

Audio recorded: November 3, 2017

Transcribed by: Mia Sitterson and Andrea Friedman

(00:00:04:00)

MIA SITTERSON:

This is Mia Sitterson. I'm here with Geri Henke. Could you please say and spell your full name and any other names?

GERI HENKE:

Sure, it's Geri G-E-R-I, last name is Henke, H-E-N-K-E.

MIA SITTERSON:

And today is November 3, 2017. We are at Geri's home in St. Louis. Geri, do I have your permission to record this interview?

GERI HENKE:

Yes.

(00:00:39:00)

MIA SITTERSON:

Thank you and thank you for participating. Geri, can you tell me a little bit about where you come from?

GERI HENKE:

I was born and raised in St. Louis, at the old St. Anthony's Hospital on Meramec. I went to school in St. Louis, I did go out of town for part of my college degree, bachelor's degree, at Southeast Missouri State. Sharon and I also lived in Florida for about a year, right before she became ill. That was approximately 2010, I don't recall the month. And after a year we came back to St. Louis.

(00:01:31:00)

MIA SITTERSON:

Can you tell me a little bit about what living in St. Louis was like growing up?

GERI HENKE:

It was great! Way too conservative, way too conservative especially for my lifestyle. The women's movement, the Equal Rights Amendment, the gay movement, all the things that I was interested in, it was way too conservative. But, maybe that's why God put me here, to help change that.

(00:02:09:00)

MIA SITTERSON:

Can you talk a little bit about the ways that you've been working to change that?

GERI HENKE:

Well, I could read you the story, because it's separated kind of into sections, according to my age and what I was doing at the time, and how I felt, that kind of thing. I don't think I could just summarize it with a couple of sentences.

(00:02:37:00)

MIA SITTERSON:

That's OK. If you want to you can go into –

GERI HENKE:

OK, this'll be a little hard to read cause it's single-spaced, but a lot of it toward the end I'll just have to wing it because truthfully it got a little emotional toward the end.

So – just a minute, I've got five pages to read. Do you need to turn that off for a sec or not?

(00:03:14:00)

MIA SITTERSON:

Yeah, I'll pause it and then we'll come back to it.

GERI HENKE:

OK, Thank you.

(00:03:20:00)

MIA SITTERSON:

This is Mia Sitterson back with Geri Henke.

GERI HENKE:

OK, Thank you. I was different, and I felt that as a child, and I became more aware of it as I grew older. From my first day of kindergarten and throughout elementary school, I loved learning. I thought the nuns were so smart, but sometimes mean, walking around with their ruler especially when it came to penmanship, and I would get a crack on the knuckles or during piano lessons when my knuckles bled. On that particular day, I hid my hands from my mother believing I would get in trouble because I had done so poorly during piano lessons. To my surprise my mom was very angry with the nun and walked me back to school to confront the nun. I never did learn what my mom said to her because I was told to wait in the hall, but from that day forward I never received another crack on my knuckles from piano lessons.

For as long as I can remember, my mom was my hero and I loved her more than anyone else in the world. She was strict and firm, not critical if I made a mistake, but instead would ask if I tried my best. (00:05:02:00). My mom pushed me and challenged me. She forced me to stand up for myself, to be strong even if I was afraid. After school I couldn't wait to come home and play baseball with my friends in the alley behind the house. It was my favorite thing to do, especially when my

mom would play catch with me. I think I was in about the sixth grade at the time I told my mom I wanted to try out for the boy's baseball team. With her encouragement, I did. The coach watched and told me I was good enough to play, but because I was a girl I wouldn't be allowed on the team. I was heartbroken and asked my mom to talk to him. She agreed to go with me but told me I had to do most of the talking. And she told me, do not beg, do not cry. I was afraid but I did it. I remember telling him that just because I'm a girl is no reason to keep me off the team. I'm as good as any of the boys. And then my mom asked one question of coach, is she as good as the boys? The coach answered, yes, even better than some of them. Finally the coach agreed I could practice with the boys, but I could not be on the team. I was upset and angry. Angry because I had been born a girl. But with my mom's encouragement and support I knew I tried my best. In a way, I won one small victory because I got to practice with the boys and no other girl in school ever achieved that. I remember thinking next year, maybe they will let me join and maybe other girls will try out too. At some point, they will have to let us play.

(00:7:20:00)

I recall one other time my mom pushed me to stand on my own. The neighbor boy next door took my baseball glove. I didn't know what to do, but went home crying to my mom, begging her to get it for me. She was standing at the door while I explained, and then she said, Geri, you get that glove yourself and don't come home until you do. Crying, I ran to the back alley where he was throwing my glove in the air and laughing at me. Some of the other kids were laughing too. I kept telling him, to give me my glove back, give to me. Finally, I ran up and jumped on him. We both fell to the ground, started fighting. We were both bleeding but I finally got my glove out of his hands and started to run when Joey, that's the boy's name, stood up and said, good fight Geri, [laughs] and the other kids were saying some of the same stuff. We both said we were sorry and would meet the next day to play catch. No hard feelings I thought, it was just a fight, my first one ever and I did good. I was pretty bloodied up but felt kind of proud. My mom was standing at the door with the biggest smile as I held my glove in the air. She hugged me and said that she didn't like that I had to fight, because there are better ways to solve a problem, but that someday I would understand why I had to stand up for myself.

I've said many times my mother taught me how to play and my dad taught me how to fix things. Mom had the greatest smile and laugh, was very playful. Reading me the comics, playing catch, dodge ball, filling the basement with some water and believing it was like a swimming pool, tying a sheet to separate the basement wall so we could have little talent shows, wringing out clothes on an old wringer washer and making silly noises, putting on some music and dancing with me. (00:10:00:00). Mom just made everything fun, including cooking, but for me cooking was boring so I was allowed to help my dad. He showed me how to use tools when we built my first hot rod. He taught me how to paint even though I made mistakes. He let me use the hammer when we built a clubhouse in the backyard, and taught me so much, and gave me the confidence to try things and make my own repairs when I bought my first house. In the evening, mom and dad would dance. They loved dancing. Or we

would sing songs. In the summer, dad would break open a watermelon by throwing it to the ground and we would stoop sit or play hide-go-seek while eating watermelon with the neighbors and other kids on the block.

I had an older brother and sister, my brother wanted me around. My sister didn't. My brother Joe would take me to the pool hall, let me help him shine his car, or put me behind the steering wheel so I could pretend I was driving. He would give me a nickel or dime if I did an errand for him or cleaned his room. Besides working full time, he played music on weekends. He was a great musician and could play several instruments, including the piano, accordion, and drums. He bought me my first drum set when I was about eight and taught me how to play. We would sometimes entertain the family and sing together too. One time, when we were at the pool hall, I asked Joe why no girls were playing pool. He told me only bad girls go to he pool halls. But I'm a good girl and you let me play pool. He said, that's different. I pushed him for a better answer but the only answer he could give me was the same one, girls don't go to pool halls. Again I started to realize that girls were not allowed to do certain things because they were girls. I used to think this about a lot and felt like there must be something I can do about it.

(00:12:53:00)

My sister Shirley didn't want me around because she was boy crazy. If she took me to the show with her friends, I would have to sit downstairs while she would meet a boy in the balcony. She would warn me that if I told mom and dad she would lock me in the closet, so I didn't say a word. Mom and dad would let her have boy and girl parties in the basement and I would sneak down and dance with her friends. They seemed to like it, but not Shirley. She would yell for mom or grab my hand and take me back upstairs. When I started high school, I remember Shirley telling me that if a boy takes me out I should not eat. She told me, boys don't like to see girls eat, so the only thing you can order is french fries, and take small bites. Also, if you go bowling or play any kind of game, you cannot win. Only boys can win. I was in shock. I never heard anything so stupid, not to eat and not to win a game. I was becoming more aware that as a girl, I was not allowed to do what I wanted. Only boys were free to be and do what they wanted. My mom always told me I could be anything I set my mind to be, and if I talked about going to college as a young girl, my dad would say only boys go to college. Girls don't need an education, because they get married.

I was raised Catholic and attended Catholic grammar school. (00:15:00:00). I loved going to Mass and looking at all the statues and beautiful stained glass windows and paintings. I used to think this is what heaven looks like, but in heaven the statues are real people. I used to watch the altar boys and wish that I could be closer to the altar. As children we went to Mass everyday and then school would start. One day I asked Sister if I could stay after Mass and talk to Father and she gave me permission. Father was walking down the stairs of the altar and I asked if we could talk. I told him how I felt about going to Mass and explained that I wanted to be an altar boy, so I could kneel closer to the altar. At first he chuckled a little bit, then he said, Geri, only boys can be that close to the altar of God. Girls can't be altar boys. I kept saying

I don't understand, I love Jesus. But in the fifties, no one questioned the priests or the church. Their rules were the word of God and I knew I had to accept it. It wasn't fair, I thought. After all, Mary Magdalen was close to Jesus and followed him everywhere, and she was a girl. Even then I had all these ideas in my mind about why girls weren't equal to boys.

It was apparent to me by the fourth or fifth grade that I was different than most girls. I wasn't just a tomboy but it was something different. At the time it was a big deal for a boy to ask a girl to go to a school picnic. I was asked but I didn't care. I wasn't boy crazy like my sister or some of my girlfriends. I liked playing with the boys because they did fun stuff. But when I would look around, most girls would just stand on the sidelines and cheer for the boys. Then one day a girl by the name of Gloria, who lived a few houses away from mine, asked me to come over. Gloria was really good on roller skates so I brought my skates with me, thinking we were going to be skating on a backlot from the alley. I never expected what happened next. She took my hand, led me behind the back porch and kissed me on the lips. It was a short kiss but it scared me. [laughs] It scared me because I had never been kissed on the lips before. (00:18:08:00) I remember being scared and asked her what she was doing. I told her I was Catholic and I can't let you do this, I started to run but she took my hand and told she liked me. I didn't know what to say except that I had to go home and I didn't think we should skate together anymore. I just remember her saying, please don't say that, I like you Geri, and then left. I believed I had sinned but I didn't know how to confess my sin to Father, and he would know it was me in confession. I didn't want to be called queer and made fun of. I cried myself to sleep that night asking God to forgive me but I also admitted to God that I kind of liked it and that I was sorry for liking it. From that time on I never allowed myself to be alone with Gloria and it never happened again.

It was 1959 and I decided to attend high school at St. Elizabeth Academy, an all-girls school. I decided on an all-girls school because I wanted more opportunities as a girl and I wanted the type of education that would help me find a way to be a strong woman. My parents couldn't afford the tuition, so I was able to obtain a partial scholarship and agreed to clean classrooms after school and work at a nursing home part-time to pay for my tuition. (00:20:07:00). I excelled in high school, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. I was able to play sports. I was able to ask questions, mostly without limits. I was taught about the dignity of women and felt very close to the nuns who were always ready to listen and encourage. I had lots of friends. I dated boys, went to dances, and tried my hardest to be like the other girls. It was a struggle. Even though I dated boys, I did not like kissing them. They seemed to want one thing and it always felt awkward.

I was in my second year of high school that I realized I was more attracted to girls. The incident with Gloria flashed through my mind many times, and I still didn't know how to handle it. I had no one to talk to, who would understand what I felt, so I prayed. Every chance I had, I would visit the chapel and pray that God would make

me normal. The only word I knew to describe it was queer. I was attracted to this one girl named Judy. I thought she was beautiful, funny, and a great dancer.

When I was a junior I finally convinced my parents to go to this teen town out in the county called Sunset. All of the best dancers and best music were on Saturday night. Judy and her boyfriend asked me to go with them one Saturday. Wow, what a night. All the latest dances, the imperial, the shag, american bandstand, west coast, and many others. I made new friends, especially Tom. I didn't know it at the time, but Tom and several others were gay. After going to Sunset for a couple of months, I spent the night at Judy's house and we kissed and we petted. We were both confused but we talked about it and felt like we were in love. We decided that since we loved each other, it couldn't be wrong. But we had to keep it a secret. We also talked about being Catholic, and how could we go to confession or receive communion. We decided that we couldn't act on it. But each time we were together we did. I felt so pulled and lost. I was living a lie. I was a queer, and some queers were killed for being queer, or would go to hell.

(00:23:36:00)

I had to make a choice between my Catholic faith and the love I felt for Judy. I decided to go to confession and discuss it with Father Pontifice. I told him everything, even the incident with Gloria. He told me, love between two people is not a sin. But he also explained that as a priest of the Catholic Church, the act of homosexual love is a sin. He encouraged me to pray and look for answers in myself, but be true to myself. In a way, I felt relieved because he spoke about his personal beliefs, but also as a priest. He didn't call me a sinner, and he didn't criticize me. Judy and I spoke about this and decided that it would be better if we never spent time alone, but rather as friends and in groups. I missed her, but I felt I had to remain true to my faith. I did not want to live a lie.

During this time, I was singing at weddings and school functions. And then later, in my junior year, I played the male lead for our school play. (00:25:00:00). The role gave me some courage, and I think I felt like God gave me a sign that gender didn't matter, but I still wasn't ready to act on it. In my senior year, I met Sister Virginia, who taught me biology. I watched the way she taught, would sit in the back of the chapel and watch her pray. I don't know what exactly drew me toward her, but the more I watched her, the more convinced I was that I wanted to be more like her. Every year, the sisters would invite students who were interested in becoming a nun to the Motherhouse in O'Fallon. I decided to attend, and Sister Virginia was my group leader. She asked me to take a walk, and while we were walking, I told her that I wanted to be like her and become a nun. She told me that God had a special plan for me, and joining a convent was not part of it. I felt rejected because the nuns were always trying to recruit young women, but not her. She explained that soon I would be out in the world, that I was special, and someday, I would have a lot to teach the Church. I didn't understand at the time, but years later, I would find out.

Upon high school graduation, I wanted to attend college, but I had to work for several years and save before starting school. I obtained a job as a dental assistant. This was a trade, I thought. If needed, I could always fall back on the dental field. And I would work to get my bachelor's degree. I also auditioned at the time with the Casa Loma Ballroom, and was hired. It was in the mid-sixties, and I was twenty-one or twenty-two. I was making good money singing, plus my income as a dental assistant. My plan was college and law school.

(00:27:31:00)

Over the years, I believed that I could become a lawyer. I could work for women's equality. Going to college opened my eyes to different kinds of people, and for the first time I met other gays. I continued to sing professionally while doing—and met some friends, and they told me about a gay bar and a coffee house. There was a bar and a coffee house. I believe it was on Olive by the Fox Theatre. I decided one night to check it out. I was by myself driving in a strange neighborhood, but I knew I had to do this, even though I was afraid. I parked my car, walked along the street, and peeked into the bar. It looked pretty rough, and the people looked even rougher. I looked into the coffee house and there was a drag show going on so I decided to go in. I didn't know anyone, but the drag queen that was singing walked over to my table, sang for a while, and smiled. This simple gesture made me feel a little more comfortable. I didn't know who she was, but during the break, a few people started to talk to me and introduce themselves. They knew this was my first time, but the more we talked, the more I realized I had been searching for this place my whole life. I started going to this coffee house a couple of times a month, but didn't get the courage to walk into the bar until much later. The challenge of leading different lives was very difficult, and keeping them all separated caused me to feel depressed. I would lie to my parents about where I was going. I sang professionally wearing gowns, long gloves, and heels, trying to be just a normal gal while working as a dental assistant and feeling at home in the coffee house.

I never set out to be a professional singer, but within a couple years, my manager arranged for Columbia Records to send a talent scout to the Casa Loma to hear me sing. (00:30:07:00). Later that evening, the talent scout offered me a contract with Capitol Records. My parents and manager were present during the meeting, and mom and dad were so proud. They always wanted me to have a singing career. But there were conditions in the contract. The agent loved my voice and stage presence and even though I mostly sang songs from big band era, this agent was convinced that I could make it big no matter what I sang. I thought, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. But what about school? What about the coffee house where I feel so free? The agent explained that my personal appearance would have to change. I would have to wear long hair wigs, falsies, more makeup, and the list went on and on. The more I heard, the more disappointed I became. Why do I have to become so girly? Why do I have to look like someone I'm not? It was bad enough that I had to put up with the advances, sexual advances, and comments from different musicians. I put up with it because I loved to sing, I loved music. I felt free when I was singing. In another world.

After much consideration and input from my parents and brother, I decided to decline the offer. Family was disappointed but supportive. My manager was angry about my decision. He couldn't understand that I sang because I loved it. I didn't need fame, and I certainly didn't need to look like something I wasn't. The decision put a strain on our working relationship, but he continued to get me other gigs, including the Chase Hotel and the Missouri Athletic Club. I never spoke to the people at the coffee house about my singing career or the name of the dentist I worked for. At this time, I made friends at the coffeehouse, was able to dance with girls, and felt I was still a good Catholic, as long as I didn't act on any sexual attractions.

(00:32:43:00)

Unfortunately it was a little over a year after the record offer that I gave up my singing career at the Casa Loma. After one of my sets, someone asked to see me at his table. It was a common practice to visit the table if I was invited, and as I sat down, I noticed the guy looked familiar. He also had a friend with him. He told me that he had seen me at the coffeehouse and knew that I was gay. I told him I was not gay, and I just liked the people and the music at the coffeehouse, and that I planned to continue visiting the place. Then he confronted me and told me that if I wanted to keep my visits secret, I would have to pay him half my income as a singer. He went on and on about how my fans would boo me off the stage and how he would tell my parents, who were frequent visitors of the Casa Loma. And he would find out where I worked and I would be fired.

This guy was serious, and watching his friend smiling made me even more angry. I felt like the floor had dropped out from under my feet. What can I do? My life is ruined. Finally, I got the strength to say I would not pay him anything and that I would rather quit singing professionally than give him any money. He looked shocked and I walked away not knowing if I could finish off the night. My throat felt dry and my legs felt so weak. Gary, the band player, asked if I was OK. He could see that I was visibly upset and offered to start the set without me. After about twenty minutes, I got back on stage and sang my heart out, looking at my parents while they were dancing. (00:35:03:00).

So, by the end of the following week, I gave up my singing profession at the Casa Loma and other venues in St. Louis. I told my family I was getting tired of it and needed a change. I still sang around town in small clubs or bars and sometimes I would even join my brother at the Yacht Club down on the river. He and his buddies played music there, and I would play drums and we would sing the blues and a few jazz songs. I didn't have to wear heels for any of these gigs, so that was the good part. And I loved making music with my brother. He was such a talented musician, plus he had a good voice. It felt good to make the hot blues songs come alive.

Finally, I registered for Notre Dame college for my senior year. I accepted the fact that financially, I could not go to law school, so I decided to get my degree in education and become a teacher. I knew I could influence young minds to do their

best, and their opportunities would be unlimited. While attending Notre Dame, I had an attraction to a girl named Lynn, who was in my theology class. We'd have coffee in the student lounge and we'd talk for hours. I first fell in love with her eyes. They were so expressive. By this time I thought, I can no longer deny who I am. My Catholic faith was still important, but I decided it was no longer going to push me in a corner so that I could not experience love. I believed God loved me unconditionally and would not reject me because I was gay. My conclusion, he'd made me different, and he doesn't make mistakes.

(00:37:23:00)

One of the first times I was at Lynn's home, her parents weren't home, and I didn't know if she would hit me for making a pass. But I decided to try anyway. I kissed her, we fell on the sofa, and she invited me to do a lot more than just kiss her. I didn't want to rush things, but she didn't want to talk. So it was the first time either of us had made love. After we cooled down a little, we kept saying things like, I never thought it could be like this. So many feelings at the same time. Our relationship was secret except to a few close friends. I was Lynn's first and she was my first. We decided to move in together. Neither of our parents were too pleased about the situation, but Lynn's parents especially cut her off, and only agreed to pay for her last year of college. I was getting ready to graduate, was offered a teaching position at a local high school. We finally found a three room house we liked. My parents agreed to help me with the down payment and if I ever sold the house, they would get back their money. We were so happy, and since both of us loved dogs, we got three of them. A German Shepherd and two white West Highland Terriers. Our life was perfect but no one knew.

Sue F. was Lynn's best friend, and she convinced us to have a commitment ceremony. The guests were limited to Sue, her boyfriend, and a former priest that Sue knew. I was feeling so free at this time, but not free enough to share my secret with friends and family. Everything was fine for about five years, and we started meeting some other gay friends. Teachers mostly, that taught with Lynn, and a few other teachers from her school. From there on, our group of friends grew. We talked it over and we decided to move to a much larger house. (00:40:00:00). Finally, Lynn told me she had cheated on me but still loved me. She had fallen in love with someone else. She tried to convince me that she could love two people at the same time, and we could all live together. [laughs] I said, no way! That would not work for me. We decided to sell the house and split the profit. I didn't have the energy to argue, but it was an angry breakup. She was a liar. She betrayed me. And I learned that all I could believe about us was false. I had to move into my parents' basement and look for another house. I told myself every day, I wanted to have another relationship.

During our relationship, we met Dr. Sheila Ruth, director of women's studies at SIU. She was teaching a women's studies class at Webster University. We became close and I became much more active in the women's movement. We met Harriet Woods who ran against John Danforth for the senate seat in DC. She was an activist for

women's rights and gay rights. We had a fundraiser for her at the house and worked on her campaign by going door to door passing out literature. Sheila was another woman I admired. She debated Phyllis Schlafly on the Equal Rights Amendment, and Sheila invited me to the TV taping. Sheila knew I had strong arguments in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment and asked me to participate in the discussions. Lynn and I also marched to Springfield, Illinois along with 10,000 other women, carrying our signs and chanting slogans. We sat on the Springfield Capitol steps hoping our voices would be heard. Doing all these things knowing the challenges, we wanted to make a difference and we did. And every time I marched or collected signatures, I remembered my mom's words to me as a child, you have to fight for what's right.

(00:42:42:00)

After Lynn and I sold the house, we never saw each other again. I was so heartbroken and depressed about her betrayal. I had to talk to someone. I had come out—finally, I came out to my family. The first person I told was Chuck, my brother-in-law. He was the least judgmental and never thought that queer jokes at family gatherings were funny. He hugged me and told me I had nothing to be ashamed of. He told me I was true blue with Lynn but that she was a liar with me, and she wasn't worth the tears. Then, I took my mom in the bedroom and told her. She didn't say anything at first, and just held me while I cried. Finally she said, I always knew it. I knew you were different the day you were born. I didn't know what it was called, but I knew I had to teach you to be strong. My other children didn't care about girls having equality. You felt strong about it when you fought to play on the boy's baseball team. You would argue with dad about civil rights for blacks. Always wanted to campaign for someone. I'm proud of you, Geri. You've become such a strong woman, and I love you.

And she said a very peculiar thing. And as I think about it now, I have to laugh. She said, Geri, I know you loved Lynn, and you are entitled to have someone to love. But don't you think it might be a good idea to go into the convent and meet a good Catholic girl? You could fall in love and then the two of you could leave the convent and be together. She was serious! [laughs] But I couldn't believe the words that came out of her mouth! (00:45:00:00). There are a lot of girls just like you in the convent, waiting for true love. Just think about it, Geri. Then she continued to hug me, saying she loved me no matter what. [laughs] I can't help but laugh. I told my sister, too, and she hugged me and said it didn't matter because she still loved me. Mom had asked me not to tell my dad or brother because they may not understand, so I never did come out to them. But I believe they always knew. We just never talked about it.

I felt so depressed and usually would just stay in the basement when I wasn't working. I don't know why, but one day I took a walk and I would jog a little too. It seemed like I was going further each day. After several weeks, my mom gave me a present, a pair of running shoes. And I thought, running is a way out of my depression. So proudly, I put on my new shoes and started running, sometimes for one or two hours. Each time I ran, I could feel the toxins of Lynn's betrayal leave my

body. I was starting to feel less depressed and like my old self. I started going out more and meeting new people. Lynn and I broke up in the early part of eighty-one.

But backing up a little, there is one thing I did a few years earlier, in the middle or late seventies. I decided to take a chance at the public school where I was teaching. I prepared an outline and presented it to my department head about teaching a class on sexism, which included a section on homosexuality. It would be a one-time class, and would be after school hours, but students had to have the signature of their parents to attend. After much debate, I was able to convince my department that sexism was an issue that needed to be taught. I had the help of Dr. Sheila Ruth, and she also met with my department and would help me teach the class. Without her, I doubt if it would have ever been approved.

(00:47:50:00)

There were only about twelve students that attended. I think others were afraid of peer pressure, so the class was small. There were also several teachers that attended. I felt proud of pushing the envelope. That something like this had never been done before. And I thought, even if there was one student that feels the way I felt in high school, it would be worth it. By this time, the students were well aware of the protests over the Vietnam War, feminism, gay and civil rights protests. So it wasn't as if they had never heard the word sexism. Sheila spoke about her struggle starting a women's studies program. I spoke about wanting to play ball on an all-boys baseball team and my attempt to become an altar boy. I also arranged for two gay women to speak about their coming out, their specific experiences with sexism and being gay. There was much interaction, questions, and opinions. But everyone agreed the class had opened their eyes to the real issue of sexism. When I met with my department for evaluation, they praised my efforts and how receptive the students were. I felt very proud the students had an opportunity to learn firsthand about the issues outside their comfort zone.

In 1979 or '80, I decided to leave my position at public school because I felt restricted. The school board seemed to be more interested in carpeting than education. It was less money, but I wanted to be somewhere where education was valued, and where I could inspire young girls to reach their full potential.

(00:50:07:00) I signed a contract with a private girls' school, and as I said earlier, Lynn and I broke up in 1980. But with my running and working on my master's degree at Webster, and starting to go out a little, my plate was full. I also continued to play softball over the years.

A new chapter of my life was beginning and I felt more free. I stayed in contact with Sister Virginia, told her I was gay, teaching, and beginning to experience new things about the life I had chosen. Sister Virginia reminded me of our conversation so many years before, when I wanted to be a nun and God had a special plan for me. She was right. [unintelligible] I valued my Catholic faith and went to mass, but would not take communion.

I was totally convinced my gay lifestyle wasn't a sin, but then I heard about a group called Dignity. It was a group of gay Catholics that attended mass and had volunteer priests serve the mass. I decided to attend and I felt like I had found a home, a spiritual home, where I was accepted as a gay woman and a Catholic. I attended mass on Sunday nights and eventually became president of the Dignity chapter. The archbishop wanted to close our chapter in St. Louis. The board, volunteer priests, and myself met with the archbishop several times. He would not give in, and started to threaten that he would close the whole parish because they were renting to us to have mass.

(00:52:16:00)

This is also when I met Mike Stancil, who was one of the volunteer priests. He was gay but he practiced his vow of celibacy. Mike was a strong advocate of Dignity and was on the board. And the archbishop no longer would meet with us. We stood on the sidewalk in front of the archdiocese office with signs that said, gays are Catholic too. I knew if the Catholic school where I taught caught wind of my involvement with Dignity, I could be fired, but I stood on that sidewalk anyway. The archbishop called the police a couple of times, but they didn't arrest us because we were on public property and we were peaceful. The archbishop met us one last time and told us we could not have mass any longer. He also threatened the parish priest of the church we rented that he would close down the church. The archbishop's last words were, we were not Catholic, and we had no business attending any Catholic Church. We loved the parish church, but Sister Tobias, who was Dignity's spiritual director and a St. Joseph's sister, invited us to have mass at the Motherhouse of St. Joseph's sisters. Sister Tobias was an important figure in the Dignity movement and was very outspoken toward the archbishop during our meetings. She was respectful but firm. She was an intellectual and because she spoke the language of the Church, she was better able to communicate with the archdiocese.

Tobias, Mike, and many other members became a tightly knit family and lifelong friends. We continued to have mass at the St. Joseph Motherhouse, but it was obvious that many individuals stopped attending. And eventually, Dignity was dissolved. Because of Dignity, I came to terms with the fact that I was not a sinner. I was a Catholic who happened to be gay, and I had the right to be welcomed into the Catholic Church. The Church was wrong. (00:55:00:00). They didn't practice what they taught, and we had every right to be welcomed by the Catholic Church. But I would never stop fighting for what was right. I knew God welcomed me even if the Church didn't. During my years with Dignity, it became more important to me to become a spiritual person, rather than just a Catholic. So I started thinking of myself as a Christian who practices the Catholic faith. The label of Catholic no longer mattered.

I moved out of my parents' house and moved into a different house by myself. At first I was a little lonely and at times I still missed Lynn, but I made a vow to myself that I would date, but I would no longer be interested in any type of relationship. I heard about a bar called Stars. I reacquainted myself with Tom from Sunset Teen

Town again, and so a group from Dignity and I decided to visit Stars. It was a mixed bar of men and women and the cleanest gay bar I had ever visited. By this time I was pretty familiar with the bar scene, especially in East St. Louis. The people, drag shows, dance, and music were great in East St. Louis, especially at PK's, Phyllis Kitchen's place. But East St. Louis was a dangerous place, especially at night. Stars was different. It was in a pretty safe neighborhood and the bathrooms were clean. Anyone who hung out in gay bars in the late seventies or early eighties knew that they weren't that clean, and they were mostly located in dangerous areas because the nice areas of St. Louis didn't want us in their neighborhood. Stars was the best place ever and had great shows and music. I loved to dance, so at Stars I was able to meet more people and have many dance partners, including Tom. Tom had been in a relationship for several years with a man named Gene. I didn't have a specific group that I hung with, but most of the time I would meet up with my friends and with Dignity. I started having Christmas parties at my house even though it was a small house. It was packed.

(00:57:47:00)

My second Christmas party, I met Sharon. A friend of mine had invited her to attend. She looked something like out of an Annie Hall movie with her little tie and vest. She was a little quiet and shy, but her face, her smile, her blue eyes, attracted me. I wanted to get to know this woman better. We didn't have much time alone that night but the next weekend at Stars, she was sitting at the bar alone and I asked her to dance. She seemed kind of uncomfortable, so I kept a little distance from her while we danced even though it was a slow song. We chatted for a while at the bar and then I invited her to the table where I was sitting. I asked Sharon out to a movie and a dinner at my house before the show. I made a beautiful roast, along with salad, warm bread. I even had candles. When she sat down at the table, she said she wasn't hungry, and I didn't know what to think. I thought, this is a strange bird. I offered her some wine and said she didn't drink alcohol but would have a soda. It was obvious she was uncomfortable and I didn't know how to change that. After the show, we saw some of my students and for some reason, she got the biggest smile as I introduced her. She didn't talk much and other than small talk, I felt uncomfortable with myself. When we got to my house, I invited her in but she declined and left. She didn't say much except thanks and she had a good time. (01:00:00:00).

The following week, she asked me to breakfast in the Central West End. She had an apartment in the area at the time. Breakfast also felt uncomfortable and then she asked me if I wanted to see her apartment. We took the elevator up to one of the higher floors. The windows were open and there was a great breeze. She turned on some opera music and sat down next to me. She said, I am attracted to you. Would you mind if we kissed? I was in shock, thinking she didn't want to be around me, and given the dinner and show—

[the recorder is paused briefly]

Geri Henke:

OK, I think I stopped here. The windows were open and there was a great breeze. She turned on some opera music and sat down next to me and said, I am attracted to you. Would you mind if we kissed? I was in shock, thinking she didn't want to be around me, given the dinner and show and what happened. And instead of kissing her, I asked her about it, and she said she didn't know how to pursue me because I seemed to have so much experience. And then before I could say anything, she kissed me tenderly and passionately. We laid back on the sofa and it was one of the most passionate, intimate feelings I ever had.

I asked her to move in with me in about 1983/84. We had been dating for nearly two years and mostly living at my house anyway. During this time I continued to remain active in the women's movement, joined the National Organization for Women, and presented several seminars, Sexism and Gay issues in the Women's Movement and another called Sexism and the Church.

(01:02:25:00)

I was always volunteering my students for different charitable organizations. It was important for me to teach them that they needed to give their time for people less fortunate than themselves. It was something new, and one year when we organized a Christmas charity drive, they were exposed to the poorest of the poor at the old Darst-Webbe housing project. Parents volunteered too because we couldn't get a schoolbus, and so their caravan of cars, we made our way into the inner city housing projects. After we made our donations, we met with several families. One of my students asked some of the kids at the project to play basketball. Girls and boys joined in together with the other students. Some of the students decided to visit some of the elderly folks living there. I felt so proud of these kids, going the extra mile even though the goal was just to drop off clothing and food.

I finished my master's degree at Webster, majoring in counseling and women's studies, but continued teaching for several more years. In 1985 I was invited by Silver Burdett, educational materials and publishing, in New Jersey to participate in a focus group. The goal was to evaluate the history curriculum. My input included segments of John Boswell's book *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*. Some teachers agreed. Others did not, and thought that gay history was too controversial to include in a high school text. No victory, but the discussion would be included in the summary of meetings that would be mailed to other schools and teachers. Perhaps some educators would consider it, once they read the summaries.

I knew my career path was going to change at some point because I had a student overdose in my classroom one time. (01:05:01:00). I gave CPR, the ambulance came, and fortunately, she survived. But I thought about the incident a lot. The other reason I decided to go into counseling was because, later in our relationship, Sharon revealed that she had completed an alcohol rehab program about two months before we met. From the day we met until the day she died, she never had another drink.

So I decided to change careers. There was an addiction epidemic going on in the middle and late eighties. I was offered a position with Carpenter Health Care at Deaconess Hospital. I completed my internship with Dr. David Ohlms, one of the leading authorities in addiction medicine. I received my LPC, licensed professional counselor, and CSAC, certified substance abuse counselor, too. These credentials opened more career opportunities for me, and the women addicts that desperately needed my help. I was interviewed [unintelligible] for a newspaper article by the *Suburban Journal* as a way of promoting the women's group. Most of the women were undereducated and didn't know how to stand on their own. They were gay and straight, black and white. The disease of addiction did not discriminate. Some of the straight women felt uncomfortable with the gay women. So with their input, I met with all of them together and then volunteered my own time to set up separate groups once a month. The idea of a women's support group was fairly new in addiction medicine, but along with the support and encouragement of Dr. Ohlms and others, it was a huge success. And another counselor for the overflow of women was used. Later I went on to work two other treatment centers, and then I was offered an EAP, employee assistance program, position, with Personal Performance Consultants. My immediate supervisor and a few coworkers knew I was gay. I felt very comfortable in my position.

(01:07:44:00)

Nearly a year later, I was interviewed and hired as the national director for the Federal Aviation Administration, our most important account. I was in charge of all persons that were in safety-related positions like air traffic controllers or pilots. I would evaluate them, outline their treatment plan and compliance, and mine was the final signature on their discharge plan. One of the air traffic controllers that I worked with was gay. He came out to me and was probably my most difficult case. I called together his supervisor and counselor because he was having such a difficult time coming out of the closet, and we directed him to a gay men's support group along with addiction counseling. This was absolutely necessary because he had attempted suicide and I had to spend several hours with him on the phone. He wouldn't tell me where he was, but finally did, and an ambulance arrived just in time. Once he had the support group, he did much better and was able to return to work.

Sharon and I were doing great, and more and more she came out of her shell. She was the one now organizing the Christmas party and summer parties. We attended Dignity mass together until it was dissolved. Every Saturday we would meet up with friends at Stars and dance the night away. We were very much in love and our intimacy was frequent and still passionate. We attended a lot of funerals in the eighties because of HIV. Very dear friends and couples we traveled with during our vacations.

Then in 1993 I was diagnosed with a neurological condition called Dystonia.
(01:10:05:00). I didn't let anyone know at work. I had to teach myself to write with my left hand, which meant I always was behind in my documentation. I would go

into work on Saturdays so I could catch up. It was very stressful during my attacks of rigidity. The disease is the opposite of Parkinson's. I started treatment at WashU, went through many experimental drugs. Nothing seemed to help, and there was no cure. Just treatment to help with the symptoms. It started affecting my voice, and I had spasms when I spoke. Diane Rehms, of public radio, has the same condition. How could I be a counselor, speak to my clients, with my voice, and them hearing the spasms when I spoke?

I decided to resign from my position at PPC. I told them I wanted to go into private practice because I was too embarrassed and ashamed of the condition that could not be controlled, and there was no cure. I could no longer play softball, continue my counseling career, sing, or anything else. The disease would come at any time, and I could not move. I never knew when it was going to happen, so together Sharon and I decided that resigning and retiring was my only option. I loved my job but I was no longer capable of performing it. All this caused a deep depression and put a strain on our relationship. We decided to go to counseling, and I was reminded that I had to focus on the things I could still do. I could fix things at home, doing odd jobs in home repair. At least I could bring home a little money. Running errands for the elderly in the neighborhood was something else I could do. I hated that Sharon had to work and support me, but with counseling we were able to make it through the hard times. My family loved Sharon, especially my mom.

Also at one point earlier one of our family members was going through a hard time and we tried to adopt her children. We met with an attorney but at that time we were not eligible because we were gay. Just about every niece and nephew had lived with us at one time or another. Sharon had been married prior to my meeting her but due to her alcoholism she allowed her ex-husband to raise the children. She had visitation and her older daughter and I became very close. But her son was young when the divorce occurred and she lived with guilt all her life.

(01:13:39:00)

OK, it was about this same time that my mother had a stroke, 1994 I believe it was or something, and I guess in a way my resigning was supposed to happen, because I was able to take care of my mother every single day. I was over there at seven o'clock, my brother lived at home and it gave him a break. He needed to be out of the house cause he was there weekends and nights, so I would stay with her all day. And she loved to read the comics but now I was reading them to her because her stroke affected her speech. That was very upsetting for me. She loved to gamble, she loved to play slot machines. So Joe and I, I mean Sharon and I, would take her at the casino every weekend to play her slot machines. After that, we would go ahead and go someplace to eat, (01:15:00:00) and sadly I had to learn how to feed my mother cause it was difficult for her to hold a utensil.

[pause] This feels all very sad to me because she was such a strong woman, and she pushed me, just would push me all the time. Eventually it got worse, even though there were some good times, and we had therapy at the house and so forth, but

eventually it did get worse. But she always tried her best. She loved to break up lettuce and I would make us little salads. I took her for a walk up at a corner church because they had a railing that she could hold onto and walk to the church, and turn around, and hold on and walk back. She felt very proud of herself and thought she was improving and I always encouraged that. I just loved her so much. I mean – it was a different kind of love, but it was so powerful. Finally in the year 2000 she passed away and I just, I could not heal, just felt I had a very difficult time. I started a journal on the computer and I wrote her letters, “Dear Mom,” “Dear Mom.” There was no one like her. Several years before that my father passed away from a heart attack, so the only person living in my old house was my brother Joe. Sharon and I would make a habit of visiting him because he became sort of a hermit, he didn’t socialize like he used to, he didn’t play his music or any of that.

(01:17:38:00)

Then my brother Joe became ill, and he had a heart attack. He had fluid on his lungs and I recall so clearly sitting in the emergency room, waiting for the doctors. And doctors came in, and they asked us, my sister and I, if we wanted to leave because there would be lots of blood that would spurt on the walls. They had to cut him and insert a tube, and we both agreed to stay there with him. The blood did go all over. My brother screamed and cried. And looking at him too I realized he had gotten older and wasn’t able to do the things he used to do. [pause] He passed away in 2010. These are all people I felt very close to. [sigh]

Sharon retired finally and she wanted to move out of St. Louis. She wanted to move to Ft. Lauderdale where her daughter lived and spend time with her. Like I said she lived with guilt because of her alcoholism, even though she apologized to them many, many, many times. I didn’t want to go to Florida. I had my home, I had flowers, I loved to work in my garden. I built a screened-in porch on the patio. It was beautiful. Put up a fan on the ceiling, put in an outlet, had a little TV out there, a beautiful table with some chairs. It was my favorite place to drink coffee in the morning, and Sharon’s too. Tom and Gene helped us build (01:20:00:00) a sixteen by sixteen deck on the back of the house. And we just had great, great parties, playing horseshoes, playing volleyball, croquet. I’ve got some pictures that I’ll share with you. Good, good friends. So I didn’t want to leave all of that. My brother had just died and I felt like I hadn’t finished grieving for that. So finally we came to a compromise. Sharon said that we’ll try it for a year and if it doesn’t work out we’ll come back home. I could live with that, that was reasonable. I didn’t want to leave but that was a reasonable request so that she could spend more time with her daughter.

Her daughter had bought a condo and was letting us live there. Well, there’s just so much empty time, I mean how often can you swim or take a walk or play tennis? I didn’t have anything to do, I didn’t have anything to fix. I didn’t have anything to keep me active. We would go to a couple of bars or something sometimes, and we still danced in the living room just like my parents used to. We both loved to dance.

As a matter of fact every New Years Eve since Sharon died I put on some music and I hold her picture and I swing her around, and I cry. But. I know that she's here with me in her spirit.

So we went to Florida, we stayed in the condo, Sharon was very happy to be with her daughter. They would have coffee and some private time, and I was happy for her but I was bored. I was just simply bored. So after a year we decided to come back to St. Louis. Her daughter didn't like it, her daughter was upset, angry with both of us. She tried to explain to her that this was the agreement that we made, and Sharon wasn't overly happy either being there. She missed our friends, I think, mostly, and going out, that kind of stuff. So we came back to St. Louis, we found a little house, small little place, like three rooms, four rooms maybe, but I loved houses, I didn't like apartments. I wanted a house, I wanted to do things with it.

(01:23:28:00)

It was at that time that we came back, shortly afterwards, that Sharon was diagnosed with cancer, in her lymph nodes. And it started to metastasize, on her tongue, in her back, in her spinal column. I never left her side, not one time, unless somebody was with her so I could come home, take a shower and let the dogs out, take care of that kind of thing. I didn't want to leave her, not one time. She was so scared.

She didn't want a port but the nursing staff that gave chemo convinced her to get one. She was afraid of all the stories that she heard about infections and things like that. The one nurse threatened her, and me too, I guess, and said we will no longer administer chemo if you don't get the port. So I got up and knocked at the door of her oncologist, and I asked to speak with him. (01:25:00:00) I told him what happened. I said you're not going to do this to Sharon, you're not going to refuse to give her chemo. He said, no, she had no right to say that, and I said, well then you need to talk to her. Because I am Sharon's voice right now, she doesn't have a voice, she could barely speak, and she couldn't swallow, and she lost all of her taste buds. And her skin had become so rough and chapped, because the radiation was drying out her body, and the chemo not only destroys the cancer cells but also destroys other kinds of cells, the healthy ones. Anyway, she finally agreed, she said maybe I should have the port, Geri, it would be easier, because her arms were so bruised from the injections. I said we'll do whatever you want.

So we went in for surgery, I waited outside the room and the doctor that specialized in the ports put it in. I had to learn how to give her IVs. She had to have surgery at one point to cut out part of the back section of her time. She had drain tubes all in her chest. Tammy came in town, her daughter, for that surgery, and she looked at her mom, and ran out of the room. Sharon was so scared, she thought, what do I look like, because she was very particular about her appearance. She was very poised, I would say classy is a good word to describe her. When Tammy saw all these tubes and bandages and stuff, she couldn't take it, she couldn't face it. Sharon asked for a

mirror, the doctor said I don't think you need one. Sharon insisted, and she looked at herself and felt very upset, felt like she wasn't pretty.

(01:27:32:00)

We went home. I would take these tubes and clean them. I would pat her head and just do whatever I could to make her comfortable. She was so helpless, and she loved food, loved food, and she was so disappointed because she couldn't eat, she couldn't taste anything. She wanted Steak 'n Shake so badly. So I went to Steak 'n Shake and I ordered just the hamburger with everything she liked on it, and I surprised her, and I felt maybe she could eat a little bit. I had a little candle and I brought it in to her. And she smiled, and she said honey, I can't eat that, it would hurt too much. And it would. But I tried. I wanted to please her, you know, she felt so helpless.

One time I had to pick up her medicine. Medicine was very expensive. She had good health insurance, but for medicine she had terrible insurance. I had to pick up this one new pill and one pill was two hundred forty dollars. I came home, and I said Sharon, you have to take this before tomorrow. And she would always say, how much was it? How much was it? She was always worried, she wanted to take care of me, too! I decided not to tell her until after she took the pill, cause I knew she'd be pissed. So she took the pill, she'd say now are you going to tell me, and I said, it was two hundred and something dollars. She said, oh my God, Geri, she picked up this little plastic table and threw it at me. Sharon had never done this before, never showed any type of violence, but I realized it wasn't me, she just felt out of control with this cancer. She didn't know how to fight it. She didn't know how to handle it.

(01:30:02:00)

I got upset and I called her daughter, like a crying baby, and I'd say, you know what your mom did to me? She threw this table, this plastic – . She didn't. She said, you let me talk to her right now, Geri. So she got on the phone, she'd say, I'm sorry Tammy. I didn't mean to, I just got mad at Geri for spending so much money. Mom, don't you ever do that to Geri again. Got back on the phone, Tammy told me what happened, and I would put the phone away and we just hugged each other and held each other and she cried and kept saying she was sorry. It's no big deal, it was just a fight, it's OK. I had to give her suppositories, and she would lean over in cramps, and just was in so much pain. After chemo, she would – her stomach was upset and just be sick all night long. But I never left her side.

This stuff continued for eighteen months. She was a hundred fifty pounds when she started chemotherapy and radiation, and she was sixty-three pounds at the time of her death. I watched her just kind of waste away, her whole body, her face. I recall one time I had helped her with the shower, and I had some soup or something on the stove. So I sat her on the toilet, she could kind of dry herself, and out of the clear blue she comes walking into the kitchen naked, and says to me, puts her body

against mine, kisses me, and says, am I still beautiful to you. And I said, oh Sharon, yes, yes you are. We loved each other very much.

(01:32:28:00)

Finally, we were in the hospital off and on, she did get an infection from the port, she was in intensive care. And then [pause] she was in the hospital and one of the doctors came in to check the radiation results inside her mouth, inside her cheeks, and that. I had been doing, they had these little sponges where you could wipe off the inside of the mouth and have a little moisture, try to clean those scabs and stuff for her. While we were sitting there, he had a little flashlight and I reached out with one of these little sponges and I said doctor, while you're looking at her would you mind taking the sponge and just wiping out the inside of her mouth, because maybe I'm not getting it all. He said, who, me? And I said yes, you. And he said we have people that do that. I'll never forget this. I said, no, you don't have people that do that. I do that. And I repeated a hundred times, I'm her voice. She can't speak. I'm her voice, I'm her advocate. And the only thing I can do is speak for her.

At night, she liked it, even though her body would ache all over, she liked it when I would get in bed with her, and we would spoon, you know. It just felt comfortable. And I tried to be very gentle. The nurse came in one night and said, what are you doing, and I said, I'm holding Sharon. She's the love of my life. She said, oh, OK. She was kind of sharp, and a little pissy. But I didn't care. If it made Sharon happy, that's what I was going to do.

Finally, when the cancer reached the spinal column, (01:35:00:00) she was having such terrible pains in her legs and she could barely walk. By this time she also lost the ability to control her bowels and, herself. So I had to change her. [sigh] Just seeing her like that was so hard. She was in the hospital and the hospice people came in to talk to me. And they said Geri, I don't think there's anything else we can do. Do you want to take her home? I said, don't tell her, please don't tell her, it's a hospice program. I'll tell her in my own way. So I talked to her, I said, Sharon, do you want to come home? And they'll send in some nurses and that to help me take care of you. And she smiled and she said I want to go home. I just want to go home so bad. So we brought her home, had a hospital bed set up. Amy and my other nieces and nephews got all the furniture out of the way for me. They loved Aunt Sharon. Got her in the bed and had the bars on the side so that it could be right next to the bed [pause].

So I brought her home and we snuggled and she'd pet me, I'd pet her. We'd kiss, you know, little kisses because her mouth, her lips were so tender you could barely touch them. We couldn't do much, you know, hadn't been able to do much, but it was still intimate, all of the actions and feelings we had toward one another. It was just still intimacy.

(01:27:28:00)

So the kids came over, I think it was July 31, and they told Sharon that they wanted to say happy birthday to Aunt Geri cause my birthday was August 5. So they came over and one of the kids painted her nails, she said can I have my nails painted? That was important to her. I want my nails painted. And she hated that she had no hair. I mean she had short hair, but it was always very classy. She said, Geri, I can't move my legs, and all the kids came in and brought her little presents, just little dolls with the shaky head, and a little cross, and that kind of thing. After their visit they all went home and we finally had a little time to ourself. We just talked a little bit, and mostly just held each other, told each other we loved each other. She just kept saying, I'm so tired.

So the next day the hospice nurse came and she was the most wonderful lady, name was Margie. Woke up, she told me, and she came in, checked Sharon and everything, and she said, Geri, it won't be much longer now. So I ran around the house, we were living here at that time, we moved in here in May, and the date was August 1. I ran around the house, got all the pictures I could find of our – her kids and nieces, nephews, my mom, dad, brother, sister, her sister, (01:40:00:00) just all the pictures I could find, then put them round her in the bed. And I asked Margie to call a priest for final blessings. Wasn't too long after that, and I kept telling her it was OK if she wanted to leave me and go home. I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it at all. She finally passed away, and I just cried the hardest I can ever remember crying except maybe when my mother died. Just kept holding her.

Margie had to call the funeral home, it was part of her job to call the funeral home, stuff like that, and I just didn't want to see her in one of those zipped-up bags. So she gave me a little extra time, and of course, Father came and gave her the final blessing and rites, but she was already gone by then. Finally the funeral home came to pick up her body. She never did quite like the dark. So I gave the funeral guy, and I asked Margie, I said could you put this flashlight in with her and leave it on? I wanted her to have some kind of light, cause that's what she wanted.

(01:42:08:00)

They took her away [pause] and of course everybody was called. My sister was helping, the kids were helping with that, her daughter and son especially were number one to contact and, in about a week, we had a memorial service. Mike Stancil, my friend, conducted the service and lots and lots of people baked for sandwiches and beer and soda and whatnot. And picked out her favorite songs for the service. It was a nice thing. I couldn't speak, but a lot of people got up at her memorial service and'd tell little stories about her. I remember, Cindy, one time, told the story that we had a party and everybody was going to bring something, so Cindy told the story that she decided to bring devil's eggs because I didn't give her something specific, or Sharon didn't, to bring. And here there were about six other people that brought devil's eggs. But as Cindy said, we just don't – it wasn't a big deal and all of us like deviled eggs. It was something we laughed about.

Sharon was gone, and it was a few days later after the memorial service. I was sitting in the garage, and [pause] the last movie we ever watched was Forrest Gump, and I don't know if you recall the beginning of that movie, if you saw it. But a little feather like drops out of the sky, and is waving and lands by his shoe at that bus stop, and he puts it in his book. So while I'm sitting in the garage, [pause] I saw this little white feather come from the sky, and it laid on the top of my car. (01:45:00:00) And I knew that was Sharon's message to me from heaven, that she was OK. That I should take care of myself, and she was OK. [pause]

I don't know much else to say on that subject except that I miss her. I haven't dated, plus I'm too old, you know, since that time. I just had no desire, you know when you have the best it's like you become content with that and the memories. It's just still very sad.

But I just have to be grateful for what we had, our memories, our dancing, playing, passion, just everything that we did. So I'm very grateful that God blessed me with her life. I'm still close to her daughter, we talk at least once or twice a week. Her son, I don't talk to quite as often, but. He's in California, and her daughter is still in Florida.

I truly – and I don't mean this as a threat of suicide – but I feel in a way pretty much all used up. I'm ready to go home, you know, I want to see the people that I love the most and I do believe in an afterlife and I do believe in, if you want to call it heaven, and I do believe that my mom is there and my dad is there, Joe, Sharon. All of the people that had the biggest influence on my life are there.

(01:47:13:00)

So I'm ready to go home any time God calls me. I think I've done what I could with my life. I tried to make a difference, especially in the lives of young people, and for women, especially women addicts. And for my young girls at school. You know, they were just such wonderful kids. I loved my students. I just absolutely adored them. Public school and private school. I was so proud of them, like when, that housing project, they didn't have to do that. They saw a kid playing basketball a little bit, a couple guys went over there and said, hey do you mind if we join in, and a couple of girls went over there too. What a great thing! What a great thing that they extended themselves to someone.

I used to always tell them, you won't remember what I say to you, but you will remember what I do. Because you'll watch my actions just like I did with Sister Virginia and other, Sheila Ruth – all the rest of them. And so they'll watch me. And if I'm kind, most likely they will be kind. If I show it in my actions, whether it be family or my students, or my addicts and alcoholics, if I show who I really am, they can get that, through action, through example. They can learn how to be that way, how to grab somebody's hand or embrace somebody that's crying, for just a – even if you

don't know them, you know? [sighs] I think I'm done. And I think I've taken enough of your time, didn't I?

MIA SITTERSON:

It was amazing, though. Yeah. Thank you a lot for sharing.

GERI HENKE:

Thank you.

[end of transcript]

WORD LIST:

Amy (niece)

Annie Hall

California

Carpenter Health Care

Capitol Records

Casa Loma Ballroom

Catholic Church

Central West End

Chase Hotel

Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality

Chuck

Cindy

Columbia Records

Darst-Webbe Housing Project

Deaconess Hospital

Dignity St. Louis

Diane Rehm

Dr. David Ohlms

Dr. Sheila Ruth

Dystonia

East St. Louis

Equal Rights Amendment

Father Pontifice

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

Florida

Forrest Gump

Ft. Lauderdale

Fox Theatre

Gary

Gene

Gloria

God

Harriet Woods

HIV/AIDS

Jesus

Joey
Joe Henke
John Boswell
John Danforth
Judy
Lynn
Meramec [Street]
Margie
Mary Magdalen
Mike Stancil
Missouri Athletic Club
National Organization for Women (NOW)
New Jersey
New Years Eve
Notre Dame College
Olive Street
O'Fallon, Missouri
Parkinson's
Personal Performance Consultants (PPC)
Phyllis Kitchen
Phyllis Schlafly
PK's Bar and Kitchen
Sharon Kramer
Shirley Henke
Silver Burdett
Sister Tobias
Sister Virginia
Springfield, Illinois
Stars
St. Anthony's Hospital
St. Elizabeth's Academy
St. Joseph's
Southeast Missouri State [University]
Steak 'n Shake
Suburban Journals
Sue F.
Sunset Teen Town
Tammy (Sharon's daughter)
Tom
Vietnam War
Washington D.C.
Washington University
Webster University
Yacht Club