

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

CARLA ROLDOS

Interviewer: Anna Keyes

Date of Interview: April 18, 2018

Location of Interview: Carla's apartment in Chelsea

Transcribed by Noreen Lai (

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #086

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Anna Keyes: Hello, my name is Anna Keyes, and I'll be having a conversation with Carla Roldos 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 April 18, 2018, and this is being recorded at Carla's apartment in Chelsea. Is this Chelsea?

Carla Roldos: [coughs] It is. [clears throat]

Keyes: Okay. So, um, can you tell me your name and age?

Roldos: Yeah. My name is Carla, and I am 60 years old.

Keyes: Can you tell me your gender pronouns?

Roldos: Her/she.

Keyes: And, um, how would you describe your gender?

Roldos: Female.

Keyes: When and where were you born?

Roldos: I was born in 1957 in Puerto Rico.

Keyes: In Puerto Rico?

Roldos: Yes.

Keyes: And can you tell me the earliest encounter you had with the trans community?

Roldos: Uh, [clears throat] it was in 1971.

Keyes: Tell me about it.

Roldos: Well, [clears throat] living in Chelsea and growing up here, I remember the kids from the block and I, we would go walk down towards—we had to walk down towards Greenwich Village. There was a swimming pool on Leroy Street. It's still there. And walking back and forth, I realized, um, then what Greenwich Village was all about, and I started seeing people that, you know, I could identify with. Um, but it wasn't till I started going to the Village on my own that I met people, and then that's how I got to meet, you know—I met my first gay friend. He was a male, Spanish. And he was hanging out with a white cis woman, and—Cindy and Philip. I still remember their names. And that was, wow, in 1971. And they introduced me to Christopher Street, which was at that time like a boulevard where there were many gay bars at the time.

This was two years after Stonewall. And then I met many of the iconic people from that era, like Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson—I knew them personally. And there was another person named Balle—uh, Rollerena, who was a very famous person. She'd walk around ri—she'd roller-skate up and down Christopher Street in a wedding gown, actually.

Keyes: [laughs]

Roldos: Yeah. It's true.

Keyes: Oh, wow.

Roldos: Yeah.

Keyes: Rollerena?

Roldos: Rollerena was her name, yeah.

Keyes: Wow.

Roldos: Um, and she wore a wedding gown, and she had a wand with a star on it like a fairy, and a mask, and she would just roll up and down Christopher Street. And everyone knew her. People would stop and talk to her. And then I don't know what happened to her, but then another Rollerena took over when the original Rollerena wasn't around anymore. I never knew what happened, why that hap—you know, why the first one wasn't around anymore. [clears throat] Excuse me. So, um, yeah, it was a different time. It was... Oh, I don't know how much of it was because I was 14 years old at the time, and everything was like so—I was so starstruck and starry-eyed. And at the same time, it was a different era. There was always somewhere to go and places to break night, and there was always a friend's house you could stay over the night after the bars closed and stay up till the wee hours of the morning and all that stuff. So I was introduced to this man who had access to female hormone injections.

Keyes: And when was this?

Roldos: This was back in 1973 that I met him.

Keyes: Uh-huh.

Roldos: Yeah. Um, his name was Jimmy Two-Top, but that's not his real name anyhow. But a lot of the girls would go to him, and if you had the money to pay for an injection, you paid for it; if not, you could barter for sex. So that's how I became—[clears throat] how I was introduced to hormones. So I started at a very early age, and I didn't ask anyone's permission. I just did it on my own. And I'm glad I did it at that age, because, you know, I stopped the process during adolescence. I didn't grow a beard, I didn't, you know—I would—all those things. So that worked out a lot in my favor. And so then I got to—introduced to—there was a bar in Midtown

called the Gilded Grape, which was a bar for trans women and the men who liked trans women. Some gay men hung out there. And I met, not my first boyfriend, my second boyfriend. And the reason I say it is because I miss him a lot. I still think about him, and we weren't together that long, but I—

Keyes: What was his name?

Roldos: His—[whispering] I don't know if I can say his name.

Keyes: Oh, oh. Never mind.

Roldos: Okay. Um...

Keyes: I'm sorry.

Roldos: That's okay. His name started with M, um, and he was very sweet. But I was so young and foolish at the time, and I was seeing another guy before M, and he was a real jerk, and I don't know why, then—I guess it was my low self-esteem at the time. I went—I stayed with the first one and left M, and I regret it till this day. And then I stayed with the first one for four years, and that turned out to be a very raw and violent relationship. And if it wasn't that he had gone to jail, I don't know, I couldn't tell you even if I would be alive today, because I went through a lot of horrible things with him. Anyhow, yeah, so then I brought—I'm bringing it back up to the '80s now during the disco era. We went from the first bar, the Gilded Grape, to another one owned by the second people, which was called GG's Barnum Room. And it was cool. I worked there as a waitress, and they had two sections. There was one section was just where they did drag shows, and the other section was this huge room. It was the lobby of the old Peppermint Lounge, or the hotel or something like that, and they had trapezes up there. There was a net, and some of the people that worked there doing trapeze acts. Not flying and catching like you see in the circus, but like single trapeze. And so I did it for a week because one of the girls was away on vacation, and so I took a couple of practice classes from one of the girls, and I did it for a week. It was a lot of fun. But then I went back to waitressing. However, at that time I started going to beauty school, and I couldn't do the night job and then get up in the morning to go to beauty school, so I had to leave the bar, the job, and I continued and graduated from beauty school. I got my hairdresser's license in '79 and worked for several years, yeah, in the Village, cutting hair. And I have to go back to 1972. I met a trans woman. Her name was Jackie, and she was an incredible woman. She was like a mentor and a mother to me. When I met her, I was 15 and she was 30. She used to work, back in the '60s in Baltimore, as a stripper, and people did not know. And she was telling me her stories and she showed me her pictures—how very dangerous it was for her, because the mob owned those places, the stripping clubs in Baltimore, and had they found out, she was telling me, they probably would have found her in pieces, you know.

Keyes: Oh my God.

Roldos: So... She said there was one incident once where her G-string broke, and she was able to get away with what she got away with. Um, you know, she very—she quick—she very quickly thought about it. But she knew of so many things. Like she was a really intelligent person, and she was also, like, ahead of her time. She was just so real-looking, and her voice was incredibly feminine. She used to sing—even before she transitioned, she used to sing on a cruise ship, as a male. And then when she went and became—she transitioned at the age of 17 and moved to New York; then she started working as a female. And—from Baltimore, then to New York, and then she got different jobs afterwards, after she stopped stripping, because then peep shows came around and then people weren't having like—you didn't see that many striptease places and all that anymore, you know, legit striptease. It was all now peep shows and porno places and all that. So she worked, Jackie—she worked doing coat check in bars, and she also worked doing the accounting books for her landlord. And then she refused to be—you know, become involved in the sex-work industry, so she moved to Florida because she couldn't afford—she had to give up her apartment, a beautiful garden apartment on Christopher Street. And she moved to Florida, and I hadn't seen her for many years. Then we reunited. She came back to New York in '83, and she stayed with us and my family for a year. And then she had to move out, got a studio here in Chelsea, and after six months she had to wind up going back to Miami. And the last I heard—you know, we wrote a couple of times, and then I didn't hear from Jackie anymore, and then I found out years later on that she passed away from the virus.

Keyes: Oh.

Roldos: Yeah. I still have many pictures of her. [phone ringing] Oh, God. [inaudible] Uh...

Keyes: What did—what did that relationship mean to you?

Roldos: It mean—it meant so much to me. It still does. I often think of her. Um, what a very special person she was. Um, it was—it's hard to describe, jeez. It's almost like I looked up to her so much, and the things that she did, the things she spoke about, how she [clears throat] didn't—you know, didn't feel the need to have all this silicone and she just took hormones, and she didn't paint her face every day—she was so natural, you know. And because I was young at that time too, I didn't need any of that stuff. So I dressed like her. I emulated her somewhat; that's how much I liked her, yeah. I even found myself talking like her. My mannerisms became like hers, you know. Yeah. Even till this day, sometimes when I speak, I can hear myself speaking as if, you know, Jackie were here.

Keyes: Uh-huh.

Roldos: Yeah. It was—I miss her. I miss her.

Keyes: So, what do you think about, in that sense, like, the mother figures and the family roles that we find outside of our families of origin as, like, trans people?

Roldos: As trans people, well—you know, in our culture—let me put it this way—um, we have what is known as “gay mothers.” Um, and a lot of trans women, when they start out, they become close to a woman who’s already transitioned and kind of like mentors them. Or some people’s definition of a gay mother can be the person who—the other trans woman who gives you your first hormone injection. But usually it’s known as someone that you look up to, you admire, and has helped you out in your transition, or even if you’ve already transitioned and—yeah. So...

Keyes: Have you been able to be someone’s gay mother?

Roldos: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. Yeah. Um, her name was Eddie when I met her. Um, and I immediately took a little liking to her, and—yeah. I plucked her eyebrows for the first time. I gave her hormone shot. And she would borrow my clothes. She was a young runaway. And then she became Athena. And we were friends for many, many years, and she passed away two years ago, unfortunately. And I was with her during those days, when she got admitted into the emergency room. And she didn’t know the levity—or the gravity of how bad she was off, as far as her disease, how much it’d progressed, but—yeah, I was with her till the end. She passed away at home. She had signed out of the hospital. I had called her to say, “I’m coming to visit you,” but she told me, “I’m home. I signed out against medical orders.” And then I found out within the week that she had died. She was taking a shower and she died in the bathroom. They found—her family found her. Yeah. Um—yeah. And then a couple of months later, another best friend—her name was Carla, as well. We were friends for 35 years. During that same time, like two or three months apart, Carla also died. So I lost two great people, very significant people in my life, several months apart. And it tore me up, because I knew them both for more than 30 years. Yeah.

Keyes: And this is maybe a question that no one can answer, but like, what—how do you cope with that, like those deaths and that passing?

Roldos: Oh. With those two people, um, there were several times I found myself drinking. Um, not till I fell out, not that bad, but yeah. And then I sought counseling with a professional and shared my feelings with other trans women, mutual trans women who knew both of them and I. Yeah.

Keyes: Where would you go for counseling?

Roldos: I go to a place called—um, it’s in, uh, Mount Sinai Hospital.

Keyes: Mm-hmm. Do you still go there?

Roldos: I still do go there.

Keyes: Okay, sure. All right. Um, let me just—I just want to fix your [inaudible].

Roldos: Yeah.

Keyes: Could you, um...

Roldos: Just talk?

Keyes: Yeah.

Roldos: Yeah, so, um—

Keyes: Sounds good. Okay.

Roldos: Okay.

Keyes: So I was asking, do you still go to Mount Sinai for service—for counseling?

Roldos: I do. Um, it's, uh, an outpatient rehab. I'm in recovery for alcohol and drugs. And I first went into recovery, into Narcotics Anonymous, the twelve-step meetings—um, I don't know if I'm supposed to say that, because it's supposed to be anonymous.

Keyes: Oh. Do you wa—we can stop.

Roldos: Yeah.

Keyes: Yeah, okay.

Roldos: Anyhow, so, um, yeah, I sought help at the LGBT Center, and then, um, I got straightened out, and I applied for nursing school. Got my nurse's license. And during nursing school, I was volunteering at a volunteer—it was an all-volunteer clinic they had at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center on 13th Street. And while I was in school, I would volunteer there once a week, and I got a lot of experience. And then they got enough funding to move here, into Chelsea, on 18th Street, and it's a clinic now called Callen-Lorde. I was the first nurse they hired. I was also the first trans woman they hired. And I worked with them for two years, and then I went and sought employment at Housing Works. I was a nurse there, here in Chelsea, when Housing Works was located on 13th Street—West 13th Street. I worked there; I did drug counseling, I did nursing, I did case management for the clients at Housing Works. And then I went back to Callen-Lorde for another two years. Yeah, and then I got sick. I had to have a liver transplant. And it's been 10 years now that I've had a liver transplant. And in order for me to get the transplant, my doctor had to re—you know, I had to retire from work. So I couldn't work anymore around sick people, as a nurse.

Keyes: I see.

Roldos: So, yeah. Um, now I can get my license back if I want to, because there's so many disciplines of nursing now. You don't always have to work around sick people. Um, but I want my license back only because I want to have it even if I don't seek employment. It's something I worked hard for, and I love being a nurse. I became a nurse because when I was 13 years old, I was locked up in a psych ward. My family didn't know how to deal with me because I was coming out as trans at that age, and so I was put in a psych ward, and—

Keyes: Where was that?

Roldos: That was at St. Vincent's Hospital when it was located in the Village. It's no longer around. I stayed there for a month, and I met this fabulous nurse, and she was so nice. She would even take me out to—for ice cream or something even though I was inpatient. But she took me out a couple of times and let me know that there was really nothing wrong with me, that I was okay; it was just society who had a problem with me, you know. So she stuck out in my mind so much, and I always remember her. I can see her face right now as I'm talking to you. And I met Irene in 1972, and it was because of her that I became a nurse. I liked being a nurse, yeah. I still like it. During the '80s—it was back in '86—the peep shows used to have trans women working with cis women in the peep shows, and it caused some trouble and some rift. This company owned like five peep shows around the Midtown area. So they terminated all the trans women. And then about a year later, I get a call, because I had also been doing part-time manager. I would work in the peep shows and I did part-time management where the cis women and the trans women worked. And then—so then I stopped working, as well, and then they called me up a year later and asked me if I was interested in being the manager of one of the—just for one of the stores with just all trans women. So I said of course. And this was a place that was kind of out of the way, and they were dying. Like, there were no customers there because—I don't know what it was. So I got together with my girlfriend Carla, the one who passed away, and her and I started together—we started calling all the girls we knew, and little by little and word of mouth came, and we had more girls than we needed. We had 15 girls working per shift, and there was two shifts a day. Carla and I would rotate as far as shifts. One week I'd do days, the following week she'd do days; and then when I did days, she did nights, and vice versa. And at that—

Keyes: Where was this?

Roldos: On 42nd Street between 8th and 7th, closer to 8th. And at that time, there was a bar called Sally's around the corner, so after we'd get out of work, we'd go and hang out at Sally's.

Keyes: Do you remember—did the name—did that peep show place have a name or...

Roldos: Yes, it did. Um, it was Show Center.

Keyes: Show Center.

Roldos: Yeah, and I was the main manager, and Carla was my assistant manager. And we needed another manager for the weekends, as well, so we had three—there were three of us, all trans women. And for a place that was going—to only making \$150 a day, we were making \$1500 a shift.

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: Because you gotta remember, you know, how many millions of men are there in New York, and let's say you only had maybe 3000 of them were into trans women? Well, it worked out fine, and they never regretted it, that's for sure. Yeah.

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: Um, then, um—

Keyes: So you had a monopoly on them. Yeah.

Roldos: Right. Right, exactly. So, um, I had asked them, because now I was working on the books, and if they would give me insurance, um, so that I could save up the money for my SRS, and they said, "We'll let you know in six months, after working there for six months." And when I went to see them in six months, they said that they couldn't give me health insurance. So I just saved up the money on my own. This is how I was able to get my SRS. I met one of the girls who came to visit, and we became friends, and she had just been post-op a month only. And she introduced me to her doctor in Brooklyn, who was doing it very cheaply, and Medicaid paid for the other half. And so I was able to get it for \$3800—3000 for him for the surgery, \$500 for the anesthesiologist, and \$300 for a one-time visit with the psychiatrist so that he would have—the surgeon would have, you know, in case he needed. But I had already been transitioned since I was 14. I was 28 now when I had gotten my SRS.

Keyes: Mm. And during those 14 years, you mentioned how you first kind of were able to get, um—get HRT. How did you get it over the course of that time, and after that, too?

Roldos: How was I able to get them, you mean? Or—

Keyes: Get estrogen. Get—like get ahold of estrogen.

Roldos: Um, well, there were people—like I said, there was that man who—there was that one man who was selling them. Then there were several doctors you could go to. There was that one time in the '70s, um, I was in what they called a "therapeutic community" here in Chelsea. It was called Compass House. It was a small therapeutic community. And they hooked us up with a clinic at Lutheran Hospital in Brooklyn, and they would take us every two weeks, and we got injections. And I was a minor then, but I was, like, an emancipated minor because I was living there—I was 17—and so I didn't need my parents' permission.

Keyes: Can you tell me more about Compass House?

Roldos: Compass House was—back in the '70s, they started these places called, um, “therapeutic communities,” like Project Return and Samaritan House and all these little—some of them are still around. And Compass House was unique in that, at that time, it was for gay/LGBT people—not exclusively, because there were cis people, heterosexual people, there was—you know, as well. Um, but you were a trans woman, you had to—you were—there were three small buildings. One building was male, in the middle the building was mostly administration, and then the other fe—the other building was all female. And in the female building, if you were a trans woman, you lived there, and then you were mixed in with cis women, as well.

Keyes: So they didn't make you go on the men's side.

Roldos: No. No, no, they didn't. And they hooked us up at Lutheran Hospital to get our female hormones, and the counselors—there were a lot of the counselors who were lesbian women, gay men that worked there. It was the only clinic of its kind. And they stayed there for I think no more than 10 years. I was there from '72 to '75. Yeah. Um—

Keyes: Do you remember any of the relationships you had with other people that were there?

Roldos: Oh, yes. I have friend—I still have pictures. I had friends.

Keyes: Yeah?

Roldos: Um, in fact, there's one friend that I still keep in touch with today. Uh, it was so weird how we got in touch with each other, but we somehow got connected, and we talk on Facebook, her and I.

Keyes: Do you have any memories of that time that you'd like to share?

Roldos: Sure. Um, there were, um—I remember that there were—a lot of the lesbian women would flirt with us, some of us, some of them—

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: Yeah. There was one who was very aggressive, uh, and we dated for a while. We never did anything. Um, you know, it was totally platonic. But we made out. And she looked like a little Puerto Rican boy to me, you know? And she would buy me things like, um, lipsticks and things like that. She didn't live there; she wasn't an inpatient, but she came every day to, uh—because we had groups there, and it was a really nice place. And there were a lot of minors there and, you know, some adults, but... It was a great place. And I wasn't the only one who had a kind of relationship like that. It was—It was sweet and fun, because we were teenagers, you know?

Keyes: Yeah. So, um, you know, you mentioned some other relationships with trans women you've had over time, and I'd like to also just hear any specific memories. Like when I was talking to, um, Sonia [Martinez], she mentioned when you had at one point gone out in a park and painted makeup onto, like, a frog or something? I don't know. [laughter]

Roldos: Yeah. Uh, we had—we had been out partying, um, and we wound up—after the bar closed, a bunch of us went to a park, one of the New York City public parks, and they had like these cement fountains of different animals. There was a turtle, and there was one, like, a seal. And Sonia was so drunk that she said, "Let me borrow your lipstick," so—I found it weird. Like, she had lipstick on. So she took my lipstick and she started drawing lips on the seal, which was really a water fountain but it was a seal.

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: And till this day, she owes me a lipstick, the bitch. [laughter]

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: Um, but yeah, we had a lot of fun, her and I, but, um... I have a lot of fond memories of things—we did a lot of crazy things. Another time, it was my birthday, and we had stayed out. We went to an after-hours, and then it just was in the Bronx, and we were going to her house to sleep the night off. It was already like 6:00 in the morning. And as we're walking from this bar to Sonia's house in the Bronx, I hear a rooster. And I said to myself, "Am I that drunk?" I said to my girlfriend Sonia—she goes by the name Chicky, by the way, and I go by the name—I went by the name China for many, many years. My old friends still call me China. I went by that name since—from 1971 till a couple of years ago. Some people still call me China, even members of my family. But legally, my name is Carla. And she—so I said to her, I said, "Chicky, I hear a rooster. Are we that drunk?" She started laughing and she couldn't stop laughing, and it took me a while to get her to tell me that in the Bronx there were some people, Puerto Ricans, who had like little small private houses and they had roosters and chickens. I'm like, "Oh my God!"

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: So it was just so strange to be, you know, in New York City, but I guess it's not strange in that area, in that part of town, in the Bronx.

Keyes: Um, my girlfriend's from Forest Hills, Queens, and there's somebody on her—near her block that has chickens.

Roldos: Yeah.

Keyes: Yeah.

Roldos: Yeah, yeah. I met a bartender many years ago. He was so, so fabulous. His name was Buddha. And Buddhy used to own, um, a peacock.

Keyes: [chuckles] Wow.

Roldos: And eventually, he had to get rid of the peacock—in Queens—because peacocks make a lot of noise.

Keyes: Oh, I didn't even know.

Roldos: Oh, yeah. They make this horrible noise. Because I've seen them, you know. I went to a circus one time in Puerto Rico, and there was a man who had a whole bunch of them. He had—he had them trained. And they make this horrible sound. They were beautiful, though, because they were all white. And he had these beautiful, like, diamond rhinestone collars on them. Oh, they were exquisite animals. Yeah.

Keyes: Tell me more about, um, your memories of Puerto Rico, maybe you either—what—since you—when—around the time you were born, in your earlier years there, or maybe more so when you visited back.

Roldos: Well, when I came from Puerto Ri—when my family moved here from Puerto Rico, I was 3 years old at the time. I do remember two incidents before we moved to New York, um, so I don't know if I was 2 years old, 3 years old. Uh, the only reason I remember them was because they were painful. One was, I remember a bee stinging me. I was trying to grab an egg from a hen or something like that, and I remember being stung by a bee. And then another time, my brothers—I had two older brothers—they were teasing my great-grandmother. And she got mad at them, and she had a mango pit in her hand, and because she was very old then, she went and she threw the mango pit at one of the other two guys. Because I was the smallest, I was just sitting there and playing, I'm sure, with dirt and rocks, minding my own business.

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: Um, and I got hit with that mango pit. I remember that to this day. And I didn't bring that up years later on, and my grandmother was able to verify it. She said, "My God, how can you remember that? You were only 3 when that happened."

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: It was her mother who did it, and she remembers the incident, as well. So, um, I attribute that to—I have a great memory. Um, to this day, I can tell you conversations I've had with people, what they wore on that day... Uh, my gay mother, Jackie, I can tell you the first thing she ever said to me when she came up and introduced herself to me. I was sitting in a restaurant called Mama's Place on 7th Avenue South. Uh, that was a restaurant where people went after all the gay bars closed, like at 4:00, and it was a diner, and everyone went there.

There was also another diner called the Silver Dollar Restaurant. It was another place where people went and hung out in the early '70s after they came out the bar, and it was a place—it—the only thing—I mean, it was like a gay bar, only they didn't serve drinks. But someone was always there you knew, you know. And I was sitting there with my ex, and Jackie came over. I didn't know her either; I had seen her. And she came over to me, and she said, "What a face you have." She said, "If I had your face, I would rule half the world." And that really stuck with me, like...

Keyes: [chuckles]

Roldos: So she introduced herself, and I introduced myself that day, on that day, and then later on we got to meet more and more, and then we hung out more and more. And then she would invite me to her apartment. She had two roommates, two other trans women. Um, and we'd be at her house every day. Yeah.

Keyes: What do you think it means for trans women to live with each other? Do you think that gives them some—

Roldos: A lot of support, sure, sure, sure. Um, we get to—I mean, I've lived with other trans women; other trans women have lived with me, even in my family's house, you know. Uh, several girls have lived with us during the years, throughout the years. One, I remember she came from Puerto Rico, and she had nowhere really to go. I brought her to my house, and my family took a good liking to her. She stayed with us; she lived with us. And another—yeah, several women have lived with us for X amount of time, including my gay mom, Jackie. She lived with us for an entire year.

Keyes: Wow.

Roldos: Yeah. But I loved it because it's—it's good, it's supportive, um, and you can—how do I—oh, you know, like a girlfriend relationship or roommate relationship with another girl. Things you can share. Um, talk about relationships and what trans women go through. You know? And share our experiences.

Keyes: Um, so, um, just to kind of back up a little bit—sorry, one second. Who do you feel have been the most important people in your life?

Roldos: Who do I feel have been? Uh, I will say four people that I can tell you that really have been very important in my life. No, I would say there are more, but... Uh, during my earlier years, I would say it began with Jackie, who was my gay mom. Of course, my family. My mother is very important to me, number one, throughout my whole life. We still live together. But outside of my immediate family, my sister is the second one. Her and I are very close to this day. Outside of my biological family, I would start with Jackie, who's my gay mom, who I met in 1972. And then I met Carla. We were friends until she passed away a couple of years ago. We became friends in the early '80s. And Athena and I were also very close during the late '70s,

until she became Athena. When we met, she was little Eddie. And our friendships—all those friendships lasted for many, many years. And then Sonia and I, we knew each other from seeing each other even from the older bars in the early '70s. We weren't friends, we didn't hang out with each other, but we knew each other from sight. And then it was in 1996, when I graduated from nursing school, Sonia started hanging out at Sally's II and so did I, and her and I, we just clicked, so we became very good friends. She started calling me all the time; I started calling her. Uh, we would meet. Uh, sometimes I'd go to her house; sometimes she'd come visit me. Then she met my family. My mother loves her. Um, and I've known her for many, many years, and we're still friends.

Keyes: Do you have any, um, memories of Sally's that you could share?

Roldos: Oh, God, yeah. The first Sally's [Sally's Hideaway] was, um, a small, uh, very tiny bar. It was Sally's I, and it was located on 43rd Street. And it was similar to the Gilded Grape, where it was a bar of all trans women. They had shows there. The guys that liked the trans women, the girls, they would go there. Some of them were like boyfriends; some of them were like johns, because tranny chasers would go there, too, to spend money on the girls and, you know, date them. So—and then I don't know what happened. They lost their lease or something like that. I think the owner passed away. No, the owner did not pass away, I'm sorry. His name was Sal [Sally Maggio]—that's why it was called Sally's—who was a gay man. And the first Sally's closed, I don't know why. But they moved over next door to a place that was bigger that was owned by these Asian people, and they let us take over. It was a huge place. They had a stage there; they had a circular bar; they had like a VIP lounge upstairs separately. And so Sal asked them if we could bring our business to their place, because they were dying. They were not getting any business at all. So that's what we did. And then we all started hanging out at Sally's II until then—that was when Mayor—I don't remember which mayor it was, but they changed 42nd Street from what it used to be, which was a lot of movie theaters, a lot of porno shops—it was a different—totally different crowd. And all the porno shops were closed and so were the bathhouses, after the AIDS epidemic came out. And so they closed a lot of these businesses on 42nd Street and Times Square. They cleaned it out, and now if you go there, it's very family-oriented, with Disney stores and those type of places now. And it's horrible. To me it looks like—with all these lights and everything, it's just so tourist-trappy to me. It doesn't have the same feel as the old Times Square. Now, that was really a good place to hang out.

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: A lot of different characters. I mean, if I were to draw them in cartoons, I would draw the pimps, I'd paint them as ravens; and the police, I'd paint them as pigs; and the trans women and the other cis women that were hookers, I'd draw them and paint them as cats, and... Oh, it was just a lot of fun.

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: Yeah. Yeah. And, uh, yeah.

Keyes: And with that economic change brought on by, like, the mayor at the time...do you feel like we've lost spaces [inaudible]?

Roldos: We've lost a lot of pla—yeah, because, um, all the bars, they were mainly all in Midtown Manhattan, and, uh, there was—once they closed Sally's, there was nowhere really for the girls to go, unless they—we were willing to go to Queens, where they had some bars. But, you know, where Manhattan was concerned, no, there was nowhere else to go. So the girls who needed to make money and weren't willing to work on the streets, they were working in ads, newspaper ads, you know, to build up their clientele and meet them.

Keyes: What do you feel like the effect has been on the community, like with this loss of space?

Roldos: It's sad, because, like, there's nowhere to go if you just want to go to a bar, even in the daytime, and just chill out and have a couple of drinks with someone, you know. It has to be—the only place that I know of that trans women get together are these special parties that they have at these places that—I don't even know if they sell drinks there or not. Um, but they're mostly based on, like, to attract men and make money. It's not like you go to a “bar” bar, you know...and that's it.

Keyes: Um, so how do you feel about this current time of trans people being more visible?

Roldos: Well, it certainly is a big change from when I started. Um, trans women, unless you were really, really, like, no one can tell—you had to be very what they call “real-looking”—um, and unless you got spooked, which means—“spook” is just another word in the trans culture that means someone knows that you're transgender; they can tell that you're transgender, no matter how pretty you may be or whatever, that it's known. So unless you were very lucky and no one could tell—then you were able to work somewhere and get employment if you got hired—but for the most part, there were not many—like now, then, you know, in the late '90s and 2000s, now you see trans women working in a lot of places. Yeah.

Keyes: Um, just to go back for a second, you know, when you were listing out those important people in your life, you mentioned your mother, who you still live with.

Roldos: Yes. Yeah.

Keyes: How has your relationship with her evolved over time?

Roldos: It's gotten closer now because now it's just her and I, um, our roles have reversed in a way, where, um, I'm more caretaker. And she's older now, so I watch out for her more. I do things for her that she was able to do. And she still can. She's very active. She's not bedridden. She goes to the senior community center every day and hangs—spends the day there, has some meals there, and then comes home in the evening and we share time together. On the weekends, I'll make breakfast and we have breakfast together. She goes to mass every Sunday.

And I things—I do things for her, like, you know, dye her hair, I do her nails... Kind of like, yeah, that's how our relationship is, mother and daughter.

Keyes: And to bridge to maybe some other kinds of relationships, um, we were talking a little earlier about some romantic relationships that you've had in your life.

Roldos: Uh-huh.

Keyes: Can you talk to me a bit about that?

Roldos: I've had several romantic relationships. Um, the first, like I said, was—turned out to be a horrible relationship. He was a very violent man. Uh, he—I didn't know, really, that he was addicted to drugs, and when he didn't have them, he became very violent, and I was the brunt of that. I was the—yeah, I would get the brunt of that. Until I—then I myself was introduced into the drug scene. But then we broke up, and I saw several guys who weren't in my life for very long, but they were very meaningful. Two of them that I can say—one is M. I spoke about him before. There was another one named V. He was Russian and was Italian. And V was really nice. He took me places, and—we'd go out to the movies, we'd go to the bars... We'd just hang out together, and we'd spend the night, you know. He was such a gentleman. They were both gentlemen. They really were. And I just felt so—with them I felt so in place, like, you know... There was never any issue about—[phone rings] it felt like—it felt like a—just an average boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. Yeah. See, I've always seen myself as a girl, um, even when I was a kid. Uh, I remember one day—I must have been 7 years old, and I remember being in my room and praying to God—and this was before I even know that—even knew that people transitioned into an opposite sex. I didn't know about Christine Jorgensen. I'm talking about the '60s now here. I had never heard about Christine Jorgensen. But I remember asking God if that were going to be—if that were ever possible for me, if he could make me a girl, would he do it, you know? And back in the early '70s when—the word “transgender” did not exist. We were “queens.” Yeah, we used to call each other “queens” or “that drag queen” or, you know. And, um, we referred to each other sometimes as “dykes,” and, you know, that's the way it was back then in the early '70s. Mm, people weren't “partners.” They were either “boyfriend and girlfriends” or “lover.” “That's my—this is my lover,” you know? Today everyone is—you know, they're calling each other “partners” and “significant others” and all that. I just—till this day, I can't see myself—I don't—I can't call anyone my “partner.” They'd have—they'd just be my “boyfriend.”

Keyes: Mm-hmm.

Roldos: Yeah.

Keyes: Um, so what would you say—

Roldos: Mm, mm, I'd like to say that...

Keyes: Yeah, sorry.

Roldos: ...the men that I've been with have all been men that were with women—um, cis women or trans women. I did not go out with gay men or men who were attracted to other men. That was—no. Because, um—and here's the thing. That I knew that I was female before I knew that I was transgender—I mean, I'm sorry, that doesn't make sense. Of course that I believed...

Keyes: [laughter]

Roldos: I mean, I knew that I was female—I was female within before I knew I was attracted to men. And therein lies the difference between gender and sexual orientation.

Keyes: Yes. Yeah, I just want to pause for a second. So you were saying about your involvement with the, um, Gender Identity Project?

Roldos: Yeah. That was, uh, back in the early '90s. It was run by Dr. Barbara Warren, who works now for Mount Sinai. Um, and it was a group of volunteers, of trans women, and we would have meetings once—twice a week, actually. And it was called STA, Survivors of Transgender Anonymous, and it was run kind of like a 12-step thing. And then the guys, the trans men, they had their own group. Our group was open. Anyone could just walk in. The men's group was a closed group. You just couldn't walk in there. You had to be, you know, a trans man; you had to be, you know, registered for it or whatever. Barbara Warren ran that group. And then I got involved, and I started running groups. I was doing a group a week. And I was running it with a trans man, and we were cofacilitating the group. It was like for an hour and a half, we'd have a group, and we would do it every week. And then we had different—him and I, we would put our heads together and we made—we picked a topic for each week. It wasn't like we had to stick to that topic, but, you know, things concerning trans pe—our lives: dating, legalities, all of those things, you know. Name changes, dating, well, early transition, because we had people who went there who hadn't even transitioned yet either way. Um, they were very curious, so, you know.

Keyes: Mm. Um, um—what's my question? To speak a little to how you've gotten by economically over time... You know, you've mentioned a few different things. You've mentioned being a manager at the Show Center. You've mentioned—

Roldos: For the peep shows.

Keyes: For the peep shows. Um, and—what's—

Roldos: I've worked in bars, as well, as a waitress, and I also worked in a bar as a coat-check girl. Um, yeah.

Keyes: Yeah. Um—I don't know. Sorry, I don't know—

Roldos: I worked as a hairdresser at one time...uh, in Greenwich Village. Um, yeah. And I once worked at a little clothing boutique in Greenwich Village for a couple of weeks. That was it. And the other times, I was just—I had to live on public assistance at the time.

Keyes: Mm-hmm. So, um, how—how do you think—we were talking a little about this, but just, like, how do you think the communities you've been a part of here have changed over time?

Roldos: Well, there are a lot of more places that—especially for the young trans people. I mean, today young trans people are even going to high school, you know, in their chosen gender, in the one that—what they—you know, in the gender that they feel they are. Um, and, like, the Hetrick-Martin Institute is a high school, really, that—for LGBT, you know, students. And there's just a lot of—more and more resources and places to go to get together in the trans community that did not exist throughout the '70s at all. At all.

Keyes: What, um, aspect—were you going to say something?

Roldos: Mm-hmm. We were—in fact, there was a time when none of the gay bars in the Village wanted the girls, um, to go into the gay-men bars. Uh, they barred us from going in there.

Keyes: Really?

Roldos: Yeah. They didn't want us in there. So we've experienced, uh, prejudice and discrimination within the LGBT community. Anyway, yeah.

Keyes: Do you still feel that there's a rift at all?

Roldos: Oh, sure. Sure, there is a rift.

Keyes: Yeah?

Roldos: Um, yeah. Um, and I've felt it from the gay male community and from some lesbian women. Yeah.

Keyes: Yeah.

Roldos: Uh-huh.

Keyes: Um, and just—how do you—what does that rift look like now? Like how has it changed over time? Is it more subtle?

Roldos: I think it's much more subtle, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, um, you know, you still have people who—well, you know, discrimination now is—you know, and being politically correct is such a

big thing now that, you know, you can't get away with discriminating as easily as before, you know.

Keyes: Sure. Um, so, what has been, like, the hardest thing about living here?

Roldos: I would say the hardest thing in New York, um, years ago was employment. Um, now—I'm not sure. I can't... I mean, things have gotten much better, but they're not perfect either. There is much more medic—there are places to go for medical help, medical advice, medical treatment, counseling, than existed way before, during the '70s and part of—the beginning of the '80s. Things started changing a lot in the late '80s and '90s, as far as organizations and a lot of these nonprofit organizations are concerned.

Keyes: What, um—what, like, aspects of the trans community do you want remembered, um, that you think might fade from, like...

Roldos: The—uh, the one thing is, um, the glamor that I remember experiencing—seeing when I first—especially in the '70s, where they would have things like drag shows, and most of the women who did them were trans women. It wasn't like, you know, men who were just getting dressed up. Every now and then, we had, you know, men who did that, you know, for fun or whatever, but... And there was so much time and effort put into these things, like, they called "balls." A ball was sort of kind of like a beauty contest, and they had different categories, and they gave out different trophies for different categories, as in the film—you can see that in the movie *Paris Is Burning*, whom I know everybody—I know everybody in there. I know everyone in there. One of the women in there who, um, is post-op, I had taken her to her doctor, um, just after I had gotten my surgery.

Keyes: Who is that?

Roldos: Um, I'm not at liberty to say her name. Yeah.

Keyes: Oh, okay, that's—okay. I understand.

Roldos: Yeah.

Keyes: I'm going to reda—I'm going to—I'm sorry I keep asking you those kind of questions.

Roldos: It's okay. Um, yeah, that's fine. Um, I mean, if you watch the film and you listen, it's not hard to tell. She even talks about it, but...

Keyes: Oh, okay.

Roldos: Yeah. She's doing great. I understand she lives in another state, and she's working as a nurse. I'm very proud of her.

Keyes: Um—have you, um—you don't have to talk about this if you don't want to, but have you ever experienced homelessness here?

Roldos: I've never, no. No, I didn't have—the times I left my home was because I wanted to, you know. But my parents never kicked me out of my house at all. Yeah.

Keyes: Um, have you had any experiences with mental health and mental illness?

Roldos: I've—yeah, I've suffered from depression. I still do. Um, I take antidepressants. Um, I was—I've been admitted to psych wards like two times.

Keyes: So, um, what do you feel are your everyday safety concerns? Do you have any?

Roldos: Sure, I do, um, especially with this current administration, this government that we have, where there's so much hate and dissension, not among—not just amongst races but amongst the LGBT community. You know, there are laws now where you can't use the bathroom in some states. Those things didn't exist before. And yeah, I—the other only that scares me is if I go into a neighborhood that could be dangerous or bump into a bunch of guys that are drunk and rowdy or something like that and, you know, that sort of stuff, yeah. But it's only been since this government has been in place that I—I've never in my life really felt scared, ever, either because I was able to pass when people didn't know, like walking through the streets, and I wasn't a two-glance girl, where, you know, people looked and said, "Wait, is that..." you know. Um—

Keyes: I think I'm a two-glance girl. [laughter]

Roldos: Oh, [chuckles] but that's not to say that I haven't been spooked, because I have, and I attribute that to my voice. I know it's my voice.

Keyes: Yes.

Roldos: Yeah. But you have to also remember, New York City is a place that's a city where people are very, um, sophisticated, you know. People know, a lot of people in New York know what the—what trans people are, and, yeah. Yeah.

Keyes: Um, what, um—what have been—besides maybe your family members and those friends that are closest to you, what have been some important sources of support for you over time, over the years?

Roldos: Other family members. Um, other—like nonprofit agencies that, you know, offered, uh, counseling especially. I would say in the last 15, 20 years, like at the LGBT Center, the Gender Identity Project... Um, yeah.

Keyes: So I think we're kind of close to, like, wrapping up. So, um, for some kind of like final questions, um, if you wanted people to hear one thing from you, what would that be?

Roldos: It would be that what I've learned, it's that it's cost me a lot to be my true self in many ways. Um, but I know that there's no other way I could have lived my life and be true to myself and be happy. I mean, yeah.

Keyes: If you, um, wanted to be remembered for one thing, what would it be?

Roldos: I would want to be remembered as a trans woman who was able to seek jobs for other trans women, help them, you know, get jobs. Uh, and that I was able to help younger people, younger trans people, and have been a pioneer in many things—as a nurse, as a—even as a student, a trans student. I made them change the name of the—it was just called the LG Club, with not even a B and a T in it. But when I joined that club in the coll—in college, I made sure that the T was added. It was because of me that Borough Community College—Manhattan Commun—that, yeah, Manhattan Community College has an LG—the T in LGBT. I changed that.

Keyes: Nice.

Roldos: Yeah.

Keyes: Um, is there anything else you want to add?

Roldos: No, not that I can think of.

Keyes: Okay.

Roldos: But thank you for the interview.

Keyes: Yeah, of course.

Roldos: It was really fun.

Keyes: Thank you.