

Nanaimo Pride Society Collection
Journeys to Nanaimo Pride 2017

Interviewer: Rick Dagg

Interviewer: Mark Rabnett

Interviewees: Mary Ross, Roxy Noble, Ian Austin, Rick Meyers, Tina Shelley, Diane Nicholson

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MARY: I'm Mary Ross

ROXY: I'm Roxy Noble. We've been together for thirty-seven years.

IAN: Ian Austin is my name.

RICK: My name is Rick Meyers.

TINA: My name is Tina Shelley.

DIANE: Diane Nicholson.

IAN: Six months older than my teeth and just slightly younger than dirt. I'm sixty-eight, believe it or not. (Mark Rabnett laughs)

TINA: I have to think about that. I think I'll be fifty-six this year.

RICK: I'm in my mid-fifties. I grew up in Nanaimo. I went to school here as a young kid and in 1979 I came out of the closet. I was sixteen years old. Now I've just really given you my age if you can do math fast. Nanaimo was a lot different back then. It was a pretty rough town.

MARY: Back in Sudbury there wasn't really gay Pride or anything until I came out. I lost my job because I was gay. We had three human rights complaints against the company, and so I went public with my story in the newspaper and that's how I came out. That's when they had their first Pride parade. Coming from a mining town, people were saying, "There's no gay miners here. Are you guys' crazy? There's no gay miners." Well, then they all started coming out of the woodwork, right? (doorbell rings) Yes, there were gay miners. It was very nice to see the support that we got for that though.

RICK DAGG: So you mentioned you actually lost your job once work found out that you were a lesbian.

MARY: We'd only been living together at that time for like fourteen years so we never said we were gay. People just assumed, but then the employer that I had at that time just told a few people he didn't like my work style and he started to make my life hell.

RICK DAGG: And how long had you worked at that company?

MARY: My goodness—

ROXY: Sixteen years.

RICK DAGG: Sixteen years and gone just because of you being yourself?

MARY: Well, the store actually—the old store that we worked at was closing and this bigger company was opening up new franchise stores, and so it was when this new owner came in—

IAN: Back in the day people my age didn't actually come out. We didn't set a date or announce when you were sixteen. Well, you wouldn't have done that anyway when I was sixteen. You would have gone to jail. So it was just sort of a gradual thing at various times, various things.

DIANE: Since I was born, and I identify as a lesbian, queer, part drag queen. Maybe ___(??) half fag? (Rick laughs)

RICK DAGG: Well, we're happy to have you. (both laugh)

TINA: I identify as a lesbian feminist woman and I, boy, coming out is such a process, you know. It's hard to pin it down to an exact date but I think the process started probably when I was, I would say early thirties, about thirty. I made some significant changes in my life when I was about thirty-two that prompted me to come out in a much bigger public way. At the time I was living in a very small town, in Ucluelet. Coming out in Ucluelet was a little different than it would be in a larger place.

DIANE: Nor did my foster mom nor my biological mother want me to be a lesbian which made a lot of sense especially in those days. It was still quite aggressive in Alberta. People were still losing their jobs, people were still hanging themselves in jail for getting caught for being, "God, gay." "We were all under the same umbrella at that time. We were just all gay. Even my mother hated the word lesbian. That was just so derogatory at the time. Of course things have changed but—anyway, we were all under the same umbrella at that time.

ROXY: We first came to Nanaimo in 1997, and we found a very divided community. Men were doing their things, women were doing their things. First thing we did, we joined VILIPS and we joined the Pride committee, we joined the Women's Centre and we got involved in the community.

MARK RABNETT: And when was that?

ROXY: In 1997, when we arrived that's the first thing we did. We joined everything we possibly could. Unfortunately in 1998 there was no Pride.

MARY: There was a newspaper put out by the Pride when we first came here but that folded the next year. So there really wasn't a heck of a lot that was left. Different Drummer was downtown which was store, a gay store. Right beside it was a little restaurant.

ROXY: Flo's

MARY: Yes, they're both gone now. There was not much in the way of a Pride community.

There was a gay bar downtown on (both talking) Commercial. Where we came from, from Sudbury, we had our get-togethers, our Pride events. It was a complete mix of men and women so we assumed that when we got here it would be the along the same lines. But very different.

RICK DAGG: So VILIPS—what does that stand for?

TINA: Vancouver Island Lesbians In Progress Society. (Rick laughs) Great name, we're all in progress, (both laugh) still.

MARY: With the VIPLIPS, that was a just for women social. They would put on the different events and the dances and no men were allowed to come. VILIPS stands for Vancouver Island Lesbians in Progress Society. We didn't think the name was quite appropriate. We did march in, what was that called?

ROXY: Take Back the Night—

MARY: Yeah, Take Back the Night, the women's march. Roxy made a banner and her and I carried the banner. We were right out in front and we turned around and, "Where is everybody?" Well, the lesbians were way in the back of the lineup because they weren't out then. They didn't want to be out for fear of retribution from their friends, their family, and their jobs. So that was fine. Everybody has to come out at their own time.

MARK RABNETT: When was that? The Take Back the Night march?

MARY: 1999? Yes, 1999.

TINA: Well, as I said, I used to come from Ucluelet to go to the women's dances that VILIPS held at _____ Hall, and after I moved here with my daughter, then I continued to do that, and it was for me, it was really an energetic and amazing place to be. The hall would be packed with women. In those days there were very few guys that went to the dances. There seemed to be a lot more division then than there is now. Fortunately that's changed, so it would be packed with

women and lots of good music and sometimes the deejay would be drunk and take off her shirt. (both laugh) There was a lot of drinking and partying going on, but everyone had a really good time. I remember those dances very fondly. I also remember going to Neighbours in those days, and Neighbours was, as you may have heard from other people, it was kind of a gathering place. It was a fun place to be. I remember going there and always feeling like I was with community, that there was a sense of belonging, and always good times to be had, and familiar faces. I think that Nanaimo is really missing that now. You know, we don't have that gathering place anymore like we did then. It wasn't that everybody was into the drinking aspect of it. Many of us weren't, but it was the place to go and hang out, feel safe and for the time that that lasted it was wonderful. I did feel such community there. Eventually it did change. It kind of shifted from being a gay and lesbian bar to being more kind of just alternative, and then eventually it ended up closing down. VILIPS was a pretty tight group in those days and they put on the dances monthly, so I think it was always—I can't remember—I think it was like the third Saturday of the month there was always a dance to go to and women would come from not only Nanaimo but up and down the Island as well. They were a little notorious. I have heard now from friends who lived in Victoria and used to come up that they were a little notorious for being a little bit rowdy and party people (Rick Dagg laughs) there but it really brought people together. VILIPS was an organization that, like many, had its struggles but by and large the people who formed the board of directors were there with good intent and were really community-minded. The focus was mostly the monthly dances but they did some other work with the Women's Centre. They had a lending library for lesbian books through the Women's Centre. In those days the Women's Centre was quite an important part of the community. It is now as well but they do a lot more work around homelessness now.

MARY: It was too bad that we came here and went “Wow, there's even a little paper, and they've got a Gay Pride thing happening kind of thing,” and then it all just folded.

RICK: We did all kinds of stuff in the very beginning. The first time I went to anything was a little pub called Blackbeard's and it was in the Villa Hotel, which is now the Dorchester Hotel, and in there along the wall was a group of gay men. That's where they would meet up on the weekends, on Fridays and Saturdays, and even though I was sixteen, almost seventeen, I could get away with sneaking in there. I had to behave. I had to be quiet, but the older guys would take care of—we didn't have gay youth groups back then. That was our gay youth group. Our older

would take care of our younger. And then there was talk that we wanted to throw a dance. I would say it was probably about 1982—we threw the first social is what we had. A group of us went out and sort of canvassed areas where we knew that gay men and women hung out and handed out our little flyers. We rented a room at what was then called the Malaspina Hotel right on the waterfront. It's condos now but we had our first social there. We brought a record player from home and set it up. What happened though was that the response was overwhelming. We had way too many people. We couldn't fit everybody into the banquet room. We had people on the stairs so we vowed that the next month we would go somewhere bigger. We started having dances at the Double Dragon which was a hotel or a motel and a Chinese restaurant with a banquet room. The banquet room was much bigger than the Malaspina Hotel banquet room so we started having dances there once a month, and it was always the last Saturday of the month. Nanaimo still was kind of rough so I left Nanaimo in about 1984 or 1985 and went to the big city so I could live in the gay ghetto where I felt safe, but those socials, those dances continued and my family was still here so I always planned my home visits to Nanaimo around the last Saturday of every month. Not only did I get to see my family but I got to see my gay family too. I moved back to Nanaimo in 1994 when I realized that I didn't need to live in a gay ghetto. I needed to have chickens and horses and I just didn't know where I was going to keep a horse in the West End of Vancouver so I moved back here and shortly after I got here that place Blackbeard's, which had been closed for years and years, had re-opened. A fellow who owned the gay bar in Victoria had bought it and re-opened it and I got a job there as a bartender-slash-assistant manager, and with that I brought lots of folks in and I did lots of shows. I'm also a very famous drag queen.

MARK RABNETT: So cool.

RICK: Anyway, that's my gay Nanaimo story. I met my husband in 1997 and we've been together since. It's twenty years this year.

IAN: Actually the city was quite different in those days. It wasn't the population that we have. The police force went home at night so that was great. There were all kinds of little pubs and bars all over the city that people went to. Depending on how you were or what sort of group you were with—gay people, there wasn't a gay bar. We didn't get a gay bar until 1992, I think we got Neighbours, 1992. What turned out to be Neighbours used to be called The Pit. That was known

quietly as—well, if you went there you had to be careful, there might be those kinds of guys there.

MARY: We did attend the gay bar that was downtown, the Dorchester. Just seems kind of typical that this gay bar was down in the basement, low ceilings—the gay bar we had in Sudbury was along the same lines so all these kind of dungy little places where we could all hang out and have a good time. That was quite a busy place. They had a lot of different activities that would happen there. For one of the Friday events we had gay bingo's that would happen down there. It was a lot of fun.

RICK DAGG: Do you remember the name of the bar?

MARY: Oh, Neighbours.

IAN: They used to have dances at the old Malaspina Hotel. We had, oh cripes now, at one point we had the Henderson House here in town. And then Muddy Waters was a place where a lot of guys went. We also had the lounge, or what we used to call, Alice's, which was that—the little brick—Rick Myers can tell you about this place more than I can but anyway, it's behind what used to be the Credit Union. What is the Credit Union now, and it was on that alley and you went in there and actually it was a lounge. It belonged to the restaurant upstairs and it was the gay bar. But because it was a lounge, a holding area for the restaurant, you had to order food. So you ordered toast. (both Ian and Rick Dagg laugh) Nine o'clock at night, everybody had toast. (both Ian and Rick Dagg laugh) That was the only gay bar in Nanaimo for years until Neighbours opened up. It lasted from— when did Neighbours open? Was it 1992, 1993?

RICK DAGG: Way before me.

IAN: And lasted until 2008.

RICK: So in about 1982, the bar had closed, Blackbeard's had closed. The fellow that sort of put the socials on wanted to have something that was more consistent so we had this little space down below a restaurant called the Outrigger Restaurant on Commercial Street. It was a little holding lounge for the restaurant upstairs which never ever got used. So we approached them about running that bar. And one of the things we had to do was we had to have something to eat because that was part of the licensing. It got nicknamed the Toast Bar because everyone had just an order of toast on their table. Sometimes you'd order the toast and the woman who worked there would just take the toast from one table and just move it over to the other. No one ever really ate that toast. Anyway, they called it in the beginning, they called it Spikes, Spikes

Lounge. They had a competition and I was very young and pretty back then. We had a competition for Mr. and Miss Spikes. The people that won it were going to go off and represent Nanaimo in Vancouver's Pride. It was way back a long time ago when we weren't allowed to go down Robson Street, Davies Street—went down the side roads and still had people yelling and booing at you. But anyway, I won Mr. Spikes and another chap won Miss Spikes—no longer with us unfortunately. Michael passed away of HIV in the 1980s, we lost so many then. Anyway, that was my first big venture to Pride in Vancouver. It was pretty exciting and it was pretty nerve-wracking too because we took the ferry over and Michael went in drag on the ferry. It was a different time.

TINA: Well, I think for me a big part of my process was moving to Nanaimo. I had been living in Ucluelet for a very long time—a very small, resource-based community. I think I was the only out lesbian in town. I used to come to Nanaimo to go to the dances. VILIPS in those days was doing dances, monthly dances at the Wellington Hall. So I would come to the dances and started finding a little bit more courage and a little bit more sense of community and eventually ended up meeting a woman and became partners with her. We did a long distance relationship for a few years. Then I moved to Nanaimo so it was coming to Nanaimo that really kind of launched me in more of a solid direction in terms of identifying with who I was. In Ucluelet I had established some community. It was mostly the people that I worked with but it was hard to be out in a small resource-based community so coming to Nanaimo I finally felt that I could be who I was in all aspects of my life and I got involved with Pride. Early on, I think that was in—I moved here in 2000 so I think that was in 2001 when I started getting involved with Pride and that opened up a whole bunch of new doors.

IAN: The bars in Nanaimo in the early days were very, very small and there were hundreds of them. There were all kinds of them.

MARY: A Different Drummer was just on the corner of Bastion and Commercial. There's a bar there now I think or a—something like that so that's where they were and right beside them was Flo's which was—we all used to get together there Sunday mornings for brunch. It was just a really small, crowded restaurant but we all had a good time there. In Different Drummer of course they had lots of gay paraphernalia. There were two guys that owned the place. They ended up separating and each went their own way so Different Drummer closed. Right now they've got the crosswalks there so quite appropriate because those were the two people that—

MARK RABNETT: That was the centre.

MARY: Yeah, it was good.

MARK RABNETT: Could you tell us a bit more because I think it's interesting to folks who aren't from Nanaimo about the crosswalk controversy when somebody faced the crosswalk. Can you just tell us— (both talking)

RICK: Yeah, I can talk lots about those crosswalks. First of all those crosswalks are really, really important to me. When I was a kid, teenager, I went to the movie theaters a lot. There was a theater called Fiesta, a movie theater up the road from there. I usually met my friends near there. I got there a little bit early so I wasn't with my friends and there were these big sort of mean guys in grade ten and they beat me up right there on that very corner and called me fag. It was pretty horrible. So then years later to see that crosswalk be painted on that very symbolic spot for me—with Rick—we were all there and watched it all happen, it was just powerful and then it was only a few months later someone vandalized with some religious writings. It was pretty awful. I got a phone call about five-thirty, quarter to six that morning at home and they said, "You wouldn't believe what happened to the crosswalks. They've vandalized the rainbow crosswalks." Instead of reacting, I decided to get proactive and go look, see what's happened for real. I went on a Nanaimo social media page and saw all this outpouring of love coming towards our community and condemning what had happened to the crosswalks. By quarter to nine the Nanaimo mayor, the Nanaimo mayor McKay had called me at home and expressed his concern and told me he had already dispatched a crew to clean the crosswalks up and if they couldn't get them clean they were going to repaint them. A lot of people probed, some newspapers and people probed. They wanted me to become sort of, really angry and lash out at the people that did it. But I couldn't. There was so much love coming in, I thought, let's just let this play out because our allies really are there for us. Later that night I had to go to Salt Spring Island because Salt Spring Island was having their Pride festival. I was heading over there and I quickly looked on social media late that night and what had happened was our allies, people we don't even know, had come together and decided that they would meet at the crosswalks and together chalk the rainbow crosswalks on the two crosswalks that aren't existing with the rainbow. They did that not even knowing us because really that crosswalk was more than just me getting beat up there or more than our community coming this far. Really, it's about everyone. Pride is for everybody.

RICK DAGG: So Diane, in 1993 you arrived in Nanaimo. Can you tell us a little bit about what life was like for you then?

DIANE: Interesting actually because I always thought I was out but I quickly realized that I wasn't. And so from 1993 through to about 1996 it was really challenging to find anything to do. There were men's dances out at Pleasant Valley Hall. And then VILIPS came along so that was great. I did get involved with VILIPS but I went to the men's dances because I like men's dances truthfully. Anyway, there wasn't that much going on in the community so I stepped up at one point to see what I could do to help put that together. I also played on a baseball team that we needed to raise money for, so I used the baseball team to put together a production. I worked at the School District 68 at that time. I wasn't out because I heard how the other employees talked about my best friend who was out. And so I just didn't out myself except for the night that I was at NDSS and went to walk into the staff room. We had already prepared for this big show and I heard them all chatting and I heard the newspapers rattling. I walked into the room and it fell completely silent. (Rick laughs) I realized what was going on, they all had the newspaper and there was my face on the front page. I went and washed my hands and think, think, think. What are you going to do? What are you going to say? I turned around and I looked at them all and I said, "You know that whole interview I had with those people, I thought we were talking about thespians." (Rick laughs) "I had no idea." I told the guy in the in the interview, I'm not out so don't—these guys are all out. They want to be out. Theresa wants to be and—okay, I'm not. So it was Diane Nicholson, lesbian, lesbian, Nicholson, Diane, lesbian, lesbian, ____ (??) (Rick laughs). It was seven times he managed to mention lesbian. So I just said thespian and walked out of the room. "Oh my God, I thought I was brilliant." It gave me a good laugh and then I was out. I have to say, it was so relieving. It was like a big weight off my shoulders and it was at that time that I realized, I've never been out. I never knew that. I thought, I've always been out because I don't have a straight life. I hardly had any—well, I've never had straight friends until the last few years so who knew? Anyway, it was quite an experience.

RICK: Gay Pride Nanaimo, off and on since its inception, as an entertainer, as an MC, I tried getting involved with the board maybe about eight years ago but it wasn't really my kind of thing. You know, making a motion, voting, point of order, all those types of things were not necessarily how I wanted to go about doing anything. Unfortunately, with the death of our president last year, John, I knew that someone had to step up. I was worried that the whole Pride

Society was going to fold, so I stepped up to run and a lot of people around got involved and came out. I ran for president and with that I wanted to make lots of changes because I knew the community wanted lots of changes. They wanted to move toward an inclusive, an all-inclusive Pride, and so I've been involved now as the President—I guess in September it will be two years.

TINA: Well, in those days there were some organized events going on. I think that there was a Pride dance, I think prior to 2001, and I had attended that and got to know a few people who were involved at that point in time and was encouraged to come on the board of directors, so I did. I served on the board, I think, for two years, and those were pretty tough days as I remember in Nanaimo at that time. City Council wasn't very friendly with us. We went to battle a few times with them, trying to get voices heard and rights recognized. It felt like it was a bit of a struggle but we had a strong group and everybody had their own piece to work on. There were times when we butted heads as I think is normal for a Pride committee it seems. But overall we got the job done and I had a pretty good time doing it.

RICK: So back in about, I'd say 1995—1995 I created this character named Vicky Smudge. Vicky because it sort of sounded like Ricky and Smudge because I wanted to smudge all the lines. I did this with my friend Chris Bolton. He goes by the name Con Smudge because I needed him at the last minute and Connie was short for very convenient. (Rick Dagg laughs) So Connie and I were going to do this—we did some shows at the little gay bar, Neighbours, and they had been really well-received, and then this straight night club, the Savoy and the Queen's really wanted us to come in there and try our shows out there. This was way—this was a long time ago, right—this was more than twenty years ago, and Chris and I thought, “Okay, we'll do it.” I remember going to the club, both of us, Chris and I in the back seat of a car, with someone driving us to the Queen's. We were hiding because we didn't know—it was always kind of scary. We got to the Queen's back parking lot, we went up this ramp and into the back door. There was a bunch of other stuff going on onstage. We were wearing pink polka-dot dresses with bows right on the top and big red hair (Rick Dagg laughs) and we walked by a whole group of people, and I heard this one really loud mean sort of guy goes, “What the fuck is that?” (Rick Dagg laughs) And Chris and I thought “Oh no, what have we done? Are we crazy?” So we went into this little back room they had for us and then we thought “We've got to do it! We've got to go out and do what we do best.” We went out there and we did our ABBA number—Mamma Mia. It was choreographed, it was brilliant, it was fun. You know, we showed our hairy armpits,

we showed them, “We’re men. Yes, we’re men and we’re men in dresses.” And the guy that yelled out when we first walked in, was the first guy to stand up after the number cheering us on. He ran another night club and he had us at that night club all the time. I really think that year really catapulted us, or whatever they call that, it threw us way farther.

RICK DAGG: And what year was that again?

RICK: I would say that was 1995, maybe even 1994. It’s all a blur. (Rick laughs) It’s all that hairspray and lipstick and glitter—that’s got me thrown right off. (Mark Rabnett and Rick Dagg laugh) We’ve definitely helped raise money for our gay community—AIDS walks and we’ve done stuff like Save our Whales. Wherever Chris or I could lend a hand to try to round up business and awareness to groups that we also believed in, we were always around. We’re always up for a good time and fun. I think it’s one of the things, for me as an entertainer, and I speak for Chris too, that we always like to bring to the stage, is that ability to have fun with our audiences because if our audience isn’t having fun then we aren’t having fun. It’s sort of a great dance. I think that whole smudging the lines thing has been really great too because by smudging the lines and being guys and dressing with hairy armpits and beer guts, we’re certainly not trying to be women, we’re not trying to be anything. We’re just trying to smudge it all up so there is no clear lines to anything.

RICK DAGG: Ah, so you are going to share some of your time in the drag king community. Would you—

DIANE: Yeah, it was three o’clock in the morning after a very bad drag queen show in Calgary. A bunch of us dykes were hanging around, kind of half cut. Most everybody was really derogatory about how bad the show was, but it was bad. I said to the girls, yeah but you know, this is our history. We should have some respect for it and if we don’t then we should do something about it. That’s how it started. In 1982, we had our first show and I coined the phrase, drag kings, but of course somebody like myself who grew up in the community, I saw things a bit differently. Everybody assumed it was women going to imitate men but in my history of being in the community, I actually saw it as imitating our community. Thus, being the drag queens, so I would take really butch women and put them into some fem clothes (Rick laughs) and I’ve got to tell you a lot of people laughed themselves stupid because it’s an illusion. That’s what drag is, it’s about illusion and so there was a real illusion. To take some butch woman and throw something in her pants and put her on the stage just isn’t much of an illusion. Then you

take the really fem girl and you put them in the butch role and there's the illusion so there really is a drag element. Anyway, I took the show—we carried on from 1982—I took the show to the opening of the Gay Games.

RICK DAGG: Wow.

DIANE: And a woman from Southern California came into the dressing room—burst in. I'm half-dressed—trust me, I'm very shy. (Rick laughs) She told me that she did all of the entertainment in Southern California in 1990. She had never heard of anything like the drag kings. "Who are you? Where did you all come from? How is this possible that I've never heard of it?" I realize now in some of the literature that people are using the phrase, drag king. But I'd really be interested to do some research on that because I believe it initiated in Calgary in 1982 which is pretty cool because Calgary is, and still is, well-known for being a little bit behind the times. To be so progressive and so well (??) We were the only community—and BC did not count on this because people from here came to there for a mixed bar event. Because women and men partied in the same bar and that was something I'm very proud of Calgary for.

RICK: In about 2004, we were at that gay bar downtown. It was karaoke night and I got him up on the stage, put him in a chair and I sang, *You are so beautiful to me* and then I proposed to him and he said, no. (Rick laughs) He said, "No, let's wait a few years." When I asked him one more time, he said, "Well, maybe when we get to year ten." I was telling my mom about that and she said, "Well, you've got to do what all the girls do, just start planning." So I started planning my wedding for our tenth anniversary and he was kind of confused. We just thought he must have said yes somewhere along the line. (Rick laughs) That was ten years ago. There, that's my story. We had about four hundred people show up at our wedding. We had our wedding at our property. It was pretty incredible, it was a whole weekend event. We had people camping all weekend and brought a big semitrailer in for the band. It was all potluck and Mr. Tuesday. Of course gay males getting married, got to have something to go with on Tuesday.

MARK RABNETT: And what were you wearing?

RICK: We all wore sarongs. I wore the bear sarong. Owen wore the Pride leather sarong and our wedding party all wore Pride (??) sarongs. I made the shirts, the pirate shirts I made them. So I dressed the entire wedding party for eighty-eight dollars.

RICK DAGG: Wow. (laughs)

RICK: I spent the money on the band and the booze. (Rick laughs)

RICK DAGG: (talking to Diane) And so you talked about people in jail hanging themselves. People would be going to jail just because they were caught in the wrong place.

DIANE: Yeah, they'd be caught in bars socializing and so of course at that time there were two doors to go in, escorts and men, and so women dressed as men. We called that your real butch woman, but really there was an actual reason for it at the time. They could go out and socialize at a bar but if they got caught they went to jail. When they went to jail their families were called, their work was called. They lost everything so they quite often hung themselves in jail with bras which are no longer allowed in jails. My thing is—a lot of people think it was street workers that got the bras taken out of the jails but I actually believe it was the lesbian women who were killing themselves left and right from the 1960s, 1970s, and I still knew of somebody in the 1980s. In 1985, I think it was, I played hockey and I was fortunate enough that the cop on my hockey team really liked me and told me not to go to the bar that night because it was going to get raided. And sure enough it was, and that was well into the 1980s.

RICK DAGG: And that was a woman cop?

DIANE: Yeah, and she wasn't even on our team. She was just somebody who cared about me and didn't want me to be there for it, so I was very fortunate not to be there because I think that would have scarred me worse than—just with the history of watching my mum's friends die and give their lives away. I know it happened with gay boys too but my experience of course was with my lesbian mother and hearing her friends.

RICK DAGG: Right.

IAN: So after the first time we went in 2001—okay, I've got to get my mind working—but anyway in 2001 we went to the City Council to—and Tina wrote this thing up—Tina Sorensen wrote this thing up—this was kind of neat—to get Pride declared. We wanted a declaration that this was going to be Pride Week. Not a chance in hell. They turned us down flat so we went after them again a while later and finally before we actually got into Council, we told them that we wanted them to—you know, they declare all kinds of things. They had a declaration for Easter Bunny week or whatever, or it's Disabled Children's Week, so the City makes declarations—all kinds of them. We wanted them to declare Pride Week. They wouldn't do it. So we went back to City Council and the next time we went back we really packed the place with people and we got the news media involved, and we told City Council, "We're going to pursue," because we were getting phone calls from organizations back east and in Eagle(??) and Toronto Pride and

Vancouver Pride. People were phoning to say, “Listen. You guys need help with these guys, we’ll give it to you, and one of the things you should make clear to Council is that if they don’t declare Gay Pride, we’re going to go after them on a human rights case. You can’t do this.” So the second time we went after them, we packed the hall and had the news media, they passed it. But here’s the fun part: Diane Brennan is sitting there and she says, “Oh, okay so we’re going to pass this.” She was for it. She said, “So that’s everything that’s written here? Like we declare Gay Pride Week from June whatever to whatever, and we’re going to fly the Rainbow flag at City Hall on the little flag pole? So it’s all included. Is that what we’re voting on?” And one of the other Councillors said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let’s just pass it. Let’s have a motion.” So they did it. They passed it. (both laugh) And so that’s how we got the flag flown at City Hall and we were the only city that did it. Now there are other cities that do it but we were the only city at that time to actually officially fly that damn flag.

MARK RABNETT: And say again what year that was?

IAN: That would have been 2002 or yeah, 2001 or 2002. The city guy would come out and put the flag up on those two little flag poles where we fly them. At first, for the first couple of years we didn’t put it up ourselves. The maintenance guy came and did it. And then we said, “We want to put it up. It’s our flag. We want to put it up.” But I think it was the second year I got a phone call—they’d put it up for Pride Week, so the maintenance guy had put it up on Monday morning. (laughs) I get this phone call, and John Lee’s in a panic, “I can’t believe what they did?” What did they do? “It’s the flag.” Aw, geez, they’re not flying the flag. We’ll have to go after—” No, no,” he says, “It’s up there.” I said, “So what’s the problem, John?” “It’s upside down!” Oh shit. (Rick Dagg laughs) So we went down to City Hall and got the maintenance guy, and he says, “Oh, I thought it looked pretty that way.” No, no, no, it goes the other way. (Rick Dagg laughs) Take it down. So he took it down and we got a big felt pen and put an arrow on it, put it back up there. (Rick Dagg laughs)

MARK RABNETT: Question about that, where did the original flag come from?

IAN: We bought it from—I think it came from Victoria. It’s not a silkscreen flag that they use. It stays at City Hall along with other flags that they have there but it’s a real flag. A real flag is made out of dyed nylon and sewn together. It’s not silkscreen, like you can go to Walmart and buy a flag for ten bucks. Everybody’s got one, they’re silkscreen. No, this is a real flag so that it

will take the weather, and that flag back in the day I think that flag cost us something like ninety-five dollars or something.

RICK DAGG: Wow. And so is that still the flag that they're flying?

IAN: That is the flag that is flown every year at City Hall. It sits in the mayor's secretary, in the cupboard beside the secretary to the mayor.

DIANE: 2002. And we had quite a big show out at Pleasant Valley Hall involving quite a few different groups of drag, even from Victoria so that was a big deal for Nanaimo. And then 2003 was huge. It was really huge. First time we ever had a live band, we had the swimming pool, we had Show and Shine, we had over fifty people on the stage that had all donated their time and effort to come over from Gabriola. They paid their own expenses. It was just an amazing community experience. Then I took some time off and have reconnected with the Pride committee last year but this year I'm actually on the board. So back in 2003, when I believe that was the year the first time the flag was actually raised, and my dear Tina worked very hard with Diane Brennan—

RICK DAGG: Tina?

DIANE: Shelley—to get the flag raised the first time, and it was a very dysfunctional City Council. (Rick laughs) Some things never change apparently. But it was very dysfunctional and it was a real challenge and with good hard work it got done. I've always thanked Diane Brennan a great deal for that. That really changed a lot in this town. It made us real and gave us some validity. And then of course this year is quite an extraordinary year as well. We will be back with a live band, Looking Queer as Funk is like the greatest moment. I can hardly wait until it takes off.

IAN: In my memory the biggest Pride we ever had up until last year was 2003. That was a big Pride. And it's kind of funny—I thought about this today and it was kind of like a big party. Like we were all partying on the deck of the Titanic. We didn't know it. We were sailing into an iceberg at full steam ahead. (Rick Dagg laughs) Because by 2005 it had crashed. But in 2003 we had just finished battling the city. Jabba the Hutt our mayor would not sign the—well, that's what I call him but anyway—

MARK RABNETT: Who was the mayor then? Korpan?

IAN: Yeah, Korpan—Corpuscle but we called him Jabba the Hutt. We finally got the proclamation in 2002, no 2001, I think. And then in 2002, he wouldn't sign it. So we'd have to

go down and sit there and stare at them so they realized, “Oh, those people are back again. (Rick Dagg laughs) I guess we better sign this proclamation or they’ll threaten us and jump up and down and bring the news media.” And we would have. So 2003, we had a big Pride. We had rented Bowen Park, the whole park. We had the pool in the afternoon for the kids and that. We had a big Show and Shine where people brought their old cars and stuff like that—old motorcycles. And then in the daytime we had a big marketplace in the main hall and it was full. We’d rented the whole of Bowen Park. We had the main hall, we had the smaller hall, we had two bars—we had the beer bar, beer and wine in the smaller hall. We even had draught beer (Rick Dagg laughs). In the other part we had the hard bar. We had food, a silent auction and I even went and got my internet certificate so we could marry people in the—front hall— (both laugh) lobby. Reverend Austin if you don’t mind. (Rick Dagg laughs) Cost me fifteen dollars. I want to get my money’s worth. (Rick laughs). But anyway, and that year we had Wonder Bread as the band. We had a very large Pride committee which turned out kind of to be the downfall. We had like fourteen people or up to twenty I think at one point.

RICK DAGG: Wow.

IAN: Yeah, it was a lot. It was our downfall (??) on wheels. I think John was in charge of, and I know I was in charge of, well partly in charge of getting everything organized and set up. Part way through the day we had given the—Lynette was the treasurer in those days—we’d given the city a deposit for Bowen Park. We had a few—a couple a thousand dollars maybe left from other Prides and things like that. But then Lynette came to John and I and said, “Guess what? We’re in dark trouble.” “Why? What’s going on?” “We don’t have any money, we’re out of money and we don’t have any liquor.” (both Ian and Rick Dagg laugh) Well, holy crap, what are we going to do? Where are we going to get a couple a thousand dollars or so to buy booze? Because we figured we’d need about that much. John says, “Well, I can’t put it on my credit card because I already put a bunch of food and stuff on it and it’s kind of at the limit.” So I said, “Well, we could put it on my credit card. I’ve got a five thousand dollar limit.” We went to the liquor store and I put thirty-two hundred dollars’ worth of booze on my credit card or there was going to be no Pride. (Rick Dagg laughs) That afternoon I got to take a break so I went home to have a rest for a couple of hours and the phone—there were eight or nine messages on the phone. All of them were from Visa wanting to know why there was so much money on my credit card. Who was spending all this money and did I know anything about it? I explained to the guy, yeah,

it's a big dance and I did it so all's well. "Oh, okay," he says "you're getting kind of close to your limit. Tell you what, we'll raise your limit to ten thousand dollars. (Rick Dagg laughs) But you realize that will increase your monthly payment, minimum monthly payment from ten dollars to twenty dollars. I thought, oh yeah, only Visa. American Express would send the guys out with tight suits on _____ ?? (both laugh) Visa, no. And that was quite the Pride. It went on for—well, it was all day. I guess it was about four in the morning by the time we packed up and I remember that Pride, it was quite the show. We were never able to quite duplicate it. Starting in 2004, what did we do for Pride in 2004? We had a dance and flag raising and a picnic and all that good stuff. But the Double D's, because the Pride Committee was so unruly, you know, up to twenty people at a time, it got to be. We weren't an official anything. We weren't registered as a society. Lynette kept a few books so we knew how much money we had. We didn't even have a bank account or anything. It was just a group of people that tried to do things for the community. So the other group split off and they went and registered themselves as the Nanaimo Gay Pride Society, and informed us suddenly in 2005. We had already started to do this thing called Gay Idol. It was going to be one of our feature things. It was a singing contest and people came every Wednesday night down to a little bar and sang their songs and whatever, and then people voted for the best, and we held it down at the—there was a bar underneath the Coast Bastion Hotel. It's been closed now for years.

MARK RABNETT: What was that called?

IAN: Sargent O'Flaherty's, I think. So we had the final thing down there. But meanwhile they went ahead and told us that they were now the official Gay Pride Committee. They were a registered society. We weren't allowed to use their name or even mention any part of their name and any of the money that we had saved up for Pride, we had to give to them. So, John and me and Roxy and Mary and Lynette got together and we said, "Not happening." (laughs) Because as far as we were concerned, Don and Darrell were in it for the money. They thought that there's money to be made by putting on a dance every month or something like that. That was fine and they did it in 2005, and then 2006 rolled around. So we were out, we were finished. We didn't know what to do so we changed our name to the Vancouver Island Rainbow Association. I thought, well, we'll do community things all over the Island and let them do the Pride in Nanaimo. That's what we had decided to do but we weren't going to give them any money. Anyway, at the end, it was 2006 and just before the declaration had to go in to raise the flag, and

get the declaration at City Hall, they phoned John up and actually sent us an e-mail saying, “Ah, we’ve dissolved. It’s up to you guys now.” What? You’re telling us this a week before we can do anything? Holy Samoley! So we had to dash down to City Hall. Fortunately, we knew Marilyn quite well—the mayor’s secretary—she’s gone now and that was quite controversial. But anyway, we went down there and we got the declaration in and we got the flag raised, but the only thing we did that year was the picnic and I recall we did a kind of a pub night at Tanya’s, which was, what’s the name of the guy that owned that? He’s gay and ran that lounge in downtown Nanaimo across from the Post Office. We did manage to put together a couple of events on short notice. We got the picnic going and we got the flag raising done which we thought was really important because we felt that, and I still feel this way, that if you let that go, it’s gone. It’s going to take a while to get it back. So every year when it was time for the flag proclamation, John, and Roxy and me, and whoever else was around, we would march down to City Hall and sit there with our little flags and stare at Jabba the Hutt. Anyway, that was the crash.

RICK: For sure, I think back in the early 1980s no company wanted to lend its name to the gay community. They weren’t behind us, that’s for sure. Now there are companies, big companies banging on our doors to represent us and learn from us how to do diversity—

DIANE: I’m very involved with the Pet Parade in particular and dances that kind of stuff so—

RICK DAGG: So this would be the second year you’re responsible for the Pet Parade.

DIANE: Correct, yes.

RICK DAGG: Huge success last year.

DIANE: Yes, and I realized that we’ve had some smaller pet parades happen throughout the time but I think that last year was the first time that we put it on the dock as a separate event as its own entity. Much like they do in the bigger cities. As we’re growing, the community is growing with it, and we had seventy-four entries last year. I was expecting approximately twenty-five. It was a huge success and people were very happy to come and enjoy it. Pride is moving forward. The city is following with us. Council, who knows? (Rick Dagg laughs)

RICK DAGG: A work in progress.

DIANE: But the amount of heterosexual people that came out with love and support and their families and their children—I never expected that I would be involved with an event that had children in it and I’d love it.

RICK DAGG: Yes. And so seeing the support that we got last year, does that make you feel like a more welcomed member of the community here and make it much more comfortable to be here?

DIANE: Yeah, I had tears in my eyes when the parade ended and because I was—Robert and I were Mr. and Miss Gay Nanaimo. We were standing there waiting and all these people just started flowing in to Maffeo Park. I was fricking overwhelmed and honestly, I had tears in my eyes. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It took my breath away. It was really amazing. Thank you very much for having me here today and—

RICK DAGG: It's been a pleasure. You were the first Ms. Gay Nanaimo. Did you want to talk a bit about Mr. and Ms. Gay Nanaimo?

DIANE: Sure, I was also the first Ms. A. Calgary and so it was quite an honour to have that happen again here.

RICK DAGG: What year was that?

DIANE: (laughs) That was the 1970s.

RICK DAGG: No, here.

DIANE: Oh, last year.

RICK DAGG: So, 2016.

DIANE: 2016, yes. However, of course with the changes in the community and the language of the community, Mr. and Ms. Gay anywhere is somewhat redundant now. But what I want to talk about is the Ambassadorship that went with that. It was—the kids were, “Oh, that's Mr. and Ms. Gay.” It was really—I got goosebumps, I'm telling you. (Rick laughs) It was really cool. They really saw it as something to aspire to. When in my history has that ever happened? It was really cool. We rode in a little pedicab in the Victoria Parade. I really felt like a queen, I'm telling you. (Rick laughs) It was fantastic. Robert—I think Robert and I were—

RICK DAGG: Robert?

DIANE: Robert Bradford was super-picked for it for the year of confusion we had last year because we were both embraced in it in such a way—we loved it, we loved being there and supporting and saying, this is us and this is Pride. It gave me a lot of honour and all the little towns that we went to—help.

RICK DAGG: Protection.

DIANE: Yes.

RICK DAGG: Salt Spring.

DIANE: Salt Spring Island.

RICK DAGG: Victoria.

DIANE: Victoria, Vancouver which I wasn't able to make but Robert represented for us as well there. It was quite amazing.

RICK DAGG: And of course our own parade last year.

DIANE: And of course last year's parade, in a lovely back of the convertible. I mean, wow. It was really, I mean that's a little bit upscale for me but (Rick laughs) it was really fun to represent and to see how people responded to it. To be just giving out that love of Pride and having it reciprocated was a tremendous feeling and a real honour.

RICK DAGG: Thank you.

TINA: I think things have changed quite a bit over the last decade or so in terms of the openness in the community towards gay and lesbian, transgender, queer, bi people. I remember days when it did not feel safe at all to walk down the street if you were holding a girlfriend's hand or having any kind of affectionate moment in public, did not feel safe. I know I always felt somewhat guarded. I remember one time, I think it was about 1998 or so, so I was still in the process of coming out and I had come to listen to the music of a live band, I think it was at Queen's or something. I remember standing there with another woman. We weren't touching, we were just listening to the music and some guy walked past and in a really nasty loud voice said, "Why don't you just stick your finger in the dyke." I was there just having a good time and I remember feeling like I had been punched. Here I was just in the process of coming out and didn't even know that I would have been identified by anyone as being gay at that point and so it was really quite a harsh reality and certainly made me feel a little bit more cautious. Then of course, as I got involved with Pride and all of the things that happened with City Council and becoming more and more out in that regard, I started feeling stronger and stronger and my sense of justice kicked in and it was more or less, "Who the hell do you think you are telling me who I am?" kind of thing. I think Pride has evolved over the years in some really interesting ways. There's always been a group of people in the community who focus their efforts but certainly it seems to be getting much more accepted. I like it that it still retains a real community feel. I know when I go to Vancouver and it's so big and it's so commercial that it just doesn't do that for me. I prefer Pride in Nanaimo and I prefer Pride in Victoria because it feels much more like a sense of

community and I think that's really important. I think from the beginning that's what we've had. We've pulled together, we've focused on the community and on each other and on creating safe spaces, and it's pretty exciting to see where it's at now. My hope is that we move forward in a way, more like Victoria and less like Vancouver. Time will tell. It really depends on the energy and see, what's the best direction to go in? Yeah, it's exciting times for sure. When I was there last year and the parade and the energy was just amazing, so I am really happy to see how it's evolved.

MARY: After what we had gone through in Sudbury, we've been thinking of it, you know, going public in the newspaper and doing interviews on the radio, so it was like, "We're here. We're queer, and we're going to march in this. Having two businesses downtown and a gay bar right there, we just thought that more people were out, and more people were open. _____??"

RICK DAGG: Yes, there's still a lot of fear

MARY: Yes, definitely. Gay people think right now that the path has been paved for them but I keep hearing more and more stories about hate crimes against the younger people too, so it's not completely paved. There's still a lot of speed bumps to go through.

TINA: Definitely there is. I think we're really fortunate to be living where we are in these times, and hopefully setting an example and making the world, and our community specifically, safer for the kids who are growing up and figuring out who they are. I think we only need to turn on the news or pick up the newspaper to know how incredibly lucky we are.