the KKK put a cross on his lawn and burnt it, because he was helping them, and I wasn’t actually at the university then. And so, there was some activity, but when I would go to the lawn chair factory with my friend Carol, we -- when Mickey Leland came to town, there were barricades everywhere between the black and the white sections of town. And so every day, we would be stopped, and questioned, and looked over, and then we were allowed, because the factory, of course, was on, you know, the bad side of town. And the whole town was nervous, very, very nervous.

Q: About integration, or --
A: About integration.

Q: That something bad would happen as a result?
A: Yeah, and young people are the ones, you know, doing it. The college kids. Yeah, it was kind of like a tinderbox.
And there was some protesting, but I was working all day. I didn’t participate in very many of those. But a friend of ours came who had been in the university, and he left, and he came back, and we were going to have a big party when Jim came back, and he had a Volkswagen minibus, and he had identified a really wonderful blues singer in Nacogdoches named Archie, and so, we would often go to his house, and we’d, you know, sit, bottle of whiskey, pint of whiskey on the chair. And he would just play all night, you know, the blues, like Lightning Hopkins and Muddy Waters, and you know, of that ilk, and he and his sister were very welcoming to the white college students. And sometimes we’d go there, sometimes he’d come to our parties, and one night, when Jim came back, he was Archie’s best friend, of our friends, and we were up there and then at midnight, we were driving back to where we were living, and we stopped to pick up a man who was walking many, many miles to his job at the Lone Star Feed Factory. And so we pulled over, and said, “Hey, do you want a ride?” And he got in, and apparently the police were following us, because we were some white kids up in the black town.

Q: Oh, yeah.

A: So we were pulled over. This is what Alice Embree wants me to tell you. [laughs] And my boyfriend at the time had --
was about to go to Vietnam, and he was visiting, too, so I mean, a big party was going to happen. He was going to go to Vietnam.

Q: So it was a sending-off party?

A: So, kind of a sending-off -- well, it was a homecoming for Jim, a sending-off for Mike, and probably there was a party every weekend, but, you know how that is. And so, we were pulled over by the cop, and -- the cop car was full of these deputized old men, or it might have been a sheriff, I don’t know if it was police. I think it was the police. And so, an old man came with a gun, a pistol in his hand, and put it at my head and said, “Get out of the car, young lady.”

Q: Just you?

A: Yeah, I was the only one that had the -- there was only one gun pulled.

Q: Yeah.

A: He said, “Get out. Get out of the car, little lady. What are you all doing?” “Just giving this guy a ride home.” Well, we got hauled into the police department, and they ran the plates, they ran all of our background checks, and held us for a couple hours. You know, they separate you and they interrogate you, and we all basically had the same story. “We’re doing nothing. We’re just giving a person a
ride.” And, it was kind of, you know -- my first day in Nacogdoches, a wakeup call to the racism, but it was so overt, in four years, nothing had changed, and it was forced, you know? An activist had to come to town and make change.

Q: And so how long did you stay in Nacogdoches?
A: After that.
Q: Yeah.
A: Well, there’s a few other things. I was there for the first pot bust as well.
Q: In town?
A: I was at a party. [laughs] I was at a party, and there was a narc, an undercover agent who had a new polaroid camera, took pictures of everyone. My friend Eleanor said, “There’s a party,” and I said, “Sure, I’ll go.” I knew the person whose house it was at. And, so, the plans were, after the party, these two guys were going to drive to Houston and buy the pot and bring it back, and as soon as they hit the city limits, they had been arrested, because this guy was there that heard them talking about it. And then they pulled everybody in that they could find, and I ended up having to testify before the grand jury.
Q: Oh, wow.
A: I was taken in. I was the last one they found, because I was very introverted and quiet, and I was in the art building a lot, and finally, someone in the art building saw the picture and said, “Oh, that’s Sue Post.”

Q: So they put up wanted posters for everyone for a pot bust?

A: Well, they just walked around. We didn’t have posters, but they had these polaroids, and so, these narcs that look like college kids would walk around and say, “Hey, I’m looking for this girl. You know her?” You know, “I want to ask her out for a date.” And so, I was taking an exam in my anthropology class, and the dean of men walked in, because I knew everyone was being found, and I just put down my pen, and he said, “Come to my office.” And, the two other women at the party were there, and he said, “You can testify or we’ll subpoena you.” It was, you know, it was in the ’60s -- it was before they were -- they were kind of dumb about it, and so, the only woman on the grand jury was put in charge of the three girls. And, we were all going to testify on the same day, one after another, the grand jury was convened, and so Eleanor went first, and I don’t know, she was in there an hour, and we were outside, waiting with the cop, or the dean of men or something, and so when she was in there so long, it was time for lunch, so the lady on the grand jury took us to
lunch. And she said, “Now, y’all can’t get together. You can’t go talk about this.” And so Eleanor went to the bathroom, and we just all ran after her. [laughs] And that woman, she was elderly, she was in her 60s or 70s, she just -- she had no way to stop us. And so, we said, “Oh, my God, what did they ask you? What’s it like?” Because we were just a wreck. And she said, “Well, they were talking about the immorality of everything.” And she said, “Well, I know my bible pretty well, and so they didn’t really stand a chance.” [laughs] And so we just -- you know, “I debated religion with them. I didn’t tell them anything.” And then I was next. And, it was very intimidating, because you’re just sitting in the middle of this circle, and they can just all ask you questions, and you have no representation, and nothing is off-limits, and they can just, you know, they can just pepper you with questions. And they were like -- it was just so repulsive, they said, “Well, we hear that there’s deviant sex when you’re high on marijuana. Tell us about it. What do y’all do?” And so, this was just pure interest. You know, it’s evil. It’s evil. It’s evil.

Q: But tell us about it.
A: But tell us about it. And I said, “Well, I’m a sociologist. I’m studying sociology, and marijuana isn’t a
gateway drug to the hard stuff. Psychedelics are very important in our evolution. Don’t you know that consciousness can be changed?” And I started citing, like, all the studies and all the things I’d been reading about, and you know, I just said, “I don’t know anything about any sexual deviants, but I know that there’s consciousness-raising, I’m not saying that that’s happened to me, but in this university, I’ve taken classes.” [laughs] And I cited all that stuff, and it’s hard to remember everything, but they just, they were furious at me, and they told me to get out. So, they didn’t get anything they wanted, and the dean of men said, “You’re out of there, just tell me.” Or, the DA, and I said, “I just told the truth. There’s nothing to tell.”

Q: Do you remember the outcome of that case at all, he was taken to court?

A: Yeah, he went to court, he was given like 20 years’ probation.

Q: Oh, wow.

A: His father -- so, he was new to the south. His father was the general manager of the Lone Star Feed -- the new general manager of the same place that the black man was walking to, but he had been transferred from Ohio to run this place in Nacogdoches, and his son, John, the one that
was busted, is a very talented artist, and so, he got 20 years’ probation as a courtesy, because his father was a prominent person. He had no other charges against him, and I don’t think any of the people at the party -- I don’t think any pot was being smoked at that party.

Q: It was just the intent to go buy it?
A: It was the intent to go buy it, yeah.

Q: Wow. That just seems harsh, even now.
A: Yeah. And so, he ended up -- so, the third girl, Prissy, he ended up marrying her. He was girlfriends with --

Q: John?
A: John, and I think that was part of the deal. He had to get married and settle down, and he’d get 20 years’ probation. So, he moved to Lubbock, and did medical illustration. And I’ve never heard from him since, but I should look him up. And so, for me, going -- landing in Nacogdoches in this really alien territory, standing out, being singled out, like, you couldn’t wear pants on campus, and I was an art - - well, if you were an art student, you could.

Q: You could, to work in?
A: Yeah, to work in. But I just wore my pants, my painterly pants, and the dean of women would pull me out every day, just because I stood out, because I looked different, and I was in the arts. And, she just picked me out, picked me
out. I went -- you had to sign out of the dorm, you know, say where you’re going, and if you didn’t go there, you could get in trouble and so my friend Debby wanted to spend the night, go to a party and not come back in the dorm, and so I said, “All right, I’ll go with you.” And so, we got caught, and we got campus-ed for a whole semester.

Q: You couldn’t leave campus?

A: Couldn’t leave our room after six o’clock every night. And, our parents were called down, and her parents said, “How dare you treat my daughter like that?” But my good old conservative dad said, “Throw the book at her.” [laughs] And Debby’s parents ended up taking her out of school -- we’re not going to let my daughter stay here.

Q: Were students of color allowed at Stephen F. Austin at that time?

A: There were some, and I don’t know -- I don’t think there were any in my dorm, but they, especially people that lived in Nacogdoches, there were some black students.

Q: And then, so, when you moved back to Nacogdoches, how long were you there?

A: So, I was there --

Q: Or do you remember when you left?

A: Probably at least -- it was at least a year, and then I started studying metaphysics, and so we had a group and we
studied metaphysics. We’d all smoke pot and talk about -- we’d do a lot of readings, and listen to Bob Dylan and smoke pot, and I was -- when I had to go back to school, and I -- maybe it was summer school, I had to go take, oh, statistics, that was the math that I had failed, so I was retaking statistics, and to get extra credit, you could be in an experiment for a graduate student, and so I signed up for that because I was worried. [laughs] You know, I was going to need all the extra credit I could get. Although I aced statistics then. I went from like an F to an A.

And so, I was in this guy’s experiment, and it was -- he showed us pictures of people, and we had to rank what kind of power we thought they wielded in the world. And, instead of talking about that, he was asking me, you know, “How do I buy pot?” I’m like, “No, don’t. I got in so much trouble about that.” But we became really good friends, and so he was this geeky guy from Colombia who’d flunked out of the University of Chicago, and he was clawing his way back into academia to redeem himself to his family, and so, he taught us all the things he learned. So, he read all the books that he should have read, and you know the University of Chicago, their curriculum was really different.
Q: In what way?
A: As far as, like, you read all the classics, like, everyone read all the same things and discussed, and it wasn’t -- they weren’t preparing people for career paths like they did. And so, we would discuss and read all the books, and so, I don’t know, he was giving us little tutorials. So, he was one of my mentors, even though it was like, “Oh, my God, do I tell him how to buy pot?” And, so he was in Nacogdoches, and kind of people in this group, this metaphysical group, one by one -- my sister moved to Austin. A good friend, Fred, moved to Austin, and when I was in Nacogdoches in college, my friend Carol, her sister, who I ended up living with in the Montrose, we visited her in Austin, and as we were riding down Lamar and passing Pease Park, there was a love-in going on, which was kind of a concert peace protest, the love-in, you know, with the flower.

Q: A love-in.
A: You know, flowers and peace signs, just, a love-in.

Q: Just hanging out?
A: Yeah.

Q: Oh. In Pease Park?
A: In Pease Park. So, Pease Park was beautiful, Lamar was not full of traffic, and there were all these hippies playing
music, and I don’t remember if there were signs or anything, but you know, tie-dye, long hair, peace and blowing bubbles and just, the hippies in the park, like you see in the movies in San Francisco, like The Summer of Love.

Q: And what year was this, do you remember at all?
A: It was the Summer of Love. [laughs]
Q: Oh, okay.
A: Yeah, it happened in pockets everywhere. And so, I always knew I had to get to Austin, and of course, it was the most similar to the liberal atmosphere of California, the freedom.

Q: So, at that time, it was -- because I know it’s a liberal place relatively, today, but it was still kind of a liberal city back then?
A: Yes. Very liberal. There was the Armadillo World Headquarters. Yeah, so, I -- do you know Timothy Leary and Ram Dass, and names like that?
Q: No.
A: So, Timothy Leary used to be a physicist at MIT, I think, but he took acid and it changed his life, and so he became someone who talked about, lived, and -- used psychedelics to try to change the world. And Ram Dass used to be Richard Alpert, and he dropped acid, and he went to India,
and he studied, and he coined the words “be here now.”

You’ve heard that?

Q: Yeah.

A: So, he wrote many, many famous books, and his influence will be immortalized, I’ll go on and on and on. He really did change people. And the Merry Pranksters, did you ever hear about them?

Q: Uh-uh.

A: There was a movie about Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, did you ever see the film?

Q: Yeah.

A: It’s kind of out of that era. So, all that was happening, so there was -- and I’ve met my first homosexuals in Nacogdoches. My friend Bobby dressed me as a man to get me into his dorm room, because I’d never heard opera, and he loves the opera. And, he talked about what it was like to be a gay man, and there was a lesbian in our dorm who got drunk every weekend, just so that someone -- she’d have to be picked up and tucked into bed, and touched, and fussed over. And so, interesting ways to learn about things. So, there was misogyny, sexism, racism, homophobia, and then, kind of, so we were on the edge of the psychedelic curtain, too. So, mind-altering drugs were really important,
because that was going to help change the world, because, you know, peace and love.

Q: And so, you opened BookWoman in 1975, how long were you in Austin before that?

A: So, I came -- I came in, I think, ’72, I think I came in November of ’72. But one of the big things that women were, you know, you could be part of the group, but you were kind of relegated to different status.

Q: In social movements?

A: In social movements. I mean, it still happens today. You just didn’t get the respect of any kind. And, so, some of the music I was listening to, so, I listened to a lot of -- so, the first day -- I transferred in my freshman year second semester, to the freshman dorm, and the first thing, I walked in and Sandy Smith was playing Bob Dylan, and I -- couldn’t believe it.

Q: And was it the first time you’d heard Bob Dylan?

A: Yeah, yeah. And it was, like, cranked up, and she was singing the songs, and I just sat in my room, and I just listened. And just couldn’t believe it. So, that raised my social consciousness, just by listening to a couple of long tracks. One other thing that happened in California, my boyfriend took me to see Dr. Strangelove, and to a Peter, Paul and Mary concert. So, those were really
pivotal. So, those were things -- and he and I went to an anti-war protest in high school. And then I went to college, I was isolated in this dorm with this weird roommate, and I didn’t know anyone, but then I had friends and went to the dorm, and Sandy had Bob Dylan on, and so, things really were starting to come together for me. And, when I first came to Austin, I discovered Yoko Ono, and so, I credit her with really opening up my mind as far as the misogyny in the world, because she really sings about it. And she had to live through it, you know, with the Beatles.

Q: Especially as a, like, a foreigner, too.

A: And as a creative genius, too.

Q: Yeah.

A: And, yes, as an Asian. So, you know, John fell in love with her work before he even met her. And, she really, really talks about the plight of women in her songs, they’re really interesting. So, I got her message, and so when I came to Austin, I entered into a relationship with a woman, and she had a child -- or, we had a child. She was pregnant when we got together, we had a child, and we were pretty isolated and new to the community, you know, the, oh, there’s a lesbian movement?

Q: Where were you living in Austin at the time?
A: So, when I first came, I lived with my sister, and it was off of South Lamar. I remember one Sunday morning, I got up early and I was walking on South Lamar, probably where the Shoal Creek Saloon is, along there. And I got pulled over because the cop thought I was a runaway. [laughs] And then, they moved to a place in -- I think they moved to west Austin, to Bridle Path. So, I stayed with them for a few months, and then a couple of other people kind of in our religious cult group moved to Austin, and so we all got a house together, a couple of us, and I guess my sister -- I guess my sister and brother-in-law rented it first, and it was on Oakmont, and so, it's like by Bryker Woods School. I lived there before Mopac was -- they started Mopac when I was living there.

Q: And it's still not done. [laughs]

A: Yeah. And so we lived there, and I had a bunch of weird jobs. I was a waitress for one night, and I worked in daycare, and then I ended up in a furniture company, and I was doing collections for people that were 30 days late in their furniture payments, and doing some clerical work, so that's where I learned more about, I guess, how a business runs. But, you know --

Q: Did you ever get involved into -- when did you find kind of a scene in Austin?
A: So, when Carol and I were raising this baby, and a friend—
— and I was working at the furniture factory. I mean, at
the furniture store, it’s over here on airport, it’s like,
next to that seafood restaurant.

Q: Still today?

A: Yeah, I think it’s a different name, but it’s not—it was
a famous name back then. And so, I was working there, and
this young woman came to work, and she and I hit it off,
and she didn’t stay very long, and she went to the UT
library system and got a job, and she called me up one day,
and she said, “Susan, this is where you belong. You could
get a job here. You got to get out of there.” [laughs]
And so, I went to Battle Hall, and it was the library, it
was psychology, it was musicology, it was education and
curriculum, and --

Q: The old library with the stairs?

A: Battle Hall, yeah, the spiral?

Q: Yeah. Now it’s the architecture library.

A: Yeah, so, yeah, there was a little architecture there. So,
I got to work in that great building, and so, I was hired
by Tom Mendina, who was in library science school, and he
basically-- he was my mentor, and taught me about
computers, and he taught me-- basically, he taught me his
job so that he could go to meetings, because he was in
library science, and he knew it was going to be a serious profession, and he chaired meetings, and he was this very fastidious man. And he put me in charge of reserves, and so, I interacted with the students that checked out the stuff, but I set up all the records and things, and I wasn’t really very good at it, but he tolerated it, he thought I was interesting. Was interested in my background, and he liked talking to me. And, so, we had a good relationship, and then he started teaching me how to read these big printouts, like of all the missing books, one of his jobs was to find them, and he gave it to me. So, I would be able to roam all around the library, all over campus. So, once I got the reserve stuff done, I could go try to find these books, so I could wander around, and so I was interested in women’s studies, it didn’t really exist, but, who were the famous lesbians? What did women have to say about what happens to us in the world? And I would find books, and I could sit down and read them.

Q: Were there any books that you remember being really formative?

A: Yeah, Gertrude Stein.

Q: Like, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*?

A: That’s one of them, that’s one of my favorite books, but also, I found, like, *Lifting Belly*, and like her erotic
poetry and stuff. And, I can’t believe that they would be -- they were rare books on the stacks. They were still on the stacks when I left the library. And, so, and also, the music library was there, and so there was all this world music, and I could take all the albums, and I could check out everything, and so I educated myself in world music, because I was working there. And then, the architecture books, they had a lot of, like, Japanese and Asian architecture, and I didn’t know a lot about that.

And so, I was able to check those books out, and really immerse myself in what’s it like to be in another culture, and a lot of psychology books that I could check out, so that was really great, working there. And the PCL was in the planning stage, and so Mr. Mendina was grooming me to go to the PCL and be in charge of reserves, because he ended up going to Yale. I think he might have been the head, or the assistant librarian there. And, so, I’m working with books, working clerical things. Have a baby and a woman that I -- we met in the community, said, “I have a friend, she has three kids and she can’t leave her house. Would you and Carol go meet her, and get to know her? She’s a lesbian mom, and there’s a lot of trouble,”
and then, I don’t know if you know that there was custody issues?

Q: Yeah.

A: And so --

Q: Usually with, like, the father?

A: Yeah, the father would always get the kids, and it was just terrible. So, we were meeting lesbian mothers whose kids were taken away from them, and Lynn still had her kids. But she couldn’t leave them, you know.

Q: And do you remember her full name at all?

A: Lynn Lichtenfeld.

Q: Lynn Lichtenfeld.

A: Yeah. She died a few years back. She was my first friend to die from cancer. And, so she raised -- had two boys and a girl. We had a little girl. Her kids were a little bit older than our kid. But we hung out with her, and the friend that connected us went on a road trip, so that was Nancy Lee Marquis, she lives in -- just outside Taos in New Mexico, she’s been there for quite a long time. And Cynthia Roberts, who also immigrated to New Mexico, they went on a road trip, and the cities that they visited had women’s bookstores. So, there was Mama Bear’s in Oakland, there was Old Wives Tales in New York -- in San Francisco. They went to Amazon Books in Minneapolis, so, they saw that
women’s bookstores existed, and they went, “We have to have
on in Austin. We want to do this. We want to start a
women’s bookstore.” And so they -- who knows what they
did? Called people, sent out mimeograph fliers, how did
the word get out? I’m not sure. But, meetings were
called, and so she said, “Well, you work in the library.
Are you going to join? We need someone to order books.”
And I said, “Well, I’m busy. We have this baby, and I work
full time, and I’m an introvert. I can’t do it.”

And so, every time there was a meeting, she would ask me,
and I turned her down three times. And one night, I was
eating dinner, and I looked at my watch or something, and I
said, “There’s a meeting tonight, I have to go.” So it
just had to kind of work its way through my brain, and I
don’t really know. It’s more like lightning struck me,
that something just totally changed that night, and so I
went to the meeting, and I was really nervous to go,
because I just didn’t like to be in big crowds. I didn’t
feel like I had those kind of skills, I wasn’t like a
super-organizer, I wasn’t a super-genius, I didn’t really
know how to order books, but I felt books were so important
in my life, and if I could contribute something, okay, I’ll
go. And so I went, and I was there an hour early, and so
there were only two women there, and so they said, “Oh, come in. We wanted to play the new Chris Williamson album for you. Have you heard it?” And I said, “No,” and so it was just really casual and nice, and then just people started coming. I didn’t have to walk into a room full of people, and announce myself. And so, I agreed to join the collective, and there was still lots of things to do. There was money to raise, to order books, we had to have a space. Articles of incorporation.

Q: So it was really a collective that started it?

A: So it really was a collective, it was a collective. So, some of the archival material from Kris will be a picture of some of the collective. I’m not in the picture. Well, it’s in the rag book, I think. Have you seen it?

Q: No, I haven’t gotten -- I’ve been focusing on more of the -

A: I mean the book they put out last year. There’s a page, and it lists all the people in the collective, but my name’s not there. [laughs] It’s so ironic.

Q: Oh. The current owner. [laughs]

A: Well, I mean, I’m an original collective member, but, you know. The current owner’s name isn’t there. So, it’s good, this’ll be here. And so, I went, started going to these meetings, and I just didn’t really know what my place
was, and there were, especially one woman, Nina Woke, and she’s still around, we’re still in contact. She’s in California. And she’s really a genius. And she’s a bookkeeper, so she set up the bookkeeping. She’s a writer, so she wrote a lot of the stuff. I don’t really know, I think she did most of it, I was just a hanger-on for a long time. And, we tried to incorporate as a 501(c)(3), and there was a lawyer that did pro bono work for us, and filed those. There was a graphic artist, her name’s Nancy, and she’s still around, and the original brochure is in the archival thing I will be giving you, like, why we existed, what the purpose was, and basically, it really hasn’t changed. Kind of like why feminism is still important, because of all the same things.

Q: Was there any push back? In the community, or in the paperwork?

A: At different points. Well, yeah, so, the IRS sent back and said, “We deny your 501(c)(3), you’re too one-sided.” Because we said a feminist bookstore, books by, about, and for women. And so it was many years later before the first feminist bookstore was able to incorporate as a non-profit, and I think there were two or three. And some of them, now, a couple of them now have a non-profit arm, like for the programming. Because that takes staff time, and
sometimes you have to pay to get an author, or to put on a
workshop or something, and so they run two simultaneous
things. And, we didn’t have the money to protest it. And
that lawyer, that was the one thing that they were going to
do for us. And, we had a few fundraisers, like the annual
Halloween dance, and we used to do it over at the Unitarian
church over on Grover.

Q: Before the bookstore was --
A: Uh-huh.

Q: Actually there?
A: The first one was before it was incepted, and then the
other genius, and I don’t know who came up with it, but we
sold stock, and basically it was like 25 dollars, 50
dollars, 100 dollars, and then in a year, you could redeem
it at the bookstore. And so we need this to get seed
money, and I think we raised 500 dollars, not very much.
And then we had a donated building -- or, set of rooms, and
it was right next to the Catholic church, across from the
Dobie Mall, upstairs where that balcony is, and it says
“Fix PCs.”

Q: To the right of the Catholic church?
A: Well, if you’re facing it, it’s to the left.

Q: Okay.
A: Because the Catholic church goes to the corner.
Q: Yeah. So it’s between like 21st and MLK?

A: Mm-hmm. Right next to the Catholic church. And we put this big yellow and red banner, and we originally were The Common Woman Bookstore. And so it was this big red banner. So, the house I went to was owned by Dede Spontak from my first meeting. And, she and I became really good friends, and she was enrolled in a program with the city of Austin for nontraditional jobs for women, and so she was learning to be a carpenter. And she was adopted. She’s Japanese, and I guess when her father was stationed in Japan, they brought her back. But, she learned -- so, she’s really good with her hands and things. I don’t know if her mother taught her, but she knew how to sew, and so she was like, “Susan, you’re going to help me sew this banner.” And so, we ordered the nylon, like they make the pride flags and stuff out of, and so we made -- it was a red background with yellow letters, because we wanted it to be revolutionary, so it said “Common Woman Bookstore” and we hung it right next to the Catholic church on that balcony. [laughs]

Q: They can’t catch a break, they were already right next to the YMCA on the other side.

A: Yeah. Yeah. Well, not quite, they -- the YMCA was down the street, but --
Q: Yeah, just down the street.
A: Yeah, so I knew a lot of those women. So, have you talked to any of them?
Q: From the YMCA?
A: Yeah. I mean, do you know? Did anyone talk to, like, Fay?
Q: Fay —
A: Brosmerin?
Q: I'm not sure.
A: Because that would be the person, because she’s still around. The other main person went to Dallas, and is a therapist in Dallas. And then Fay just retired from the school district as a counselor, school counselor.
Q: Yeah. I know there’s —
A: I haven’t seen her in a long time.
Q: -- some women involved with the rag were -- with the birth control information center, that are being talked to.
A: Alicia, is she one of them?
Q: Alicia --
A: Oh, shoot, I can’t remember her name. I’ll remember it later. I mean, you can ask me later, or email me about it. And, so, anyway, so we did all these things, and had benefits, and raised 500 dollars, and so the last piece was a place, and below the rooms -- so, we got a couple of the rooms, so, below was the haircut store, so there was a,
like, a barbershop, a haircut store, owned by a local lesbian named Margaret Nunley, and she donated to -- there was maybe four rooms, three or four rooms that were rented, and they had been fire-bombed, and so that’s what she donated, and it was possible because Deedee was learning to be a carpenter.

Q: So she could rebuild anything?
A: So she could rebuild it, and refurbish it. So, I was her gopher, once again. So, I just got the hammer, held the ladder, did whatever she asked me to do, so we got those rooms spiffed up, and she built bookcases, and I’m paying for a storage bin that have these nostalgic bookcases, like the ones that she built in there. It’s hard to get rid of them. I mean, there’s other stuff. When we moved here, we downsized. This is half the size of our old store.

Q: And were you still working full time at the library, at the same time?
A: I was, I was. So, I did things like on the weekend, and I would help her sometimes in the evening. And, when we opened the store, I just looked one evening a week, I think I worked Wednesday nights, so I had -- so, really, I showed up, I was there, I sometimes just let the politics go on without me. I would be at the meeting but not really be adamant for one side or another, because separatism was
rampant. Have you heard about separatism in the lesbian feminist movement?

Q: I’ve heard of it, what kind of, like, what were the issues?
A: Can men be allowed in a space? And so, that’s a feminist legacy. Can trans people be allowed in this space? You know, who’s going to have the energy here?

Q: So, is it the same time of like, woman-born-woman kind of stuff?
A: No, it’s before.

Q: Before? Okay.
A: It’s before. But, we’re creating spaces for women. And, so, this is a radical thought, “We can just exclude men.” How can we find our power? Men talk more, they have more money, they talk more, they’re stealing our thunder. Can we exclude them? And so -- initially, that wasn’t a political discussion, but it became obvious that half the collective felt that they were in this because they wanted a space for women only, and that’s the kind of space they needed. And, the other half thought, “Well, we’re for all women, not just lesbian women. And, with women, a lot of times, children and men come along, and we can’t -- we want to reach all women, we can’t exclude men if we want to reach women.” And so lots of meetings, there were a lot of discussions, and battles, stances, positions, and in the
end, half the collective resigned after the first year because they wanted us to succeed, but they didn’t want to be a part of that.

Q: So, the half that was for or against the exclusion of men?
A: Those who wanted it to be a woman-only space left. And, you know, there’s reasons. One went to graduate school in Florida. One went to nursing school. You know, different things. One moved back to the reservation in Oklahoma, and, those who seriously wanted to open a space, have a space that anyone could come into, because we could reach more women, people, feminists could be grown, by disseminating information and having a space that would allow perusal of the information.

Q: Was it an event space, like BookWoman is today?
A: No.

Q: Just a bookstore mostly, at that point?
A: Mostly it was a bookstore. So, we had these two small rooms upstairs, and I don’t know if Kris [editor’s note: Kristen Hogan, author of The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability] -- I can’t remember if Kris goes through this in her book, but -- yeah, she does, so, feminist publishing grew up with feminist bookstores, because one of the problems was if you walked into a regular bookstore, it was hard to find books
by women. You’d have to look through 500 men to find a few books she wanted to read. So, we wanted to bring those books all together, but also more radical writings. But, the mainstream press wasn’t publishing those, and often, if radical books, or books with sexual content, they would take them to printers who would refuse to print them once they saw what it was. “These uppity women” or “these damn lesbians. We’re not going to print them. We refuse to.” Or, they were being rejected by Random House, and Simon & Schuster, and houses like that.

Q: Which is just ironic, because we’re sitting next to a box of a bunch of Random House books.

A: Yes. Yes. And, so, Random House is who you want to publish you, because they have the top billing for the most prominent publishing house right now. So, women had to learn skills, how to be editors and publishers, and then the women learned how to print, and I know that some of the interviews are the Red River Women’s Press here in Austin, because they were a lot of the women who worked on the rag worked there. And Rita Starpattern, who started Women and Their Work, with Deanna Stevenson --

Q: The gallery?

A: Yeah, the gallery. So, that’s connected. So, all the women’s publishing is connected now to the Women and Their
Work Gallery. But there were two codirectors, Rita Starpattern and Deanna Stevenson, and Rita did the art, and Diana was more interested in the authors. So they would bring authors as well. And, they brought Audre Lorde --

Q: To BookWoman?
A: No, to UT.

Q: Oh, okay.
A: The whole litany of these women, and I got to go sell books, and be educated by actually, you know, hearing them recite their poetry, recite their short story, tell their essays. They used to happen up in UTL in the Peter Flawn room.

Q: The academic center?
A: Yeah, yeah. So, we’d go up there and hear these wonderful women. And so that was part of my education. I got to do that many times.

Q: Were there a lot of students? Like, since it was across the street from UT, were there a lot of students who frequented it?
A: Yeah. Yeah. Because they, you know, they were interested, but also, just women in the community would come as well. And, I think we were open probably pretty short hours, I can’t remember -- I could only work in the evenings and on the weekends. And, then Kris’s book -- so there -- a Women
in Print conference, so all these stores were opening, all, I don’t know if one influenced the other, but it’s just funny, like, at some point there were health food stores on every corner. I remember -- I know where the first one was in Austin. And, Sprouts in the Safeway, and 150 women’s bookstores in North America. And it’s dwindled to, I don’t know, 12, I think. Between 11 and 13, no one really knows. But, other specialty bookstores closed, too, and that’s a whole other thing, with discounting and big box stores, and the chains. So -- so, we were in that space next to the Catholic church for about a year, and the discussions about separatism were pretty ongoing, and one incident, I wasn’t there, I’m not sure if it really happened, but knowing that some of the collective members were really adamant about men in the store, the woman who owned the haircut store had male barbers that worked for her, and she claims that one of her employees came upstairs and was asked to leave, and it incensed her, so she kicked us out.

Q: Of the space?
A: Yeah, of the space, and so we made it real nice, and we were there for a year, and you know, it’s possible that that happened, and I don’t know how many times that happened, but I know that a business couldn’t exist if someday it’s -- if I’m there, okay, come on in. If you’re
being a jerk, I’ll ask you to leave, but, if you’re respectful, you can stay. But if someone just says, “No, get out,” and you wouldn’t know what would happen day-to-day, that would be really hard. So, I mean, I’ve asked men to leave, but not very often. And I probably asked -- I’ve asked a few men with mental health problems to leave. But, you know, mostly I try -- if we can bring someone in and help educate them, it’s really great.

Q: And so, did you -- were you at -- did you continue to -- besides BookWoman, was there a larger lesbian community in Austin that you joined up with, and participated in?

A: Yes. Yeah, so there were many, I started playing softball, and there were concerts. And so there was a bunch of peace and justice singers. And lesbian singers, and comedians that came through towns, and there were the bars, of course. The bars were big. And there were spaces for women, there were lesbian bars in the old days.

Q: Was there a part of town they were concentrated in?

A: They were downtown. So, The Ginger Man isn’t there anymore, but that was the Hollywood, we called it “the hollyweird.”

Q: There is a Ginger Man.

A: It moved. But it moved.

Q: Oh, okay.
A: But it used to -- I don’t know what’s there now, it’s -- I don’t go downtown much anymore. But, I don’t know, there’s some spiffy something there. And there was a place on 29th street near campus which was called The New Apartment, and then the oldest gay bar, not the one on Congress that was just in the newspaper, but there was another one near the Capitol that I saw they just tore down. It closed about three or four years ago, and I think I’d only been in there one time.

Q: Yeah. It’s before my time in Austin.

A: So, people went to the bars a lot, because it was fun, it was fairly safe, and you could meet people. There was some performance at The Hollywood. Terry Galloway is kind of a famous -- she was one of the -- I don’t want to say “organizers,” she helped start Esther’s Follies. She was one of the first -- she was part of the group that started Esther’s Follies, and so she’s an actress. She did Shakespeare at Winedale when she studied at UT, and she’s deaf. She just totally reads lips, and she was this incredible actor and comedian and poet. She’s in Tallahassee. She has -- she comes to Austin, the Austin area, outside Austin, her family lives, so she comes occasionally. But she followed her partner to Tallahassee, her partner who’s a professor at the university there. And
so she’s still doing satire. [laughs] And she used to perform at The Hollywood, and some poets would, occasionally, but it wouldn’t be like every weekend or anything. And then there were things at Women’s Space that we’d go to. There would be lectures and sometimes concerts. At BookWoman, we put on the Halloween dance every year, and we did a New Year’s Eve dance occasionally. And some of the performers would be there, too, like Meg Christian and Alix Dobkin.

Q: So was it more of a kind of community, like, not just social community, but was it more of a community were there ever any, like, concerted groups that were active?

A: There was --

Q: Or, like, satellite groups of national organizations?

A: The National Organization for Women was stronger, and I’m not really a joiner. [laughs] And there were -- I can’t remember, like, the puppet theater? I know that Alice Embree probably is going to talk about that, they would make these big puppets, and they would do political satire down at Town Lake. And there would be throngs of people there, and it would be a lot of anti-war stuff, and I would -- we’d go down there, and then sometimes we’d bring a little display, like, with buttons and books and things to sell at some of the little festivals like that. So, I’ve
made up for my slacker years. Now I work all the time, [laughs] I go to everything and try to be a lot more politically active. But then the next thing that happened is, you know, so she kicked us out, and what do we do? And where I was living on San Antonio Street had soft retail zoning, and so one of my exes was still living up there, and I think one of the apartments was empty, and so I told Carol, “Find somewhere else to live. We’re moving the bookstore.” And so the rest of the collective painted this area, moved all the books, and they said goodbye. And then that was when I had to make a decision.

Q: To take the bookstore on yourself?
A: Yeah.

Q: And do you know what year that was?
A: Well, let’s see. So, if we started in ’75, and we were a year -- so, it might have been two years on Guadalupe, I don’t really know.

Q: So, not long after it started.
A: So, Kris knows. It’s in the book. Yeah, so, not long after. Within two years.

Q: You kind of had to decide whether or not you were going to keep actually doing it.
A: And so, I’m like, hmm, I’m going to have this really good job at the library, and be able to touch books, and learn
all the stuff, so I was just like -- so, world music, psychology, architecture books, and it’s very exciting to be continuing my education there at the library.

Q: I’m assuming you picked BookWoman, but, like, what was it that made you realize this was something that you wanted to keep?

A: So, I just couldn’t believe it. Like, that’s it? We did all this, and I just -- the day the lightning hit me, and I went to that meeting, something changed, and it was probably all the knowledge I was taking, you know, all the things I was realizing about society and about women’s place in society and the importance of literature, and how books can change people’s lives, they were changing mine. And it’s going to stop? No, it can’t be. And so, yeah, I made the decision that I had to quit my nice job and -- but I couldn’t really do that, because there wasn’t enough money to do that. So, I took a part-time job as a clerk in circulation at the PCL, because it had opened. And, I rode my bike at noon -- I worked eight to noon in the PCL, and I rode my bike to San Antonio Street, 1510 San Antonio, and I would open the store, and we’d be open until six. Like, all the book catalogues, nothing was digitized, of course. So, I still didn’t know how to order books, really, because Nina, the genius, really had done all that. But she had
moved to California, and she wrote out how to do it, and she gave me her stack of catalogues, and I would -- my living room, basically -- so, there were apartments in kind of the big open room, and so the bookstore was in one apartment in the big open space, and I lived in the other part, and there was a kitchen, I guess that everyone shared, and so then it was just my kitchen.

And so every night, I would pick up a catalogue, read Nina’s notes, and learn how to order books, and you know, start learning to look, and start curating. And I’m a much better curator now. And figure out, you know, what are the new albums to get, and to order them. And, someone who did -- we did have one person join the collective when everyone else left, and that was Judy Turner, and she had lived in San Antonio, and she visited a lot, and had gotten to know, I guess, a few of the women, because Austin had a more lively scene than San Antonio, it was a lot more liberal. So she joined the collective, and eventually she got a job in Austin at the health department, so she had a fulltime job, but she was making money. And she worked in computer and IT, so she had a really good job, and so she took over the bookkeeping, and also she did income sharing with me. Because I couldn’t survive on a part-time job. And the
bookstore wasn’t really making very much money, you know, to pay rent. It wasn’t high, but still. So, she did income-sharing with me for many years. And we wouldn’t have survived without that. And then, a woman named Margaret McNeil came, and she would volunteer for a few hours on Saturday. She was never part of the collective — I mean, there wasn’t a collective anymore, but she wasn’t an official employee, she was just a volunteer.

Q: And this was still in the late ’70s, pretty soon after it moved?

A: This was — yeah, this was. Yeah. And so, it was hard to work, you know, every day of the week. And so she said, “Take some Saturday time.” So, that was nice.

Q: So, I know you came to Austin at the tail end of — or, not even really the — you came kind of after a lot of the tumultuous ’60s stuff, but, just in those like five, eight years or so, did you see a change at all, the city?

A: Austin?

Q: Mm-hmm. Socially, I guess.

A: I think that people became more connected. I think the different movements became more connected. And, coalitions were formed. I know that, like, my girlfriend was going to the John Brown reading group and learning about racism, and she participated in discussions, and I was ordering books
at home. And, what were, let’s see, what were some of the other movements? So there was the movement on campus, there were the rag people, there was this --

Q: There’s SDS.

A: Yeah, and I knew a couple of the radicals, in fact, the FBI paid a visit to me once when they were looking for someone who was really -- had done something that they were very upset about.

Q: A lot of --

A: So they had tracked, the worst kind of activist, in their opinion, to BookWoman, and we were still called The Common Woman then, and so, wanted to know, like, where is she? Where would she be? You know, so I got questioned about that, and of course, I didn’t know anything.

Q: A lot of women who were active in Austin at this time, a semi-common consensus has been that a lot of them have been visited by the FBI, or they know that somewhere, an FBI file exists that is about them.

A: Yeah, so I knew I had one. But compared to my file in Nacogdoches, [laughs] I wasn’t too worried about that.

Q: When did the name change?

A: So, this is another interesting story. So, we were in my little house on San Antonio Street for a couple years, and a woman named Kate Turner came to town to go to UT graduate
school, and she was in folklore, anthropology slash folklore, and she came from Douglas College in New Jersey, Rutgers, and she knew that a feminist bookstore existed, and so, as soon as she hit town, she wanted to hit the bookstore, and so it was upstairs on San Antonio street. We didn’t have any air conditioning, all we had was box fans. I think one room closed, but that big open room didn’t have air conditioning. And we had this old, ratty couch, and I was laying on the couch in August [laughs] just, like, swooning, and she and her girlfriend walked up, and said, “We’re here to see the feminist bookstore.” And so, we became fast friends that day, and she had a friend named Karen Umminger, who she went to college with, and shortly after, Karen came to visit, and we all went out, and Karen and I hit it off, and she came back for another visit, and so, we actually became involved, and she said, “Hey, I’m willing to” -- she was living in New York City, working for the Meredith Corporation that published, like, Better Homes and Gardens magazine, cookbooks and everything, and she said -- and she loved books, and she said, “You know, I see some potential here. I’m willing to move to Austin, and if you give me part of the store.” And so, we went from -- actually, the IRS gave us nonprofit status, but not tax exempt, so we redid the paperwork, and
we had a partnership, and -- she had a job, but also started working in the bookstore, and had -- because she was actually -- her job in the Meredith Corporation, she really knew how publishing worked and stuff. So she had some fundamentally good ideas, and wanted to grow it, and one of our friends was Kathryn Miller, who owned Cowgirls and Flowers, and she just closed and retired. She called us up one day, and said, “Hey, I’m moving down to 6th Street, and there’s all these vacant buildings, and they’re historical, and there’s money for renovations, and you need to move down here. So, come on.” And, so, I went down, and looked at the place that she had rented, and it was like, high ceilings, brick, fabulous, and so I was like, “Oh, that’s really” --

Q: Like, downtown 6th Street?

A: Yeah, downtown, and, boy, that’s a really good idea, and so I was fired up, and I started looking in the newspaper for the “for rent” sign, for the little ads. And I saw one, and it was like, “storefront, 900 square feet, 6th and Trinity, we’ll build to suit.” And I was like, “Oh, my God.” And it wasn’t, you know, I don’t what the rent was, so I went down, and we met -- Karen and I actually went down, we met with the landlord. He had leased it, he had a bar called Wylie’s, which is right across the street, and
he had leased two or three other buildings. His mother, I found out later, was on the historical architecture board, and so he knew a good thing. Or, she knew it, and told him, “Rent these places, because this is going to pop.”

And so we went down, we talked to him and told him what the business was, you know. We went from -- we had pretty marginal spaces, and he listened to our pitch and he said, “No.” He said, “I do not want to walk out of my bar and see a big old sign that says ‘Common Women.’ That’s despicable. You can’t rent from me.” And, that, you know, that was devastating, to just hear that. And, so, Catherine was saying, “You really need to get down here,” and I walked up and down, and I looked at some other places, there was some other things for rent, and Jabour’s Liquor Store was down there, it’s now Twin Liquors, you know, they own all the liquor stores. But they were these two Lebanese twin brothers who had that liquor store down there, and I started going in there, because they had some buildings for rent. I was trying to --

Q: Curry favor.

A: Yeah, with them. [laughs] And just, you know, talk to them, to see if I wanted to rent from them. You know, how would they receive a lesbian feminist bookstore? So, I got
to know, one of the twins was easier to talk to than the other, and so I got to know them, and the space that they had might have worked. I actually went to the Orthodox church at Christmas so that they could see me there. [laughs] And worm my way in. But it turned out that they had other plans for it, and that didn’t really work out, so I went back to the want ads, like a month later or something, and I saw an ad, and it sounded just as good as the one that I was turned down for. And so, it was through Sasserine Sens, it was a real estate company, and so I called up, and the agent was named Stuart, and I can’t remember his last name, and so he picked me up. He said, “I’ll show you the place. Let’s go look at it.” And he drove up to the very same spot.

Q: The same space?

A: Same space, same landlord. And so I said, “Stewart, he won’t rent to me.” And Stewart went, “What? You’ve already looked at this spot?” And I told him the story, and he said, “Well, this makes me very angry to hear this. I’ve just recently remarried, and I married a much younger woman, and she’s filling me in on all the problems that women have. You can’t get credit in your own name. She’s not taken seriously. And, I don’t want that for my wife. I don’t want that for any woman. Let me go talk to him.”
And so, it took a man, a man-to-man talk, and we were signing our lease.

Q: Under the name “Common Women”?
A: No, that was the one thing.

Q: You had to change it?
A: I had to change the name. And so, I was willing to do that. So, I had 24 hours to come up with a name, and so I picked BookWoman. And, so, it was just a terrible raw space, and so Jerry Cria rebuilt it for us. We were able to have input into the plans, and so it was very exciting. There’s a whole series of pictures, I think mostly Karen took, because she was a photographer, of the whole construction of the place. And, we had an open house, and my father came, and my grandmother, and my sister, and I don’t remember if she was married then. I think she was. Her husband, and a couple of my cousins were visiting from Arizona, and so, like, my whole family came, and it was a really big deal, and we had a band. So, that was kind of the start of the events that we started having. We had a big band and big party.

Q: Did that go over well, with your family?
A: Well --

Q: I know you said your dad was kind of conservative.
A: Yeah, he was conservative, but here I was, I had a real business now. And he ended up telling me that he was proud that day. He brought -- you know, he was old-school, he brought this big horseshoe, like, flower arrangement on a stand, yeah. And, you know, he brought the whole family, so he was proud, and it looked really nice. I mean, it was painted well. We had an awning and all kinds of things. And so, we just, you know, paid a little more rent, and paid it back to the landlord for the buildout. And we eventually actually expanded in that area, so we doubled our space there. And so that was kind of the heyday. But, the first year, he didn’t feel like he had to give us air conditioning, and so for that first summer, our doors were open, and that’s when we could hear the harassment. People would walk by, and they’d say, “There’s those dirty lesbians that opened this,” because we went from a very obscure upstairs place --

Q: To downtown.

A: To downtown, where everyone was starting to go, because all the buildings were being --

Q: Restored.

A: Restored, and it wasn’t just bars, then. There was, like, a body shop, you know, where they sold fancy soaps and things, and you could rent roller skates there, and there
were more high, fine cuisine restaurants, and slowly, slowly but surely, the bars -- it’s the highest use of a property because of liquor sales, and that’s why we had to leave. Because a bar owner wanted it. And, our landlady -- Jerry’s lease expired, and then our landlady, the woman who owned the building took over. She was great, and she never raised the rent. But, she owned it with her two sisters, and they knew how much they could get in liquor sales, and so, eventually, we had to move. So, we were where the Iron Cactus is. At 6th and Trinity. But that first year, to have people just, you know, yell things in, because we could hear them, and by year two, people were saying, “Mom and Dad, this is our feminist bookstore, and I want you to come in. It’s really cool.” And so, it might not have been the second year, but slowly but surely, more and more people would come in, and it was really the heyday that everyone would come in. Because everyone went to 6th Street, and so everyone would come into the shop, and we had lots of events and lots of readings. We had Sandra Cisneros. She had -- it was so packed, she had to stand on the counter.

Q: Yeah, I just saw her when I was a freshman her at UT.

A: Yeah. Well, that’s when I rode the bus with her. She was staying up in Clarksville, and someone had given her a
house for a while. And Ann Richards, you know, the poster of her on the motorcycle? We had 12-foot ceilings, and so we could put a lot of posters up. We had a lot of art, a lot of posters, and she came shopping one afternoon, and I said, “Governor, would you sign your poster?” And she said, “Sure, get the ladder. I’ve got my sharpie.” And so she climbed the ladder with high heels on, and the secret service was like freaking out, they were trying to pull her back down, and she climbed the ladder and signed our poster. [laughs] That was great. And we did a Yoko Ono tribute one day, all day long, and we recreated a lot of her pieces with local artists, and my employees. And I cut my hair for peace in the window. [laughs] We had live music there, a lot of things. A lot of good times.

Q: Do you think that -- I know BookWoman’s one of the, you said, only about a dozen women's or feminist bookstores are left. Do you think that, maybe, are there any reasons Austin was really kind of a good incubation space for it?

A: Well, I don’t think Austin really was. It’s been really hard to hold on to her. There have been a lot of really hard years. When -- so, we had a couple of good years on 6th Street, and we had to move to 12th Street, and the space was bigger. We had an expensive build-out, we had higher rent, and then once Whole Foods Market went in, our rent
just skyrocketed, and the economy downturn, there was construction on Lamar, there was the beginnings of discounting of books, that Book Stop here, I mean the whole “discounting” thing started in Austin with Book Stop, and that was before Barnes & Noble or Borders, or way before Amazon.

And so, this guy, Gary Hoover, it was his idea, and he did very well for a long time, and books, we -- selling books, you make maybe 35 cents on every dollar that someone spends on a book. The rest go to the publisher, or to postage, or, you know, the distributor. So, it’s a tough business. You have to sell a lot of books. And the work is very detailed, intense, time-consuming. There’s a lot of labor involved. So, there have been some good times, some bad times, and -- the only reason the store still exists is because my partner -- my current partner, I’ve been with 20 years, supports me. And so, I support other people, but I don’t -- I haven’t taken a salary since we moved here, when the store almost closed because of the economy and the construction on Lamar, and when the rent went so high. And, so, now, in the last couple years, sales are growing, feminism is back in vogue. Women are wanting to educate themselves again, I’m really seeing a trend that way, that
-- a lot of people are thinking things about a change, we have to band together, we have to support each other, and it’s worthwhile listening to women again. Women have a lot of good ideas.

Q: So, are you glad you moved to Austin?

A: Well, yeah. I love to travel, but I can’t wait to get back home, because it’s a great town, I’ve learned a lot. And, what about you? Are you going to stay? What are your plans?

Q: I want to go to grad school outside of Texas, just because I grew up in San Antonio. So now I want the change.

A: Yeah. Well, moving to a different state, or a different part of the country, I mean, it can be really radical. It can be good.

Q: I guess I just want to close with maybe -- like, what do you think was the most important thing you did in the ’60s and ’70s, or what was the most important thing that happened to you?

A: Well, there was a series of things, but the culmination of saying, “Okay, I’ll do this,” because it changed my life. It really -- it gave me a purpose. It gave me an education, and it has helped and inspired, and really saved, from what I -- I mean, I get stories back, that, you know, “This bookstore saved my life,” or, “I just didn’t
know what I was going to do. I didn’t know what I needed, and I found it here.’’ And, “It’s such a comfort to come in here,’’ or, when I go exhibit off-site, and I see -- just, I went to the Texas Women’s Conference, and I hadn’t been in 12 years, and --

Q: The one in Houston?
A: No, well, it’s here now, again.
Q: Oh, okay.
A: It’s back in Austin. And I put up that book, Feminist Baby, there’s this new board book, and these women, their eyes were like popping out. And that book, everyone came to it. It took a long time for that book to sell, but to realize that, wow, there’s something I’ve never seen before, but I want that. And so, I haven’t seen that kind of excitement in a long time, and so, going to that --

Q: Is it disappointing that -- like, are you happy with, maybe, where the state of feminist issues has been, like, the pace that it’s been moving?
A: So, yes.
Q: Like, it’s taken 50 years.
A: Yes, it’s really taking -- it’s gathering steam again, and so, in the early ’70s and the ’80s, there was lots of progress, and then -- I don’t know. The complacency, the conservatism took over, and it’s really great to see,
there’s radicalization, but also more normalization, like, these are normal issues. I mean, it’s easier to talk about them. It doesn’t mean we’re changing them yet, but more and more people are talking about them. And I see that, you know, young people, they’re expecting it. They’re not going to settle. Well, I hope not. Not when they hit 40. [laughs] Things get tougher. But, yes. I’m really -- on one hand, it’s like, “Oh, my God, we’re just fighting the same old shit.” I was looking at the last couple of episodes of Vietnam, the Ken Burns film, and to just see it and hear about it all again, and, you know, so much death, and so much war, and -- you know, where are the protesters? Where are the anti-war protestors? I just don’t see them. I mean, we’re protesting for women’s rights, but we’re not -- yeah. And so, my --

Q: I think it’s easier to talk about social issues now.
A: Yeah. Because war is patriotism. One of my old, old friends from back in the late ’70s, early ’80s, was shopping earlier today, and she said that she went to the Old Crow Medicine Show, and they did Bob Dylan’s Blonde on Blonde, but they reimagined it, and she was like, “No, no, no, you can’t,” so her friends who took her just loved the Old Crow Medicine Show, but she was like, “No, you can’t, like, sweeten up Bob Dylan.” [laughs] So, she felt some of
the message was gone, and at the end, they were singing “How Many Roads Must a Man Walk Down” -- no, not that one. What’s the one about how many lives have you -- oh, “When I Had a Hammer,” it’s a Peter, Paul and Mary song. And, she was just -- how many deaths will it take till we know that too many people have died, and she found that everyone was just singing it like a lullaby, and she was choking on the words, and she was screaming the words, “How many people are going to die,” and no one else there, so this was this moment for her, like -- what’s wrong with you? [laughs] And, yeah. So, that kind of choked me up, and I’d just, night before last, was watching the Kent State killings, and the war protests, and we should be doing more of it.

Q: I know, I -- there may be not -- there is not maybe as much, like, formalized war as Vietnam.

A: There’s like two generations now that have gone to the middle east.

Q: Yeah, but I can’t imagine, at UT today, walking out of class and seeing anything close to what the ’60s protests were like.

A: Yeah.

Q: It just doesn’t seem possible. Even though those things are still there.
A: And the marches down the Drag, and all the stuff in the parks, and, mostly, I couldn’t do the marches because I was at work, but, I could go to the park on the weekends. Yeah, so, I don’t know. So that’s -- this is -- is this a flaw? It’s -- in this generation, I don’t know.

Q: I think it’s a tipping point. But that’s my perspective, as a member of it. I don’t know, I think it’s going to accelerate, like, social involvement.

A: Because the environment’s more important. Recycling’s more important than anti-war right now. Yeah. [laughs] I’m sorry I said that. [laughs]

Q: No, you’re fine. Thank you so much.

A: So, I don’t know. So, anyways, my perspective is more personal, and the personal is political, and -- yeah.

Q: Okay. Well --

A: So, anything else, you can --

Q: Yeah, I can email you.

A: I guess you could email me for clarification, you could read something into the record or something.

END OF AUDIO FILE