**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

https://www.nyctransoralhistory.org/
http://oralhistory.nypl.org/neighborhoods/trans-history

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**MELISSA SKLARZ**

**Interviewer:** Ric Tennenbaum

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**Transcribed by** Carrie Haguewood (volunteer)

**NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #016**

Ric Tennenbaum: **Hello, my name is Ric Tennenbaum, and I will be having a conversation with Melissa Sklarz for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is July 5, 2017 and this is being recorded in Manhattan, New York. [Page turning] Hi Melissa.**

Melissa Sklarz: **Hi Ric, how are you?**

Tennenbaum: **I'm great. Could you please introduce yourself, um, with however you like and also talk a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up?**

Sklarz: **So, my name is Melissa Sklarz, I'm a trans female. I use she and her. Um, this is the year 2017—I transitioned in 1991, it was really when I started on hormones so it's over 25 years now. I was born in Manhattan. Um, we, my family, lived here until I was about two and a half. When my mom became pregnant for the third time, the family moved out of Stuyvesant Town or Peter Cooper [Village] where we were living on the East side and then we moved to Long Island to Hicksville, New York in Nassau County. Um, as you know, white veterans had the GI Bill after World War II and they got access to cheap schooling and very inexpensive housing and so we moved into a three-bedroom split-level house in the suburbs on former potato fields. Um, and we grew up there surrounded by the Baby Boomer generation of thousands and thousands of kids just like us. And, um, and I lived there consistently until I went away to school and then on and off since then.**

Tennenbaum: **And so—on and off. Where were you moving about?**

Sklarz: **So, what was life like in the 1950s and 1960s? Hicksville was a typical suburb for Long Island. It was all white, um, it the same economic class, it was all middle class. My high school was filled to the brim with kids just like us. The neighborhood, the community was originally—mostly German, then Irish, then Italian and a smattering of Jews, like us. Mostly I knew, growing up, a lot of Italians and Irish kids and some Germans, and of course the Jewish kids. My high school had over three thousand people, my graduating class had over a thousand people. Today in Hicksville it's about one-third the size of what it was. My generation, my cohort, was the pig in the python. In fact, now, the millennial generation—you—is now, more than our Baby Boomer generation was for the first time since World War II. And so, on my block there must have been a hundred kids. Uh, there must have been, you know, maybe thirty houses and probably had the—there were some families who had two kids, and some had five or six. Every house had lots of kids. And, all the fathers served in World War II, and they all moved out of the city, and they were all excited to be among cohorts living in the suburbs. Um, —there—I mean the idea of diversity where I grew up was Jews, is the only thing. Again, it was all white, it was all Christian. In those days, they did not differentiate. We lived in a Christian culture, there was no differentiation for Jews. We—people today they take a look, and they make fun of holiday "Season's Greetings" and holidays, instead of just Christmas. Well, I was a Jewish kid who grew up when everything was Christmas, and it was uncomfortable, because it was very obvious that we were left out of it. In fact, one year, I think just to make us happy as children, my parents actually kinda sorta celebrated Christmas—not with a tree and decorations. But with Christmas morning presents,**

the whole thing, just so that we could experience it once. And it was fun, it was very exciting, uh, we never did it before and we never did it again. But, just as all of us—my siblings and I—reached the age of eight, nine, ten, this was probably a big deal. You know, my parents worked very hard to give us what we wanted—my dad used to be in the garment industry. In the twentieth century many Jews, most Jews, all Jews worked in the garment industry to some degree. My father worked there, his father worked there, his father-in-law worked there. My uncle—my father's younger brother in fact—after the navy, went to school and got a degree in engineering, so he never did that. But it was very, very, very common. Um, after a while it became obvious that my father had no real yearning to sell bedspreads like his father, so my dad went back to school, got a master's degree, and wanted to become a teacher. And I was probably still a little kid then. And he got his master's degree, and of course because he was a teacher, he was constantly looking for gigs because his job didn't pay that much. So, he was always doing other kinds of jobs, especially while he was a student getting his master's degree. I mean, for a while he was a substitute teacher, then he was a gym teacher, and then finally what happened is they hired him in our school district—he became the first Jew to be hired to teach American History. They only allowed the Jews to teach science up until my father became a history teacher. My father had a sense of the world that was special, and he felt it was very, very important that all of us knew that there was a world outside of Hicksville. I was my father's child, I was the most like him, I was the eldest, the first-born. And so, I was raised to be very much like him. He and I got along great, through all the crazy I put both my folks through, and he loved me until the day he died. I would go to school with him when he was getting his master's degree—fascinating to me, you know, in International Relations. But, among his different gigs, he was teaching recreations, because he studied physical education in college at NYU. But he got a gig in Brooklyn teaching—being—running a community center, and so my younger brother and I would go with him. And so, we're talking ten, eleven, twelve years old, and we would go to Bedford-Stuyvesant. And here are these two little white suburban kids, little Jewish kids, going into an all African American neighborhood. We were flabbergasted. We had never seen anything like—we had never heard of anything like this. We would occasionally have awareness of black people, but the idea of a community of all-black people was astounding. And you know what? The kids in this community were astounded to see us because they probably saw white people as infrequently as we saw people of color. And so, at first it would be, awkward, very awkward—extremely awkward. There are no boundaries, there's no learning. But I had a secret weapon, and it became very effective. My secret weapon is I was a jock. And I discovered very quickly that playing ball was a great, great interaction that worked. And when they saw that I could play softball and do very well for a kid my age, it was a great icebreaker. And we would go with my dad to the community center in Brooklyn, and after time, we made friends, we fit in. We were as different and unique in the setting, you know—we played pool, we'd run around, we made friends. And it was astounding—we're talking the pre-civil rights era of New York, before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I would say it was '61 maybe '62—I would say during JFK years. And here we were there. And, um, it's a great, great memory that I have. You know, if my brother was here, I don't know what his memories would be, but it was cool and it was fun. When I was a little kid, I became aware of this obsession. I don't know if children can have obsessions, but I was obsessed with having feelings of the opposite gender. I had no awareness or knowledge of anything outside of my realm that indicated that anything was going on, other than the fact that I was obsessed by this. I was obsessed by my mother, and my sister, and the women, and the girls in the neighborhood, and I never could quite figure out what it meant. And no one

**really could help me with this. I did learn very early that my concerns and interests were not typical, and I learned to shut it down, and to lie. And at a very, very early age—we're talking way before ten—and I don't know what happened. I mean I can remember being six, seven, eight, and playing with grandma's makeup. And then to my shock and horror I find out that unlike lipstick, nail polish doesn't come off in soap and water. And so visiting grandma, you know, and here my nails are flaming red, and the soap and water isn't working, and I can remember getting a nail file and just filing off the tops of my nails. Um, so the sense of shame and differentness was imbued at a very young age. If there was an incident that happened involving my mother, I do not remember. But I do remember being ashamed. I do remember asking around and discovering that none of my little friends had this same obsession—that my obsessions about opposite gender was very unique to me. I would play—there—apparently little boys go through an era, a period of their life, hating girls. I never did that. I played, I played with boys, I played with girls. I—I liked doing the things that girls did but I was an athlete, I was good at—I was good at sports and yet I also liked to do the things that the girls did. I was truly dual-gendered. In some ways I still am, which is very ironic that these same questions I had when I was six, seven, eight—I still ask today. Um—**

Tennenbaum: **What are some of those questions that you're still asking today?**

Sklarz: **Who am I? Where do I belong? Where do I fit in? What is my identity? You know, I take a look at the modern language of gender identity and gender expression today and it, you know—I'm as puzzled now as I was when I was eight years old. Um, some of it fits very well and some of it not at all. I know that there are trans women that know absolutely positively that they are women and that's, puzzling for me because I don't share that same absoluteness that some trans women do. I'm a trans woman, you know, I—this is the life I live. I've made the best of it. I still feel I'm dual-gendered. You know, it'd be a lot easier if I was one or the other, but I don't really feel that way—it's a discussion that permeates through therapy through the years. For a while I used to think that trans women now were adamant about being women were crazy and I've since learned that, no, there are trans women that very, very adamantly see themselves as women. So, I've discovered that even with a trans community, I have uniqueness, or it's certainly unique for me. Um, I mean when I was a kid I would cross-dress, I —I don't know what else you'd call it. I mean I would play with the girls, I would play board games with the girls, I would play dress-up. You know, but I also did my little boy things, you know, I was equally comfortable. If there were some kind of rules, cultural parental rules, I do not remember them. Until I got older and started to cross-dress in secret more actively—I would say from ages up until puberty, I got away with it pretty easily. As my body started to change, it became a problem because my body grew, and my sister's stuff became difficult to access. And my mother is OCD, and I knew that she knew where everything in her room was—everything—and that as hard as I would try, I could never get it exactly the way it was. I even drew maps of her closets, her drawers, so I would know exactly. And it never—it sometimes worked but I would get caught and I would be confronted and deny everything. And I was lying, and she knew I was lying, and I was—I ignored it, you know. I just, this is my story and I'm sticking to it. And as I became a teenager it became obvious that there was something dramatic going on. My mother put locks on her bedroom and my sister's bedroom, neither of which kept me out of their bedrooms. After I became homeless and went to rehab and had this grand revelation about my gender identity, my father was**

shocked—my mother was not, remembering back to these early years. You know, I started lying dramatically, consistently—reasons to stay home alone. I tried different outfits, different expressions. I had sexual fantasies involving me as a woman with men. All this, and this must be those early teen years, and I had no idea what it meant. And I can remember in 19–when I was eleven, in our household we read two newspapers every day. In the morning we had the New York Times, and, in the afternoon, we had Newsday, which was the Long Island paper. And in those days, it was illegal for men to dress as the opposite sex. People—men would get arrested. And a man got arrested, and then I got to ask my mom the question that every mom of an eleven-year-old wants to hear from their child in the early 1960s—Mommy, what's a transvestite? And in the newspaper, they reported that this person got arrested. They talked about what she was wearing, and I was amazed because it showed me for the first time that these feelings that I had about being male-identified—that there's someone else out there doing something. And I was amazed—flabbergasted. You know the only—other than seeing Bugs Bunny on the cartoons, the idea that I could dress as a woman, you know. I didn't know anything else, there was no language. And so, I decided to investigate. And when I say investigate, I went to the Hicksville Public Library and I read every book that I thought could tell me more about this...thing. I read all the textbooks, I read all the novels, I read all the true-crime stories. I read histories. Anything that I thought I that could—I would look for homosexuality, transvestitism, and transsexualism. This would have been about ten years after Christine Jorgensen, and this is the early to mid-sixties. And I learned a great deal about a lot of things, and I learned more about cross-gender. Again, there was no language for it, there was—you had transsexuals, you had transvestites, and there seemed to be a realm in between that they didn't have language for. And when I was seventeen, as you know, Christine Jorgensen was the first public American transsexual in 1953. And then in, and Harry Benjamin—well I mean first the Danish doctors were overwhelmed by requests and then they taught American doctors including Harry Benjamin, and it was a thing. And in 1968 he wrote the *Transsexual Phenomenon* which is—he did a wonderful job for the time. And his gender spectrum had six stops along the gender spectrum. Today there are probably six thousand, but in those days, he had six, and I was on that spectrum, I recognized myself as that. There was a book called *Psychologic Sexualis* [*Psychopathia Sexualis: The Classic Study of Deviant Sex* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing] from the nineteenth century—I read all the stuff that had anything to do with that and they talked about transsexual, transvestite, and that grey area in between. I read all those things, I read Harry Benjamin. And, you know, did I relate to Christine Jorgensen? I did not. You know, Christine Jorgensen had her operation at 21, you know, she joined the army to try to fit in as a man—it was a terrible failure, you know. I was better at being male than she was, you know, I was not that isolated from my male identity, but it wasn't what I wanted. You know, I always thought as I got older, I would outgrow these feelings, and instead they got stronger and more pronounced. And um and so, I couldn't really find the answers I was looking for, for me. And so, like many others, you know, substances, alcohol, drugs enter and I sustained myself for that for nearly, oh for twenty years, until I became homeless. But, you know, my—the desire to take action... I mean, I was so lost sexually. You know, ages of 16 to 21 really, I didn't—you know those are the great golden era of being a teenager, you know. And my memories—I learned to fit in. I don't remember junior high school 13 to 15. I remember virtually nothing of it. High school—I learned to fit in better, and I was funny, and friendly, and still obsessed. I was a jock, you know, I was a varsity athlete in high school. I started

drinking and smoking cigarettes and then smoking pot all before I got out of high school. Again, this would be the late 1960s. Um—

Tennenbaum: Do you remember when you first started drinking and smoking, specifically weed, how that affected your relationship to yourself, um, and to the people around you?

Sklarz: You know, at first when I started smoking pot—I first started smoking pot in, I would say 1968. I was seventeen. It was explosive, it was extraordinary, it was a different world. It changed everything. In those days pot was so simple, it was nothing like today. It was—Columbian was really good. Mexican could be hit or miss, Michoacán was good. You know, it was just—and what it did is it redirected my essence, you know, my gender identity became hidden. It became subjugated to this new awareness of this inner world that had nothing to do with my confusion. Um, so, I mean once I started smoking pot—and then in those days we would smoke hash—before I went away to college, I did LSD, and, you know, there's this whole new awareness. And what it did is it took away my obsession with gender identity and gender expression. It added zero to it and it was amazing distraction—amazing. It was perfect for me, because now what I could do is pretend to be a guy better, you know. Now I was just gonna be a hippie, I was gonna be a stoner. And I mean during—I didn't really, when I went away—high school I was very popular, very well known. I was—I hung out with the smart kids, with the jocks. I hung out with the theater kids, I—mostly backstage although as a senior they threw me on the stage. I played a character, a drunk, who wakes up and is now married to a young boy dressed as a woman—sorta act all this out on stage. And they thought it was funny because I was known as a jock and one of the smart kids, and here I am acting, and so that was fun. And, um. But other than that, when I went away to school, the only constant companion I had was drugs. I didn't—I hated weekends because people would have lives, they would interact, and I didn't do any of that, you know. I was completely isolated, and so to feel less isolated I did more drugs. And so, it was creating a spiral, and so rather than—and what happened when I was by the time, I was 19 I was doing so many drugs I started drinking to offset them, to offset the effects. And then, so now not only I was doing lots of drugs, now I was drinking every day on top of it. And my second sch—the first school was the student rebellion after Kent State, and that was terrible. And I—it cost a fortune and I felt horrible, so I went to a state school upstate. I flunked out of my second school because of my drug use. My grades were so bad I had to—I took a year off once I got out of the draft, I then went to night school and got somewhat better grades. You know, it was a mystery cause here I was—I was very bright, very knowledgeable, and yet, I could not perform in a university setting. So, I started at night school and then eventually I was able to go to day school. I ended up going to four undergraduate schools. I tried to get a master's degree. The one consistent thing was drugs and alcohol, and this was all in my early twenties. And, you know, I dabbled in cross-gender behavior. I was al—, you know. Those years, so in 19—when I was 20, college kids wore a uniform, especially those upstate. So, and the uniform was jeans, and jeans, and work boots, and everyone wore it and it drove me crazy. And I dated a girl who was much more flamboyant than that. And at one point I told her, I said, you know, "Let me wear your clothes, let me see what that's like." And so, I liked it—she didn't. I thought it was fun and cool. In the end, it got too much for her, and also, I was changing. I couldn't—the drugs and the alcohol were no longer preventing me from having real feelings about my gender identity. And we broke up, I think within a month she met someone very much like me who wasn't obsessed

with cross-gender and from what I heard they married and had a life. And I've looked for her a little through the years but not all that hard. I first went out in public, I guess I must have been 25. I was in Albany—graduate school. Graduate school didn't work—too much cross-gender obsession, too much drugs. And you know, I was great at quitting. I was really good at that. And you know, when things get tough, I quit. Did it all the time.

Tennenbaum: How did it feel when the gender thoughts started coming in when you were getting high, and it was no longer that escape and distraction?

Sklarz: Um, I was...obsessed with wanting to be more involved in cross-gender behavior. Again, though, I was a jock, you know. I was—there was really, you know, nothing feminine, you know. I had been socialized as a guy; I was sort of a guy on the outside although I was a lot quieter than a lot of the guys. I was—I didn't date all that much. I dated infrequently and when I did, I sort of pretended, I didn't really feel much of anything. I was shocked that people were so excited about this. I think I met my first gay couple—I must have been 25, so this would have been the mid-70s. And one I played softball with and he had a white boyfriend who was very soft and effeminate, and he was African American, and he was my teammate on the ball team. But I would hang out with them, and—just because, you know, I want to know more. I want to know more. Here are these two men living together as a couple, and I wanna know more. And, once I quit graduate school, I came back to New York and a friend of mine was working at the airlines, and he had gay friends and so I started hooking up with them. And so, we made—one of his friends, we made a deal that there was a bar he wanted to go to, and he didn't want to go alone so I went with him. And there was a bar that I had heard of that I wanted to go to, and he would go with me. So, I went with him to the Anvil, and it was crazy. It was very masculine, very leather, very public sex, very sex, drugs, rock & roll—loud, completely pitch black. A guy dancing in the bar eventually became the Indian from the Village People, but in those days, he was a Go-Go Boy dressed as an Indian, I mean that's where they found him. These were all prototypes in those days, we're talking the early 1970s. And the bar I went to was a transgender, transsexual hangout called The Gilded Grape on 8th Avenue. And it was 1976 and I went for the first time in December. In some ways I never left, you know, it was just the most unbelievable thing I had ever seen. It was a whole culture of cross-gendered people. Some of them were the most beautiful women in New York, others were more on the fringe. The place was filled with guys running after them. The vast majority were Latina, or African American. There was a show element involved, there was a hangout, they were all working. It was the only job any of them could get, was hustling. There were no other—either you had to be so perfectly flawless to hide your gender identity, or you would hustle there, or you'd work at the bar as a bartender. And I was enthralled by this world, at this culture. I have a hundred stories of all the different people I've met. From those days, a handful are still left—A handful. You know, even then—a handful, a tiny handful. You know, between drugs, and AIDS, and violence, and the life, you know. They didn't—a writer named Jerzy Kosiński, a polish writer, who escaped I think after World War II, wrote a series of these urban novels and there was always a trans component in them, because apparently, he was as enthralled by this as I was. And in one, one of his books, he had a um—in one of the bars there was a secret room and that's where all the trans women over the age 40, the Crones, would go and, um. Because in those days any trans woman that lived to be over 40—there was no role for them. What they would do is they would become like, aunties. And they would just,

**they would take care of the children of female relatives, they would help the young girls coming up. There would be no role for them, they couldn't work anymore as hustlers.**

Tennenbaum: **Do you know how they made ends meet?**

Sklarz: **No. I mean, I knew a gal that—they did hair, nail salons, bartender. I, you know, I would have to go back—you know, in those days I was in my twenties, so I didn't really care about the older ones. That was not my interest. —You know, some were very—you know some of them were icons for the period. This was a little before Studio 54. This is that change from the hippy time into the disco time in 'Disco New York', you know, these were all—some of these girls were icons. They were just amazing. And, um, The Gilded Grape was very, very well known on 8th Avenue, and then they opened another place called, G.G. Knickerbocker's—G.G. for Gilded Grape—Knickerbocker's, The Barnum Room [G.G.'s Barnum Room]. And it was like four rooms and the main room had a disco trapeze up there and it was the most extraordinary trans nightclub ever in the history of New York. And, um, you know, every night there would be—and in time, straight people heard about it and they would start to come and be part of the scene. But my memory is there'd be hundreds of people. You would have trans people, you would have people that liked trans people, and then you had gay people, straight people, and it was just... And of course, in these days, you know, I had discovered that there was a drug that I could take that would—I drove in those days, I would get in car accidents all the time cause of my drinking. I would blackout. So, so I started doing cocaine and, um, so I wouldn't get in a car accident. So, I always had cocaine and the girls knew that. And that was sort of my role there. You know, I would hang out, and I had coke. And—but it was a huge, huge problem for me, I always did much more than they did. And that was the beginning of a serious, serious problem for me. After Barnum Room closed down, there was a series of others. There was Sally's Hideaway, then after that burned down, Sally's II. There was Casa Dario, there was the Grapevine. You know, and these were all mafia places, and so—and there was a component. There were people within the mob that had—that saw this as a moneymaker. And this would have all been in the mid-70s to, [whispering] I don't know, early 80s. Eventually my...drug habit got to the point where I had to move into a much less exclusive neighborhood. I couldn't afford to pay quality rent anymore. So, I moved into, I guess what I call a working-class neighborhood in Queens. Um—**

Tennenbaum: **How were you making money during that time?**

Sklarz: **So, I came back from graduate school in 1976, I was able to get a job. And so, it was a classic double life, you know, where I had this straight life—I had this day job, because I was still clever, and I was a college graduate. And then I'd have—when those days—was weekends, you know, where I would enter this other world of cross-gender people. And, you know, next thing I know, it would be 4 o'clock on Sunday, 5 o'clock on Sunday. But I would spend, you know, some time, a lot of time, most of my time and eventually all my time in this other thing. And my drug use took my life away. There was—and so at one point, I was living, sharing a two-bedroom apartment in Jackson Heights. Then I moved to Brooklyn Heights, and then it just got too much. And so, I moved into a small, one-bedroom near the railroad tracks off the 7-train in Queens. I lived there until I stopped paying rent and I got—I lost—I got evicted from**

**that. At one point my drug habit was so bad that I left the country for three years to get away from coke. So, from '79 to '82 I lived oversea.**

Tennenbaum: **Where were you?**

Sklarz: **I lived in Israel, on an overseas constructing project, building an airbase for the Israeli. And I lived in Tel Aviv for six months. And living in a city without cocaine, made me crazy. And so, I moved into the desert and I lived in the desert for two and half years. No temptations. I was an all-or-nothing kind of girl. And, you know, I had to live in an environment with nothing. And, you know, there were, 200 Americans, 100 British, and 2,000 men from Thailand on this jobsite. And, you know, again, among the guys, you know. I was great at playing ball, but I was different, when you think of a construction worker I was hardly not—I was hardly the type. And the women liked me there because I was safe. I wasn't crazy. I wasn't overly aggressive. I wasn't aggressive at all. And it's very funny, I was always—until I transitioned, I was always one of the girls. It was af—once I transitioned though that that role became...complicated to fit in with all these great women. But up until I transitioned, I was always one of the girls. You know, I can think in college, it would be seven women and me, hanging out, you know. Not unusual at all. And um...**

Tennenbaum: **What about being without drugs, specifically cocaine, do you think, um, made you, as you said, crazy while you were out in the desert and in Israel? Like, what kind of thoughts were you having, and what kind of feelings were you having in your body?**

Sklarz: **You know, we worked—when I was in Israel, we worked eleven hours a day, six days a week. And I, I worked, I drank all the time, I played ball, goofed around. You know, I drank. I drank, and I lived with the secret that my gender identity was different. And I was able to get this job and pay off all my drug debts. And save money—I'd never saved money in my life, I mean it was...I had no disposable income, I spent it all on drugs. Um...when I came back from Israel, I could have bought an apartment for cash, in Chelsea. Had I had the wherewithal, which I did not. All my money disappeared on drugs, two years after I came back. I must have saved, in 1980s dollar, probably had sixty, sixty-five thousand in the bank. You know, and it—gone in two years. I frightened people; I frightened my drug dealer. I was spending it so fast on drugs—how quickly it went. I'll take car—I'll look for a job tomorrow, I'll look for a job tomorrow. Two years went [snaps fingers] Like that. I was broke again. With a drug habit, again.**

Tennenbaum: **What, um, so—**

Sklarz: **Feelings? What kind of feelings did I have? I didn't. I didn't. I had—I was carrying around this secret that got bigger and bigger. You know, I thought well, well maybe I—a trans girlfriend, maybe a trans wife. And I tried that, and it was like, "Gosh I don't know, this doesn't make me feel any better. Actually, it's making me worse." You know I would have trans roommates when I lived in Queens. But they were all escorts, you know, so it would be really complicated. And my drug habit got worse, and now I had drug addicted escort roommates—that didn't help either. And you know, my life had become quite chaotic. And, you know, it was water going down a drain. You know, and what started as a hobby, and**

**something magical, you know, became a parasite that I couldn't get off. I could not escape from it. And then it became simple, you know, I've—after all my money was going to drugs then I stopped paying rent, and six months after I did that I was evicted. And my escort roommate called me at work. I had had a corporate job—I was struggling mightily. I thought they didn't realize what trouble I was—they, of course, all realized. That how come, you know, this person's really bright, why are they struggling so badly? You know. It was—I assume it was—. If it was me, I would never tolerate an employee, a Melissa employee like I was in those days. Never, never. But they tolerated me until I became intolerable [laughter]. Lost my home, went to rehab, came out of rehab, tried to get sober. Eventually they fired me. The alcoholism they could've dealt with but the drug abuse.**

Tennenbaum: **Was there drugs other than cocaine?**

Sklarz: **Well, the snorting took too long so I learned to smoke it. So, you know, smoking crack wasn't probably the best idea I had in the 1980s—learned how to smoke crack. So, that was awful. That was truly awful. I—the last two years, you know, it was, awful. You know, in retrospect at that time, you know, I—on the Fridays I would get paid my money, my paycheck would all be gone by Sunday. And then on the weeks I wouldn't get paid I would have to go to my parents' house since I hadn't eaten in three days. And then I would take money from them. Those last 2 or 3 years were the worst, you know, it was—you know I was lost, I was lost, and losing my home was the best thing that ever happened to me. And in rehab, I told 'em. I said, "I hate being a guy. I've been hanging around with transsexuals for 15 years, and I don't understand." And they went, "Oh, we have no idea what you're talking about. But if you go to the gay center on West 13th Street..." And I did, and they had the Gender Identity Project there, it started the year before. And I went there and the Gender Identity Project—they weren't all disco queens, they weren't all models, they weren't all escorts. They were people starting a journey—male-ish people like me, and some had transitioned, some were transitioning, some wanted to transition, some will never transition—but they were all in the room. And we get a chance to talk about what's going on and I had—the only time I had ever seen trans people was late at night after I had 4 or 5 drinks and a ton of cocaine. So, this was a revelation. And within three months, I started talking about transitioning, and I started to dress more appropriately for a trans person. And they said, "Oh, you're doing great, you're doing great!" to my face. Behind my back they said, "This one? [whispering] Never. Never." Um, what's this for? And—I, you know, I told my assistant at work that I was gonna do this and my appearance was starting to change, I started on hormones, and two weeks after I started hormones I was fired. And this was May 1991.**

Tennenbaum: **Where were you employed that fired you?**

Sklarz: **Well, I'm not gonna mention them. It was a corporation; they were hops merchants—hops and beer. Beer would taste and smell like oatmeal, that you get a buzz. Hops give it aroma, gives it a taste. You know, malt, alcohol, yeast, it's not gonna have any taste. So, these are hops merchants selling hops to breweries all over, so, I was involved in that. I thought it was, you know, for an alcoholic, I thought it was a clever idea when I came back from overseas. It was a terrible idea. I was working there, and then I wasn't. And they gave me a reasonable settlement. Translation—we don't know what's going on with you, but we're**

**gonna give you enough that you'll go away and not sue us. And that worked, you know, I had enough money to live on for a year. I spent it all on electrolysis. I found a place to live, a one room to live in—14th Street, right near The Stroll. In those days, the Gansevoort District—Meatpacking District—was a literal meat market and the meat guys would be there from, you know, from 4 in the morning till noon and then they'd leave, and then the girls would take over. And that was The Stroll, and I moved two blocks from that. I figured anything that I was gonna do, that had been done a thousand times before—in fact, RuPaul and her friends also lived right there in The Stroll in the meat market. When they first moved here from Atlanta, they moved and they lived in a place, in fact, in *Sex and the City* they show where she lives is right near on Little West Terrell St right where The Stroll was. In fact, Lady Bunny, today, lives only two blocks from that area too because she was part of that crowd. And I got to know her. And um—**

Tennenbaum: **Were you yourself doing sex work at that time?**

Sklarz: **At—when I was early on, I would go to the bars and hang out and do anonymous sex. That's the trans experience I knew. It was okay, sometimes it was fun. You know, I really, I got a kick out of it. It was the idea that I could be a desirable female, you know. We're talking the first 2, 3 years and I didn't really have a real—I had gigs. I had two cocktail waitress—I had a great cocktail waitress job on 14th and 8th. And so, Lady Catiria, long gone—former Miss Continental. And they had the Continental girls would do all the entertainment, so all the guys would come. These girls were, they were all in relationships, they were unapproachable. And here I was, the cocktail waitress, so I would get the leftovers and I would charge them money, and it helped pay the rent, you know. I lived around the corner from the bar, what could be perfect. So, they're at 14th and 8th, I'm on 14th between 7th and 8th. And I mean—so I started hormones in '91. My first full time job was '94 in Gay Games—it was a temporary job. And then I got hired at Gay Men's Health Crisis in '96 and I was made redundant after a year and a half. And I started working part-time at the Credit Union. I start—I worked there 20 hours a week as a debt collector and then I would be a cocktail waitress at night. And then what happened is the Credit Union saw that I was clever, and they made me full time and then they made me a manager, and eventually I became director at the Credit Union. I stayed there for 19 years. The bar fired me when they realized how much money I was really making; they covered my shifts when I wasn't there. And the promoter was fucking pissed because I—when you have a gig like that that's based on her, you gotta give her a percentage, and she realized I was way undercutting her. She had no idea how much money I made. And I'm like, "Girl I gotta pay the rent," and she said, "Girl I don't give a fuck, you're fired." But I was okay. So, Gay Games was '94, I—full time to Credit Union was November 1997. So—and I got fired in '91. So, you know, three years really, just working gigs—whatever I could find. Telephone sales. I did all sorts of crazy things. I was too old to do sex work, I was already over 40, right? Yeah. But I made ends meet, and my rent—$700 a month on my 14th street one room. My room was about like this, I lived there for 12 years. After Gender Identity Project they were so—they thought I was clever, and they had me doing peer counseling. —[whispers] Where were we? Um. And so, you know—oh, Gender Identity Project. So, I started—they had me becoming a peer counselor and then I would lead groups, and then I would be a counselor, you know. I had an office, and I would have clients. And we would talk. And the fact is that people had gender identity needs and there were no resources. There were—there was**

nothing. There was Gender Identity Project. I mean, AIDS was invented in New York. Gay AIDS in 1981—rare cancer seen in 41 homosexuals. This month is—last week was the anniversary of the New York Times story talking about 'Rare Cancer in 41 Homosexuals', and it was the beginning of coverage of HIV/AIDS. And, I mean, I was at GMHC [Gay Men's Health Crisis]—I started in '94. You would see people and they'd be gone in a month. And then I was there in '96 when they invented protease inhibitors, and people stopped dying. But other—but there were no resources. The gay community invented all this on their own. No one would help them. No government would help them. I'm sure you're familiar with GMHC, the story of GMHC where gay men came together to create their own resource, because the closeted gay mayor was afraid to help them—that it would spill over on him. And so that was that time, and there were no resources and so I said, "Well, I knew people, I've been in the neighborhood. So, let me see what I can do". And at one point there was a gentrification of the meat market. They wanted to do something with the land that—they wanted to improve the quality of life in that area. And yet there were all these trans working girls and so they had a town hall on what to do about them. And the language was very anti-sex work and then it became very anti-trans. And so, at Gender Identity Project, they told me about it. I said, "I'll go. I'll go and represent." And I did. So, 200 neighbors from the community, and me to be a can—. The cops, the community, the elected officials, and I show up representing the community. And I countered their rage with my own. You know, I wasn't—I got to speak publicly much better, but mostly I sputtered with rage, you know. This is not a game; this is peoples' lives. And, you know, this has been our area for years. And you were all brought here because it was dirt-cheap because it was filled with carcasses. You know, the animal ones at night, and the girls during the day. And now, the value of your properties are going up and you're going to treat these girls like they're the carcasses. And the elected officials were not offended actually. They thought it was pretty cool that someone from the trans community would show up. And I became friendly, and then friends. And then they got even with me—they put me on the community board. And that was in, [whispers] oh I don't remember. Maybe 2000, 2000... And I started getting involved in neighborhood and the community, and etcetera. We can talk about all that if you want.

Tennenbaum: Yeah, I'd love to. And by that time, you had also become an elected delegate, yes?

Sklarz: I started—we started promoting... There was a group of us in the mid-90s. One of the leaders of our Gender Identity Project group, all the rest of us—you would have laughed. I mean, we're talking 20 years ago, and we would all wear our special girly outfits and all of our makeup, and all of this, and the high heels. And there would be this one fucking crazy person with very short hair and sweats bouncing a basketball. And her name was Ricki Anne Wilchins, and she said, "You people have it all wrong. You think that the goal of all this is to pretend you're always born women and disappear. Well, that's not what this is—that's not what's gonna happen. You gotta stand up and own your identity, not only for yourselves but for everyone." And we said, "Girl, you're fuckin' crazy. That's not how it's done. The way it's done is you get what needs to be done to look like you were born female and disappear." And she says, "No. You stay, and stand, and fight." And two years later, I said, "Okay. This...resonates." And I studied political science, you know. And so, I had a sen—Denise Norris was her right-hand gal, and the two of them were like you know, the transsexual menace based on lesbian

menace, you know. And, you know, Ricki would go to the Women's Michigan Festival and Camp Trans and all this. And they had a fundraiser, and it must have been '97 and here I am, a baby trans, and to go to this event and all for the first time in my life...I feel heroic for being trans. I've never felt that before, to go into this fundraiser and people's eyes are glistening with excitement and enthusiasm. And I'm—and so we said well gays and lesbians have civil rights in New York but trans people don't. The language has to be different. So, trans people invented trans-inclusive language. We discussed it—we had a group called NYAGRA [New York Association for Gender Rights Advocacy] in those days. In those days it was democratic—that ended in time—but in those days it was democratic. I was involved—there were a group of us. Carrie Davis was involved. A slew of people. I think Ricki, at this point, had moved to D.C. Ricki started a group called GenderPAC and we were like, "Okay. A transgender political group, how cool is this?" We went to D.C. and we lobbied. It's like, this is weird. And of course, I ooze trans shame, you know, it's like well I do okay I'm a little person, you know. I can wiggle with the best of em' you know, got good at makeup. But some of the others were obviously trans and I was insanely uncomfortable to be around them, you know—6'2" and 6'3" and awkward. But we did this, you know, we were—this was the Clinton [Bill Clinton] years, and we started to teach—. Well in those days we had no friends so democrat, republican, it didn't matter—they all thought we were freaks. But Ricki was adamant—Ricki and her team. Eventually, she stayed in D.C. This is a precursor to NTAC [National Transgender Advocacy Coalition], precursor to MCTE [Maryland Coalition for Trans Equality]. Eventually Ricki fell in love and her companion felt left out of her GenderPAC and so they changed the mission from 'Gender Identity' [Gender Identity Project] to 'Gender', and people felt betrayed. Our leader was leaving us. And so that's where NTAC [National Transgender Advocacy Coalition] came in and then all that [tapping noise] and that's where MCTE [Maryland Coalition for Trans Equality] came in. But, and so I—involved as a trans person in trans politics, selling trans ideas to straight people. And, duh, people that were interested in the future got it immediately. People that were confused were willing to listen. And haters gonna hate that. As that proph—as that sage Taylor Swift says, "Haters are gonna hate" [Shake It Off by artist Taylor Swift]. You know, and then, as anything it falls among political lines that, you know, reactionaries are not interested. And so, we got nowhere in New York City. We tried for years—I would say three years convincing Giuliani [Rudy Giuliani], Peter Vallone, who was a speaker for 20 years. We got nowhere. But what was happening, is NYAGRA started lobbying, Tom Duane [Thomas K. Duane] was a gay guy in city council. And, genius, and Margery Lopez—lesbian in city council, and a woman of color—and she said, "You know, don't worry about the white gay guy—the white guy. People of color—they know discrimination. Lobby them first." And you're going, "Well, of course." In those days, for us white people, it was revolutionary. Fucking revolutionary. Our natural allies are not gonna be white people, but people of color. And that's what we did. And we went and we started lobbying them. And, in the election—it must of been 1998, the state senator for Greenwich Village ran for attorney general and lost. And so, Tom Duane became—took the state senator slot and his former chief of staff, red-headed gal named Christine Quinn, became the council person. And I helped with the campaign, you know, I had gotten to know Tom. Tom and I were friends. And they had a—in those days Greenwich Village had three different political groups. I won't—briefly. You had, the Gay and Lesbian Progressives, Tom and Chris' group. You had the, um, the straight liberals, and then you had the Ed Koch democrats. And each of these three groups— [punches hand]. It was civil war in Greenwich Village, you know. So, the straight liberals were lead—Deborah Glick, even though she was a lesbian, was part of that

group. Our group was, raggier and more liberal, a little bit more lefty. And the Ed Koch democrats were like status quo, they were the nearest thing to status quo in Greenwich Village. You're not gonna have republicans, but. And these three groups—and so there's these tiny local contests. And they said, "Well, we're gonna have you run on county committee." And I said, "That's awesome. Yay," you know. There are 120 members of the county committee—New York County. And I said, "Great, that's really exciting. Thank you for considering me," you know. My election district was, the 14th street between 7th and 8th on the South side, 13th street between 7th and 8th on the North side, and then that little bit of 7th and 8th there. And that was the whole district, I mean there were, you know, 5,000 people there. And then a couple weeks later they said, "Listen, how would you like to be a judicial delegate?" And I said, "Wow! What is that?" And they said, "What happens is we have 11 slots here," you know, "There are gonna be a total of about 70 in judges. We want you to be in our slate, but we're gonna have to run a campaign." And I said, wow. This is something, this is amazing to be 1 of 11 people from the entire neighborhood. We're talking, you know of 50,000 voters and there are 11 slots among them, and I'd be one of the 11. And it was me, and—Tom set this up. And the head of Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats was a—he event—. The president was Kevin Finnegan he is now the political director at 1199 [1199 SEIU United Healthcare Workers East] but in those days... "This'll be great! You'll be in our slate. You'll be one of our 11 candidates." [Sklarz] "Wow! Amazing. Uh, wow I'm really—" "Yeah well we'll have to fundraise." [Sklarz] "Grea—yeah, y—." "Of course, you'll be the first transsexual." I said, "Woah, woah, woah, woah, woah. Wait a minute. You mean I have to run publicly?" And they go, yeah...it would be cool, it would be new, it would be different. It would be eye-catching. No one's ever done it before. And I said... And I said yes, and, um, we did all that. And I ran, and I fundraised. I—my campaign literature was cute, and interesting, and unique. And I won. I got one of the 11 slots. I think we did pretty good, we got about, maybe 7. Deborah's group got maybe 3, may—you know, 6:3:2, something like that—we got the majority. And for the first time for the judicial convention, New York Times covered it with my picture on the front. You know, the—they gave me a role, a seconding speech for one of the judges. It was...amazing. Tom was my great mentor, great benefactor. I was in the Out 100 [Out 100 List, Out Magazine] that year—1999. You know, of course someone like you, you take a look. What is it like to transition, you know, before social media? Before computers? Before cable TV? And so, to have Tom in my corner was amazing. And people wanted to know about this new thing, and he would direct them to me. And I got to speak at rallies, you know, here we have the leading democrats of the neighborhood, of the county. And— "I'm Melissa Sklarz!" And so—one year I spoke at the rally in fr—in the pre-Pride Rally and those days it was in Bryant Park. You know, I'd get up and speak in front of a thousand people. [whispering] Nervous. And it gave me a platform. And it was a roll. And, you know, a transsexual has run for political office—and won. Now, if you're gonna say, "Well, it's not a public office," it's true. And is it a big deal? Yes. Yes. It's a new idea, you know. They don't compare the Wright Brothers flying Kitty Hawk to the Challenger going to the Moon, you know. But it was a big, big deal. And, you know, it's the kind of thing where in Gay Games, in 1994 in New York, the rules for transsexuals to compete in Gay G—were stricter than the Olympics. And so, we had a committee lead by Ricki Anne Wilchins. "This is bullshit." And there—and Northrop [Ann Northrop] was on the board, and she says, "These people are correct." And so, she was our bridge. And they changed the rules to make it easier for—in those days the language was transsexuals—to compete in the Gay G—. You didn't need bottom surgery. That if you were trans-identified you could compete. Everyone's happy and Ricki's looking there giving them

the stink eye. [Wilchins] Goes. "Well, if you really cared about trans people you'd hire trans people." And the board looked at her, looked at themselves, looked and I—and they went, "Well none have ever applied." So, I get a phone call, "Apply to Gay Games!" So, I did, and they hired me, you know. And I—at GMHC, new policy. And we are in those days staff—150 people. New policy. The board. All the staff. Very democratic. Done with that, done with th—then we're gonna do this, this, this this, this. Mmm no. Raise my hand, stand up, "How does this new policy affect transgender people?" Silence. Directors all look at one another, whisper. [inaudible]. "I don't know Melissa; we'll get back to you." And I learned then, you know, if not me, then who? If not now, then when? And all I did was stand up and represent a point of view of a community. I was not HIV positive. In time, race and class determine all these things. But it was powerful, it—I mean the response I got from that assembly of do-gooders, of people fighting death. The response I got was overwhelming—of support. And now they've got a trans gal who's a director there. Hell, I was an administrative assistant. I was a receptionist, I got promoted to an administrative assistant—that was, that was very cool. I was hoping to be an assistant director someday. They eliminated my job before they—they even tried to mix the budget to find a slot for me. They were told that. I wrote a blistering letter of outrage to the board of directors. I was a bridge burner in those days—anyway, that's how it started. And, you know, I'm clever, you know. And I'm clean and sober now—26 years, you know. I've learned about building esteem. I've learned about the difference between what's my stuff and what's other people's stuff. I build careers, I've reconciled-ish with family. I take risks. You know, I don't burn bridges, I try not to attack others—let people have their way. I mentor young people. You know, this idea can't always be about me. My role is to mentor the next generation and, in my case, even the next generation. And the fact that, I gave up on white people a long time ago because in America, white people do okay. Even white trans people. You know, people of color, always struggle in America. And so, my mentees are a generation of a community of color. And I've given as much as I can, and most will tell you that. You know. Um. And that's a good thing. That's community empowering. And I mean I remember when Laverne Cox was a baby and coming to me and wanting to know about activism, you know. She had a production company with Eric, and we did a thing. What happened is trans was a temporary medical identity that, you embraced it, you changed it and then disappeared. And Ricki Anne, at least in New York, you know—who was first Kate Bornstein or Ricki Anne? I don't know, let them tell you that. Or it was that time. And I thought Ricki Anne was crazy until it made sense for me. Do people think I was born female? I don't know. I don't really care. I've built a path that works for me, and I've made it work, and I've tried to make a difference, you know. Cause I'm interested in policy and politics, you know. I've done things—first trans delegate of the Democratic Convention of New York, I've been part of the last four delegations for the last four conventions. First trans person in America to be in the electoral college, I was president of Stonewall Democrats, I was board co-chair of Empire State Pride Agenda, I've been board co-chair of National Stonewall Democrats. Now I'm here. Trans people, with a trans-run organization, raising money for trans community. Genius, you know. Difficult, but genius. You know, I found a voice and people say a lot of nice things about me. I no longer flinch; I no longer argue. I let them say what they wanna say. I've been involved with the—you know the different—. The political environment is changing. You know, I'm among a small group of people that has taught the democratic party—taught—progressive candidates and elected officials what trans is. I'm not the only one. I'm virtually the only one still involved in public policy. There was a group of us—10, 12 people. Some are gone, some have moved away, some have just stopped,

you know. How many times can you fight and lose, and fight and lose? —Some have gone onto other things. But, I mean, I can—a hundred conversations, a thousand conversations with elected officials. What is trans? Why is trans? Who is affected? Why? How? Where? Is this about me? It's about us. It's about you. Here's why it's about you. I've had relationships with the last four governors—so many elected officials, and I've taught them all. And those that believe in the future embrace it, and those that are open-minded will listen. And haters are gonna hate. Some—we have a state senator whose initials are Andrew Lanza and we try to convince him that trans civil rights in New York State matter. And he goes on this whole—he fights it off like Captain America uses his shield. And it's like, "Andy, it's the law of Staten Island, of your home, where you're raising your children. We're just trying to export it throughout the state. It's not new. It's not different. It's the law of your district." And he still doesn't support. Marty Golden [New York State Senator], same in Brooklyn doesn't support. Ruben Diaz Sr., The Bronx, doesn't support. It's the law of New York City, you know. Haters are gonna hate.

Tennenbaum: How has trans visibility, uh, both in the media and in our communities changed and how does that affect how public policy is maneuvered?

Sklarz: You know, visibility changes everything, you know. It's, you know, Candice King was a revelation in "Dirty Sexy Money", to be a trans woman on a regular TV. You know, Laverne was a revelation to be trans on "Orange Is The New Black", you know. Caitlyn Jenner, you know, before Caitlyn Jenner, 5, 10% of Americans knew a trans person. After Caitlyn Jenner now everyone knows a trans person. The fact that it's Caitlyn Jenner is unfortunate, but now they know what trans is. And, you know what? Caitlyn Jenner thought all of her money would protect her just like I thought my drugs and alcohol would protect me. And it didn't. And she thought it would protect her. If I live in this mountaintop in Malibu surrounded by all my money, then I won't ever have to do this. If I father 10 children, then I won't have to do this. And she was wrong, just like she is with her politics. And she was wrong, in the end, feeling on the inside overwhelmed. You know, I'm not gonna name names, some of the public trans people are silly—dumb. But you know what, we don't have elected officials, we have failed, we have been unable to overcome that. And so now we have models, our community spokespeople, you know. Pretty girls. Look, I—Janet [Janet Mock] has written two books, and Laverne is an amazing icon. But some of the others are like... You know, um, and now it's up to us. There's never been a trans person as a member of state legislature, never a member of Congress. You know, the trans people, they're elected or—these tiny little towns. We have Jess [Jess Herbst], and now this tiny town in Texas. Jackie Ryan in the school board in this tiny town in Massachusetts. So, it's something. It's something. You know, in 2000 there was 1 trans delegate at the Democratic Convention. 2004, there were 6 of us. Then there were 10 of us. Last year there were 25 of us. And from all over, you know, and it's one thing to be a trans person representing a deep red state like Georgia or Utah I mean, you don't have any other democrats. But for me to represent New York, to be one out of millions, you know. New York has 12 New York statists. 18 million probably, 10 million people vote. Probably 7 million are democrats—I'm 1 out of 7 million. And—of 27 electoral votes in the room, and be the only trans person, it's a cool thing. You know, I—what comes first, is media representation or elected officials? You know, were there gay actors that lead to Harvey Milk or the other way around? You know, who's to say? Did—do you know who Paul Lynde is?

Tennenbaum: **No, I don't.**

Sklarz: **You know, Sal Mineo? You know, there were people that were—Liberace, Richard Simmons. I mean, Harvey Milk said, you gotta come out, and you gotta stand up and be proud. Did Harvey Milk create...media icons, or was it the other way around? I don't know. In our culture the media icons come first. Now, media—we've had a social media revolution, you know. There are people all over the country that are famous for having their blog, or their Instagram account, or their Facebook. You know, we all have a presence. We are all journalists, we are all actors, we are all performers. So, it's different. It's just different. I spoke at a corporation last week—250 staffers, video screens in their offices around the world. And I said, you know, to me, the icon, the future, is not certainly Caitlyn Jenner—it's Jazz Jennings. You know, here's Jazz Jennings—transitions at 9, goes on YouTube, becomes older, becomes more polished. Talks about the process, you know. Trans kids are gonna become trans teens, become trans adults. What is the future of trans? Is it gonna be a child malady that people outgrow? Why wait now till you're 50 or 60? Now there's a road map. You don't have to suffer—like Caitlyn Jenner, or me until my 30s. You don't have to. Now there's a process on how it's done. And, you know, so much has changed, you know. I can remember trans life in the 70s—it was brutal! I vaguely remember the 80s—not my best decade. HIV wiped out a generation of girls, you know. You know, the 90s was political awareness, you know. The zeros were the beginning of political's power and strength. And today, social media revolution. We're all politicians, we're all activists, we're all celebrities, we're all stars, you know. Social media does that. Now, we have a thousand gender identities. And what matters and what's important, you know, what matters and important to me and what matters and important to you may be two completely separate things. And you and I, you know, what does 2030 look like to both of us? How old are you?**

Tennenbaum: **I'm 22.**

Sklarz: **S—I. So, what 2030 looks like between you and me.**

Tennenbaum: **What does 2030 look like to you?**

Sklarz: **What is happening now is we're going to see people fixing their gender identity. We're seeing the reduction, dissolution of gender differences—the boundaries between male and female are disappearing. 2030 trans women will have babies. Um. You know, when you reach 12, coming of age, you'll pick your gender. You will be male or female, both, neither, you know. When we invented not only gender identity—which I understood—but gender expression—which I did not—it's like, gender expression is the beginning of the dissolution between male and female—oh Melissa! You're just—I was right! Our enemies said, what you're doing is you're taking away the boundary between male and female. I—I was not one of those warriors. I used to tell the people, "You create the ideas, I'll sell them." What had happened is some of the ideas became very complicated. Some of the nuances of gender identity, mostly gender expression, haunt us today—bathrooms, documentation. Because gender identity is easy, you take a look at me it's like, "Well Melissa, miss thing, you're a girl. You should get a girl passport; you should have a girl driver's license." But if we're gonna**

**make people do away with the boundaries between—Oregon now is a ex-gender identity. But Oregon is very progressive, and some of these other states—Texas is taking away. Bathroom bills is not about going to the bathroom, it's about destroying transgender identity. It's telling them that, "We will not recognize transgender people. We will use the bathroom as a way to smack you down. We're telling you that we don't wanna see you in public. It's not about using bathroom A or B, we don't wanna see you in public." And so, the—you know, the Obama years and the great LGBT victories now we're seeing the terrible, terrible reaction. Are gay people safe? We'll see, but trans people are not. And now there—the backlash against us. We're seeing it in Mississippi, we're seeing it in Texas. We're seeing a terrible, terrible person like Pence [Mike Pence], and then a moron like Trump [Donald Trump]. And dangerous people like Gorsuch [Neil Gorsuch] in the Supreme Court. You know, who speaks to transgender Americans? You tell me. Is it you? Is it me? Is it Laverne? You know. Is it Jazz Jennings? Caitlyn? Is it the person who has the most—the biggest—most followers on Twitter? Are they the voice of the people? Is it an entertainer? It is someone like me who has worked on birth certificates, passports? I mean, I don't know. What does 2030 look like? More freedom. This is a reaction; this is the end of the 20th century having an impact on policy—I hope. Donald Trump is the ultimate 20th century man, cast adrift into the 21st century. He's like in Jurassic Park, the T-Rex that escapes in San Diego 66 million years later and wrecks everything up because he's a creature that has no place in this moment. And that's what Trump is like. And he's that T-Rex breaking everything. You know, my concern about the future that you will write, and I will not, is how does a non-binary future look? How do you legislate it? How do you create laws, rules, guidelines, in a non-binary culture? I have no idea. That's not my battle. My battle was to bring the culture to this point, it's for others to carry from here. You know, I know Jacob Tobia—you know, I get what they are doing. I don't understand how laws protecting them will look. Do they belong—what happens when bathrooms are gendered male and female? So maybe Jacob will lead that battle to eliminate gendered bathrooms, I don't know. Does Jacob use a—does Jacob, in all of their female finery, use a ladies' room? I have no idea. And if they do, what does it look like? I don't know, you know. That is not my battle. I will be supportive. I'm hoping that progress moves forward. That's why it's progress. And that it's like the tide, and Donald Trump can stand there and try to fight it, you know. There are just so many white people left to make these kinds of laws, and we're not done to see what this terrible reaction looks like. Non-binary is not my battle, it's yours. You know, you're gonna find what works. If I was an elected official, I would make bathrooms non-gendered. I guess single-stall bathrooms—single-stall bathrooms are expensive. Multi-stall bathrooms are cheap, so who's gonna pay for non-binary single-stall bathrooms that are much more expensive? Whose tax dollar? We're talking a part of the population—trans is what, three-quarters of 1% of the population? And now we're gonna spend double the money on single-stall bathrooms so that a quarter of three-quarters of 1% feel comfortable because they're non-binary? You'll figure it out. You can write to me in my retirement home in Florida. [laughter].**

Tennenbaum: **[laughter] One of my last questions is—well 1, when was the first time you heard the term transgender? And how has the development of language affected your own relationship and understanding of gender and yourself?**

Sklarz: **Um, I first heard the word transgender in 1990, in Gender Identity Project in the support group. It was a lightning bolt for me, because transsexual was about bottom surgery and I was like, you know, I have so many other questions on top of that. Transvestite, crossdressing is being a guy and dressing up and it's like, that doesn't really seem like real life to me. And transgender was a lightning bolt that worked for me. This idea that the spectrum is much bigger than Harry Benjamin and his 6 stops. It's 600, it's 6,000. And I'm in that spectrum, and I get to be Melissa. I get to be Melissa, where my shape of my genitals is no one's business but my own, and I get to live my female life, and I get to relate to the world as a female, and the world generally relates to me as a female. And this is awesome. You know, if it was going to be a drag queen or Christine Jorgensen, I would have been lost. I would've drank myself to death. The idea that there is a range of options saved my life. I just thought it was genius. Now I know a lot of transsexual people are over it, I know a lot of non-binary people are over it. Transgender itself is too awkward, trans is even better, trans asterisk is stupid. Trans is fine the way it is. You know, what happens is whatever the cultural context—political context is, [clapping] transsexuals always end up at the bottom. Now we have, gender non-conforming. It's like so, now, non-binary people. So here again, here's our transsexual revolution with, again, transsexual people pushed to the back, by others. You know, transgender people then trans people, now it's gender non-conforming. Now it's non-binary and, da-da-da-da-da and transsexual. Um you know the fight continues. Language, language matters. The—our president ran on the idea of politically correct. And old people, you'll see a lot of older, white icons complain about political correctness. And it's really important to allow new ideas to breathe. And some are really important, and others are not. But we're only gonna figure it out if we try. And so, calling someone 'them' and 'they', will it last tests of time? I don't know. Ze, and all that—Zer, you know, five years ago that made sense. That doesn't seem to be working. But it—I'm not afraid of trying new ideas, and that includes language. Transsexual, transvestite, y—look, I remember when all we had were homosexuals. And you really wanna call yourself something that is controlled by doctors or do we get to seize our own identity? I wanna seize our own identity. You know, don't put me in the transsexual-transvestite box. I'm trans, I create my own identity. Language helps people create their own identity. And by creating their own identity, people become empowered, and they become stable. I mean, people want life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And if new language—which our enemies call politically correct—help make people's lives meaningful and more stable, it's a beautiful thing. You know, who's to fool? Who says they know everything? The problem with Donald Trump is he's too dumb to not know what he doesn't know. I recognize there's a lot I don't know. And my friends in politics know they don't know everything. There are friends I've had for years and they still make dumb mistakes. I have the luxury, I have the privilege, to allow them to continue to make mistakes. I'll remind them when they make them, but I won't hate them for it. I have privilege, I can afford that luxury. You know, I'm not in favor of all new ideas, but I'll listen to all of them. And some make perfect sense, just like transgender did—like a lightning bolt to me. And just like there are people out here that hear GNC—that's me, I'm gender non-conforming. What does that mean? I don't know, I guess we'll have to wait till 2025 and figure out. Is it a permanent identity? I don't think so. But I may be wrong, been wrong before.**

Tennenbaum: **Are there any current political or social movements that you felt especially inspired or excited about?**

Sklarz: **[sighs] My darling, 2016's election was a stake to my heart. You know, I helped Hillary Clinton in 2001 when she ran in New York. I helped her in 2008 when she ran for president. And I was all in for 2016. And to see a right-winged demon version grow roots and become the narrative of the day by a generation that only know the demon version of her, is the biggest political tragedy of my time. Do—what happens next? I don't know. I thought Hillary was gonna win and we would see the death of Reaganism—of this idea that cut away at taxation creating a social net for everyone and force the more prosperous to pay their fair share. And now instead, we have this Frankenstein monster who's more aggressively anti. Um, I look forward to the first trans person being elected to a state legislature—I think that would be a revolution. I think this idea of special rights—well all those things they used to say about the black people and the civil rights, it took black people 100 years from the emancipation to the Civil Rights Act of '64. It took women 70 years to get the right to vote, 70 years. It took gay and lesbian people from Stonewall to marriage, you know, what are we talking, 30, 35 years? I think having a trans person in the state legislature—is Harvey Milk the first gay elected official? No, but he changed the conversation, and is the spiritual father of generat—a thousand gay elected officials that have come in his aftermath. So, for me as a mainstream political person, you know, we have people running now—I wish them well. We know why more here in New York City; I wish him well. I gave money to Krissy Browde [Kristen Browde], who's running for town supervisor in New Castle in Westchester—we had an event for her. I'm still not convinced, I had—my turn came years ago and I, I was afraid of my job, and I said I'll do it next time without realizing, guess what? There may not be a next time. And I'm talking, 2003. And there was an opportunity, and I didn't, and, you know. Shoulda, coulda, woulda, kinda, sorta. "Well, I won't do it this time, I'll do it next time." The fact is, you know, now there's the same thing again next year—the state assembly where I live in Queens. But I gotta have the fire in my belly, it's gotta be the only thing that matters in my life. So, for me, as a mainstream political person, you know, that's really important. I would love to see someone elected to a state legislature in America, you know, that's the real deal. You know, all over the world when gay people get elected to political office, the conversation changes—when lawmakers meet gays and lesbians. Whether it's New York, whether it's Mississippi, the conversation's changed. They're no longer the creepy others, you know. They're our neighbors, they're our friends, they're our family. So, I'm excited about that. As far as the new generation and non-binary—not my battle. Go get 'em, I'm right behind you. [cheering] Yay! But...**

Tennenbaum: **How have you been coping with the 2016 election?**

Sklarz: **Badly. Badly. This year in New York City is a municipal election, we've got a hundred people, 100 liberal democrats running for 7 or 8 slots—half of them have come to me asking for this, that, and the other thing. You know, no one was better prepared to be our—the leader of the free world than Hillary. And, to win a majority of the vote and lose to this person—the only thing we know for sure is he was on TV, and everything else about him is a myth. Without a record, we don't know a thing. Some have implied he's a Russian agent. We don't know. He won't tell us. He mocks us for even asking. Um—You know Bernie Sanders reached a point where they told him, you know, you could actually win. He says "wow". And they said, but here's what you've gotta do, you've gotta sell demon Hillary. And he said, "well**

that's ridiculous, we've been friends for years". And they said, "if you wanna win, you have to sell demon Hillary". And he said, "okay". And so, he sold demon Hillary to a new generation of young people. And if they loved Bernie, they bought demon Hillary. And when came time when he did not win, and it came time to vote, enough stayed home where she lost 77 thousand votes—the difference between Hillary and Donald Trump. Split between Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. And what happens now? God only knows. I have not recovered from 2016. I don't read the papers; I don't watch the news. I read the papers when the Mets [New York Mets] win, which is not a lot these days. You know, I'll be supporting Mayor de Blasio [Bill de Blasio] for election—this is 2017. I'll probably support Governor Cuomo [Andrew Cuomo] for re-election in 2018. He's been very good to me; he's been very good to us—our transgender community. He has a weird way of doing politics. I have no control over that. He's done everything that I've asked him to do, with the exception of demanding the state legislation support transgender civil rights. He said, "No Melissa, I'm not gonna use my political capital for three-quarters of 1% of the population. Here's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna challenge the haters to fight me in court." And no one did. And now transgender people have civil rights in New York State. Because the governor said, "This definition of sex includes transgender people. Who of you wants to fight me in court?" And no one did. You got 90 days to do it. And now it's the law of New York State. And if anyone wants to reverse it, they will have to go to court and fight it in court—they can't just erase it, it's not an executive order. And so, I'm grateful to Governor Cuomo. The least I can do is support him and his political endeavors, as he did his measure to help us. And that said, this year I was supposed to do petitions in my neighborhood—I did not, you know, even if I'm on it. Now I'm a judicial delegate every year in Queens, you know, but it's not 1999 anymore.

Tennenbaum: Is there anything else you'd like to be remembered—you'd like to share?

Sklarz: I would like the fact that—like Elizabeth Warren—that I persevered, that I hung in there. You know, I did politics with Sylvia Rivera—Sylvia was right out of the 60s and 70s. I just would roll my eyes and shook my head. But I worked with her in, you know, the 90s—certainly not in the 70s, I was nowhere around. And she liked me because I was a different kind of girl from the girls that she knew—the chaotic girls, the girls always in trouble trying to escape drugs and violence. She lived on the piers for years. So, I hung in there. I hung in there, I made friends, I communicated ideas, and won people to our point of view. Transgender peoples' lives are better because of the work that I've helped do—not alone, but I persevered. And now I help others.

Tennenbaum: Thank you. I'm remembering now, I made a flag, to ask you more questions about homelessness in New York City—where you were, what resources were available to you, and what wasn't. Are you game to talk about that?

Sklarz: Sure. Homelessness, um, when I moved to the 14th Street, this is after the Christmas tree pier of the 80s, and before the Gansevoort special district—the meatpacking district, when it was still the meat market. And that whole area was filled with homeless people living on the piers, including Sylvia Rivera. You know, the 90s were horrible to New York. You know, crack ate everything. The real religion of New York City is money. It was in 1630, when they invented New York—it is today. You know, I do what I can to help LGBT homeless youths find

**housing. The fact is everyone needs housing. The fact is gentrification eats people's lives. The fact is, that—to watch white people push families of color out of neighborhoods they've been in for a 100 years, is tragic. When I see a generation of African American—older African American men, men my age—why did I get access to college and they didn't? Is because the GI Bill was for white people. And so, the foundation of wealth for my family was the house my father was able to buy because he was a veteran. And bring stability and put down roots for my family that black men didn't get. And so now I see black men in their 50s and 60s living on the street, without having the resources that I had access to. The more housing, they build, you better be earning $100,000 a year because none of the new housing is for you. What happens—we've already eliminated housing for the poor, we're eliminating housing for the working class, we're eliminating housing for the middle class. The religion of New York is money, and LGBT, well, race and class determines everything in New York. Wh—I remember when GMHC was all white patients. Now it's not anymore, it's all people of color. Race creates poverty, race creates imbalance, race creates injustice. No cop ever fired at me while I was behind the wheel of a car—for being me. You know, homelessness is just about race. Poverty is about race. My speaking opportunities today—how can I speak about gender identity? I own a home; I have a career. You know, racism affects everything, and people of color have to work so much harder, and still get so much less. You know, I remember when Harlem was dangerous, and now I can't afford to live there. My grandfather was born in Harlem, in 1895, when it was a Jewish suburb. And after World War I, black men came back from France and didn't want to go back to children of sharecroppers and go back to the South and work for slave wages And so they came to New York and stayed, and they were ghettoized in Bed-Stuy [Bedford-Stuyvesant] and Harlem. I want to fight racism. I think that everyone wants a home in New York, and they blame the mayor and it's—we have buildings, luxury buildings, that are empty because they are used to hide money from overseas investors. And, you know, they're not building housing for people anymore, they're building housing for money—for people to store their money. You know, the—injustice creates revolution. And they're building these new luxury buildings for people to hide their money. People lose in that situation. I'm a mainstream democrat, and I'm talking about the coming revolution, you know—just think of what the young and the angry feel. The idea that the revolution is coming, and it would be a right-wing, racist, nationalist revolution is something that I didn't see happening. We assumed it would be a left-wing revolution, and now it's a right-wing. Where white people have so little and instead of blaming the wealthy, they blame the poor. Mind-boggling. I have a friend, works in New York City, a close friend who's in charge of ending homelessness for Mayor de Blasio. The solutions are draconian, you know. You want to live next door to a homeless shelter? What if you own a home and there's a homeless shelter? Who's in the homeless shelter? Men, who have been poor for 20 years and recovering from alcoholism and drug addiction. Families, where the struggle to eat will force people to do terrible things. Good people in bad situations. Who wants to live next to a homeless shelter? [clicks tongue] The answer is, we're all gonna have to do it. If we care about fighting racism and poverty, and homelessness, all of us have to be willing to live next to a homeless shelter.**

Tennenbaum: **Do you feel like a statement like that has a place in the mainstream democrat party today?**

Sklarz: **Politics is hard in America because people that want to change the world for the better are forced to go to their neighbors every two years and beg for their job back. Um. What they used to—in the 60s and 70s they used to talk about helping the poor and Chuck Schumer was the first of the generation that changed that conversation—helping the middle class. Because you can't win elections and be white if you talk about helping the being poor because that comes out as giving everything to the blacks, and that doesn't work in our racist culture. So, Chuck Schumer says, helping the middle class—. So now the democratic party talks about helping the middle class, which the right sees as code for taking money from the whites and giving free money to the blacks—our money to the blacks. And that's how you get a Donald Trump to be elected president. You know, you take a look at the democratic party, there's a great, great generation of progressives, of liberals, of radicals. You know, and that's why—well. Governor Cuomo would rather deal with the republicans, he's afraid of the democrats. The demographics of America are changing. People are desperate. Jobs used to pay wages—my father was a high school teacher who owned a 3-bedroom house in the suburbs, and my mom stayed at home and raised us. That was eliminated. Started by Ronald Reagan and now, two working parents could no longer afford a house like this. And so fewer and fewer people are paying more and more taxes. What they've done is they've taken wages out of work, they've eliminated unions. The new generation is coming of age, you know, they like Bernie because Bernie is talking about these ideas. You know, Hillary knows how to create public policy. Bernie doesn't care about public policy, no one's ever asked him what he thought. He's always been the cooky old guy in the back. Um. The beauty of Hillary is that she was able to take what Bernie was talking about and turn it into public policy—unlike Bernie. He was never creating public policy. Maybe when he was mayor of Burlington in the 70s. The new generation is gonna find a way. The enemies of progress have a—have no respect for law, they have no respect for urban culture, they have no respect for immigrants, they have no respect for LGBT, and they own a lot of guns. So, I don't know. That 2030 that's coming for both of us, you know. I would like to see the democrats take back the Congress in 2018 and impeach him. And spend the next 2 years having him Tweet all he wants as he's being investigated by Congress every day. Works for me. Um, I believe in a democratic party. My father believed in a democratic party, I learned it from him. You know, public policy and progress goes to the democratic party. It has since the 1930s. LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] gambled everything, knowing full well that this would be the end of southern support for the democratic party. So, there's that. My interest in politics transcends my transgender identity. I'm a white person that cares. That's my quarry.**

Tennenbaum: **Any final words?**

Sklarz: **No. We've been here for two and a half hours. You know, I've, I—the 1970s were an amazing time. It was the emergence of a trans culture, it—granted it was all people of color, all undereducated, all based on nightlife, and of escorts, but it was magical. It was there, it was—people came from all over the world to be trans and beautiful in New York City. Um, it opened up a can of possibilities. So, few of those girls are left. My icon as a kid was not Sylvia Rivera—when I was in my twenties, you know, my icon were these beautiful, beautiful amazing women. Whether it was Tiny Show Business, or Ava Hollywood or Miss Sugar. This whole, whole generation of beautiful, beautiful trans women. Now, Tracey Africa [Tracey "Africa" Norman] is back in the news. She was a fashion model until she was outed as trans**

**and was fired. Tracey Norman now, but she, back in those days, she was Tracey Africa. So many of 'em have come and gone, you know. But they've showed me the way, and they were wonderful, wonderful women. Um, and, you know, when I think of trans in the 70s I know that they've turned Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera into legendary icons. But I knew legendary icons, and it was these girls in the bar from the Gilded Grape, and the Grapevine, and from the Barnum Room. And they were the beginning of trans life for me and I hope that their contributions will be remembered and not forgotten.**

Tennenbaum: **I want to ask you, um—is there one party from the Gilded Grape that you remember distinctly?**

Sklarz: **My friend—Ros Blumenstein [Rosalyne Blumenstein] who is now a therapist in California—was Ro. I met her as a teenager. She was one of the disco bats at the Gilded Grape—at the Barnum Room. She's written a book; I will get you access to that book. You could read Ros' book and reach out to her. Her drug ad—she—. I drank so I forget a gener—I forget a decade. She used other drugs, she remembered way better than I did. Ros Blumenstein wrote this book, and you should read it, and I will get you—I have a copy at home, I will reach out to you. And it talks about nightlife—trans nightlife in New York in the 70s and 80s as someone who transitioned at the age of 21 in probably the late 1970s.**

Tennenbaum: **Thank you.**

Sklarz: **Sure.**

Tennenbaum: **Thank you so much for your time, and for your story.**

Sklarz: **Sure.**