

**Kari Alice Lynn interview
November 27, 2020 in Urbana Illinois
via Zoom digital recording.**

**Interviewer: Jerry Carden
Assistance and transcription: Kathryn La Barre**



Image of Kari Alice Lynn from <https://compassionandchoices.org/stories/kari-alice-lynn/>

Background:

Kari Alice Lynn is a 75 year old lesbian womyn living in Urbana Illinois. The interviewer, Jerry Carden, knew Kari Alice as a casual acquaintance when she lived in Champaign-Urbana some time ago. That friendship was renewed at a deeper level when Kari Alice moved back to CU two years ago, and started attending the Unitarian Universalist Church that Jerry's husband and he attend. The History Harvest Project is in collaboration with a history class at the University of Illinois that is focusing on documenting local LGBTQ history and creating an archive of materials and interviews. History Harvest was begun as a project at the University of Nebraska.

Abstract of interview:

During this herstory, Kari Alice Lynn reflects about her life in a series of prepared remarks from her time during the 1960s as a young woman in in an interracial relationship and discovering her lesbianism and coming out in 1974. She discusses her abortion, recovering from incest, changing her name, and her activism in support of the ERA in 1982¹. She speaks frankly about her health issues and her 37 years living with

¹ Kari Alice Lynn with Mary Lee Sargent and Jane Mohraz and others organized the Grassroots Group of Second Class Citizens which held a series of direct action protests in Springfield to protest the refusal of the Illinois legislature to ratify the ERA. (From Eileen Boris and Nupur Chaudhuri (Eds.) *Voices of Women Historians* (1999). Indiana University Press, p. 25.

HIV. She tells us about the loving and supportive community of womyn who have been part of her life in celebration, health and emotional support, her experiences with festivals, and potlucks. She also discusses her Zen meditation practice, and recent diagnosis with Lung Cancer.

Transcript:

I am Jerry Carden and we are here today recording with Kari Alice Lynn from Urbana Illinois about her experiences. Kari Alice has prepared remarks for us. It is November 27th, 2020. I believe we'll get started – Kari Alice.

[2:16 - 21:43]

November 2020 - Prepared remarks by Kari Alice [formatting preserved as submitted]

I'll be following a guideline, which is not naming names of LGBTQ people,
I'll be using this guideline while sharing my Herstory.

I was born in Decatur and my Mother moved to C_U when I was 2 yrs. old.
I'm 75 now and have a birthday coming in December.

Mental health therapy sessions, have been a gift to myself, at times when I've been in emotional pain, couldn't see other options, and needed
support along the path.

I can't imagine what my life would have been like without the healing encouragement, compassionate listening and suggested options. The very same is also true not only of therapists but of Friends and loved ones throughout our lives.

I was in an 10 year relationship with a Black man, when I discovered my lesbianism and ended the relationship. He was supportive, and wished me well in my future life.

I had an abortion during the dating period of this relationship. Abortion was against the law in Illinois. I hemorrhaged excessively and traveled to California to be with a friend, and to finally see a doctor legally. The hemorrhaging was life threatening, and I was lucky to have survived it.

It was 1962 when our relationship started. I watched as he embraced his newly discovered cultural Blackness. I tasted the racist poison directed towards him by C_U police as they pulled us over dozens of times. They called him by name, asked to see & checked his ID and drove away, content in their racist harassment—or what is now called 'stopped for driving while black.' They never said one word to me, as I sat in the passenger seat.

After reading Betty Friedan's book 'The Feminist Mystique,' I became a feminist with a new awareness, inner strength and the clear knowledge of how I wanted to be treated by men. I stopped bleaching my hair and wearing make-up. I ceased wearing a bra, and did indeed stop wearing pantyhose & high heel shoes. This was the year when I had my first major surgery, a hysterectomy due to cervical cancer, and the fear of pregnancy, was over forever.

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I was reluctant to acknowledge my Lesbianism because I was reluctant to again be choosing a lifestyle where I was outside of main stream america.
I started dating women, at age 30, in 1974.

The lesbian community is rich with friendships,
we are accepting of each other, and of our differences,
we have our own culture.

1976, I started a relationship with a womyn, we were together for 7 yrs.

In the lesbian community we provided our own entertainment.
As we've become a more accepted part of society, which is great,
we've also lost our close knit connections.

We had our own newsletter: The Lavender Prairie News²,
I was a part of the collective for several years, along with many womyn.

There were many annual events, like Solstice dinners, and an annual
Passover Seder dinner,
it was a feminist seder, and written by one of the Jewish lesbians.

We enjoyed Potluck's and parties in each others homes, and in spaces we rented. May Day
celebrations, held for several years, were complete with
May Pole dancing at a locale Forest preserve.

An annual baseball game, at the same forest preserve,
where womyn came from out of state to participate.

I remember a bike trip and over night camp-out at another forest preserve. We rented a round
house³, located in Urbana and held mostly game nights,
we paid monthly membership dues.

We've had Amasong, a lesbian/feminist chorus for many decades.
Before Amasong we had Miss Saffman's Ladies Choir⁴

² *The Lavender Prairie News* (p. 2) 1976-2001 The **Lavender Prairie News**, one of the longest running lesbian publications in the U.S., founded in Champaign-Urbana. <http://publici.ucimc.org/2002/03/a-smattering-of-womens-history/> and <http://www.bonniefortune.info/MG/timeline.html> full run held at the Lesbian Herstory Archive

³ This house is also known as the Garvey House, built by Bruce Alonzo Goff in 1955 for John Garvey, faculty in the School of Music. It was designed as a residential space and it holds a central public space for music recitals and other gatherings. See: <https://explorecu.org/items/show/305>

⁴ *Miss Saffman's Ladies Choir* (p. 2) – See music and information online: Spotify playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/artist/7zBoYqbVAQx0mrHLIFVVKG> ; Old woman. From *Gay and Straight Together* (1984)

also a lesbian/ feminist chorus.

We attended the National Womyn's Festivale⁵ held in Foellinger auditorium,
for womyn only,
out of state womyn stayed in our homes, especially the musicians.

The U of I worked hard year after year and finally got rid of the festivale on

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a technicality, they invented.
The festivale moved to Bloomington, Indiana and later to other
midwest locations.

We traveled to the Michigan Womyn's Festival, also for womyn only.
I attended the 1st. Festival in 1975, and many others.
The 40th festivale, in 2015 was the last one.

We created a village on the land, we were provided 2 hot meals per day,
with snacks and a truck load of fruit set out for lunch.
We had showers, outhouses, a day stage and a night stage.

A medical tent-with doctors and nurses, a tent for massage, many tents so womyn could discuss
political issues, issues concerning the operation of the festival itself, tents for workshops, and the
selling of womyn's wares,
like jewelry, clothing, stained glass, and the list goes on.

In the early decades there was a lot of nudity—we saw the differences in our bodies, the variety.
The numerous roles womyn filled was inspiring. It was a learning environment, and these rich
memories will never be
forgotten.

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In 1981 books by womyn emerged in the US exposing incest.

<https://smithsonianfolkways.bandcamp.com/track/old-woman> About the album from the Smithsonian website:
Gay and Straight Together is a landmark compilation with live recordings of both gay and straight songwriter-
activists including Malvina Reynolds's daughter Nancy Schimmel and feminist songwriter Kristin Lems. Produced by
children's music performer and Folkways artist Ginni Clemmens for Open Door Records, the album was released in
1981. Songs in various styles can be heard on the album, including uplifting sing-along anthems such as "Carry It
On," country-flavored "Piney Creek Woman," humorous social satires like "Lezzie Queer," and the pure, genre-
defying inventiveness of "Weird." (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Notes)

<https://music.si.edu/object-day/gay-and-straight-together-produced-ginni-clemmens> Liner notes:
https://folkways-media.si.edu/liner_notes/folkways/FW08580.pdf

⁵ *National Womyn's Festivale* (p. 2) First held at the University of Illinois in 1974 See more here:
<https://archives.library.illinois.edu/slc/the-national-womens-music-festival/>

I went to an incest survivors workshops in the midwest, on Land owned in trust for women only, where we shared our stories,
touched our wounds with kindness and understanding,
we became more than our pain and moved forward in our lives.

Also in 1981, I changed my Name from my birth name
to the name I have today
many womyn changed their names during those years.

There were invitations from the Gay Men's community over the years, to join together at rented sites, for various activities. We enjoyed the Gay men's chorus in C_U, and trips to hear the Chicago Gay men's chorus. Gay men have always been very welcoming.

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1982 I went to Springfield, Illinois to the Capitol building,
to help get the Equal Rights Amendment passed.
We were to participate in one act of non-violent, civil disobedience.

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The nation was 3 states short, and close to the deadline of ratification.

14 womyn chained ourselves to the Senate railings,

instead of one act of civil disobedience
we stayed for 30 days and accomplished 31 acts.
We angered many in the capitol,
and were jailed 4 days,
each charged with class A felonies,
which were later reduced to a \$500 fine.
Being charged with a felony at this historical time was unheard of, and
extremely punitive.

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1983 my second long-term relationship ended.
I didn't date womyn for about 6 months.
I dated an old friend for a couple of months, a male, recently divorced,
we had never dated, he was safe emotionally, as neither of us wanted a
relationship.

9 yrs. later I learned he had had AIDS, which he died from,
this is how I became infected with HIV.

Lesbians were talking about AIDS in the gay men's community in Calif. so we did know AIDS was happening, and not confined to California.

My herstory of having AIDS spans 37 years.

I've never met or heard of a lesbian with AIDS:

mostly because you can get it through male sperm, & blood exchanges.

1985 I was dating my future wife,

I had an annal fistula surgery,

which I latter learned was an indication I had HIV.

The following year I had the dis-ease ITP, and had my spleen removed.

My platelets were attacking my own healthy platelets & life threatening.

I learned later this was an autoimmune dis-ease or AIDS.

1987 We were engaged to be married.

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We knew something was going on with my health.

I had the ELISA test, to rule out HIV, it took weeks for the results.

We really had put it out of our minds, we were thinking of the wedding.

48 hours before our wedding I received the results from the tests,

(the ELISA test was positive, they had then sent the second part of my

blood for the Western Blot test)

the result: I was HIV positive, which was devastating news.

My future wife very generously wanted to continue with the wedding.

On June 6 we exchanged vows in a wedding ceremony.

It was unusual for lesbians to have a marriage ceremony,

as marriage was not legal at the time.

Our ceremony was a feminist ritual, and of course the meal was a

traditional Lesbian potluck.

Two weeks later we invited friends individually to the house, to view the

wedding pictures and shared the news that I had HIV.

There were many tears shed by our friends. I'm glad we had some time, before sharing with others, so we could support them in that moment.

There was no medicine available at the time for HIV, so I turned to

alternative medical systems, like Chinese herb's,

acupuncture treatments in Chicago,

a healing Macrobiotic Diet, we learned in Massachusetts,

and Eastern style massages locally.

1991, I started AZT in August, stopped in Oct. due to severe anemia

and started again later.

Two years later I again stopped AZT for the last time.

I had shingles 3 times, which is extremely painful.

I heard that thru meditation I could learn to transform pain and be able
to live with it.

I went to a Vipassana Meditation retreat Center in Massachusetts, to learn how to meditate. I
continue having a strong practice today.

1994 I stopped working and started receiving Social Security Disability.

1996 in November I was extremely ill and switched doctors,

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to a new Doctor at Carle who was from Canada.
Carle had an HIV department, instead of just one infectious disease doctor
for an entire clinic.

I started 2 anti-viral medicines, and was too sick to add the 3rd. drug.
I was also in a wheel chair due to weakness.

Near Thanksgiving the Doctor told my wife not to leave town,
as she traveled for a living.

Lesbians were prepared to help in my home.
A list of possible needs was sent out and they graciously responded,
to help however needed.
This is a known practice in our communities of helping each other.

Instead, I had help from a case worker, a nurse, and 2 hourly workers,
who took care of my needs.

I can't recall the name of the organization from years ago,
although it continues today.

1997 In February the drug Crixivan was added, a protease inhibitor.

During all of these years the gay men's community were very active, there was an Art Show at
the corners of Church and Neil Streets, to raise \$ for GCAP⁶,
I remember going and taking a folding stool so I could sit,
I could only walk short distances at this time.

The Quilt, a Names project was being created across the US.
I made 2 woven squares on my floor loom, for men without family support.

GCAP purchased a house, used it for men who were sick with AIDS, and

⁶ GCAP (p. 6) Greater Community AIDS Project of Champaign County (GCAP)

who had no where to go.

I had been in 3 different support groups, until in each group I was the only survivor left. My wife and I were Pall Bearers in 2 of the funerals.

In 2000 we moved to Wisconsin, because of my wife's work.

My health continued to improve over the next 2 years

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I spent 15 years living in the country, in Wisconsin.

In 2015 we moved to Florida, my wife was now retired,

and her family came to Florida from NY as snow Birds,
she wanted to move there so she would see them more often.

In October of 2017 we divorced.

I moved back to C_U, 2 months later.

I continue many friendships in the lesbian community, and get together
with a dozen dykes each week on zoom, during covid.

2019: I quit going to the locale zen center I had been a founding member
of, and became a member of the Unitarian Universal church of Urbana/ Champaign.

2020 in March I learned I have lung cancer.

I chose not to take the recommended chemo, radiation,
immunotherapy treatments

which might have added one year to my life,
and also offered many serious side effects.

I would have liked to have ended my life with dignity by using medication, Illinois hasn't made
this possible to her residents at this time.

I'm planning to use VSED⁷ [5] to control my dying process when I'm ready to leave this realm
of existence, which means not eating or drinking fluids.

I'm getting help from Palliative Care, and

will later switch to Hospice for comfort care.

I'm fortunate to have a large support group of open hearted, and caring

friends,

mostly lesbians, and friends attending the Unitarian Universalist church,

also friends who attend the Prairie Zen Center.

⁷ VSED (p. 7) Voluntarily stop eating and drinking. See Kari Alice's story here:
<https://compassionandchoices.org/stories/kari-alice-lynn/>

Our minister Florence Caplow, is also a Soto Zen Priest. I'm grateful to Florence for her support in my zen practice, my life practice as I

prepare for dying.

I'm very appreciative to be invited to share these words about my life and involvement in the LGBTQ community.

Thank you very much for listening.

Transcript of conversation post-remarks [21:46 – 34:59]

Jerry: Thank you so much Kari Alice.

Kari Alice: Yes, I was delighted to do it!

Jerry: Even though I know you, I learned so much throughout that timeline. You were bringing tears to my eyes as I listened to the trajectory of HIV. Your finding out about it, as well as when the test was available. It was years before we even had a test. You were talking about the ELISA test, and then having to send it for the Western Blot. So, the test wasn't an easy answer either.

Kari Alice: No, it was weeks, and weeks, and weeks!

Jerry: It took so long to get the results and in the meantime you had all this mental anguish and angst, and then the different timeframes that the different drugs became available. It is an incredible, incredible story that encompasses so much history of not just the local LGBTQ community and the lesbian community but also just our life in general dealing with HIV/AIDS issues.

Kari Alice: Oh yes, I remember visiting men in the hospital. One man, his sister was the top administration person at a hospital in Florida. He was put in a room, and they turned off the air systems because since they thought he had AIDS and they thought it would travel throughout the hospital. They did all that, and of course, the windows don't open in hospitals. He had a fever and he was just burning up. There were so many things that happened. His sister came to visit and it was just absolutely fabulous. She came in, she saw him, said 'Hi', and kissed him and then whoosh! away she went. He was moved to a new room that had air conditioning. He got meals, they were giving him just certain foods, oh it was just crazy.

Jerry: I was reminded of our first cases locally. I served as the first Chair of the Gay Community AIDS project – when we still called it that. It was a few years from the time we learned about HIV before until we began to know people locally. You've just reminded me so much of that time period. I just want to thank you so much for that very eloquent rendition for what was going on not just what was happening for you

personally, but what was also happening with the local community and the larger community.

Kari Alice: Oh yes, Mahomet community was really hit hard. There was a large group of men that lived there and one of them was a woodworker and had a shop. People would not touch the furniture. They thought that the furniture had AIDS. The ignorance surrounding it, is just amazing.

Jerry: We won't mention their names as you said early on, but early on - but it was interesting that very conservative smaller community west of here – they revelled in knowing the couple, and their store that they had in Mahomet, and several other people who had stores there in downtown Mahomet, but once they became ill with HIV it was all of a sudden very hands off.

Kari Alice: Yes.

Jerry: They didn't get the same kind of support that you were relating about receiving from the lesbian community and I think in the larger Champaign-Urbana community as well.

Kari Alice: Yes.

Jerry: I wasn't aware of the earlier marriage, no relationship with the Black man, not marriage.

Kari Alice: Relationship, not marriage.

Jerry: And becoming pregnant and your abortion. You've been through a tremendous amount in your life.

Kari Alice: Well, and we hope the Republicans don't get back in office and that the Supreme Court changes because we could have that again. That was a terrible time. The problem is that so many women who would get abortions are young women, many times under 20 years old. They do anything that anyone tells them is a possible way to abort the child. I had a friend in Champaign who gave classes, and that was a time when women were for the first time, getting together in classes, looking at their vaginas and finding out what the names for body parts were, and she told women how you can do an abortion with long q-tips.

Jerry: Oh my...

Kari Alice: Oh yes, so we do not want to go back there. We really don't!

Jerry: We certainly don't No! So, you mentioned something about Amasong. I was aware of them, I moved here in 1978 and soon learned about Amasong and you mentioned the name of a choir that preceded Amasong. Could you mention that name again?

Kari Alice: Amasong, I believe, began in 1990 so they have been with us for several decades. Miss Saffman's Ladies Choir [2]. You can look it up and you will get some of the music that the choir played.

Jerry: Did you participate in that choir, or Amasong?

Kari Alice: No, no, I am not a singer. I sing flat so you wouldn't want me in a choir.

Jerry: That is great knowing that Amasong started in 1990. I actually thought they were around when the Men's Chorus first started, which was 1984. I do remember we had several joint concerts at McKinley Presbyterian with Amasong, and Christina Birger the first conductor and how awesome she was. She is another person we want to interview for the History Harvest project.

Kari Alice: That would be wonderful!

Jerry: She has a wealth of information and she is such a dynamo.

Kari Alice: Right!

Jerry: It is nice to know that Amasong is still continuing. The Men's Chorus lasted only about 10 years. We broke up around 1994. That was also AIDS related, because our conductor at the time developed HIV and he was having a real problem with emotions and anger issues and we got to the point it was no longer fun to go to the rehearsals.

Kari Alice: A decade is a very long time – that is wonderful.

Jerry: It just strikes me, in terms of both the lesbian and the gay community - we were much more organized back then.

Kari Alice: Yes.

Jerry: Do you think that is because we kind of had to be more underground?

Kari Alice: Yes. It is sad though, that some of those things didn't continue. It is to me, because I was involved in them, and it just was my whole life. I lived in a house that was considered one of the party houses. A lot of times there wasn't even drinking going on. We got together, we danced, talked, it was just getting together that was most important. So, now it is a huge loss and you also then connected with womyn. You had

their phone numbers, addresses, you knew who people were, and now many of those womyn are still here. I've bumped into them on the in stores and on the street, but there is no connection, and that is just sad.

Jerry: Yes, it is. One of things that we hope doing the process with the History Harvest we hope bringing some of the men and womyn together for sharing memories, will help spark the desire to maybe come back together and start something going like that again.

Kari Alice: It would be lovely.

Jerry: We are very grateful to you for your time in putting together that synopsis of your life, and with you being so honest about all of the health issues from your past and your current health issues, and what your plans are. It seems like a lot of the support you've received over the years is how you've survived this long.

Kari Alice: Oh yes! That is the one thing about the lesbian community, the men's community. We have love and connection with people and, you know - as we age, we learn that so much of the rest of our life just drops away. What TV we have, what kind of car we have, all that really doesn't have any meaning at all. It is the people in our lives. That really is rich, very, very rich.

Jerry: You've been instructive in your own way, in terms of after you moved back to town and we became reacquainted - in terms of learning your situation with your current diagnosis and what your plans are, and watching you make your priorities as to what is and is not important and letting some of those things drop away.

Kari Alice: Yes.

Jerry: I remember the comment you made, that you didn't have any of the flyers we might have made copies of for the History Harvest project. You were thinning out.

Kari Alice: (Laughing) Yes that is true!

Jerry: Again thank you so much. Are there any other thoughts that come to mind that you may you have to share as we wrap up?

Kari Alice: No, thank you Jerry. And definitely a thank you to Kathryn

Jerry: Yes, very much so. Thank you again, I look forward to continuing our conversations and moving forward. So, thank you.

Kari Alice: Thank you.