

Audio recorded: October 30th, 2017

Transcribed by: Lizzi Kehoe

LIZZI KEHOE:

This is Lizzi Kehoe. I am here with Betty Neely. Could you please say and spell your full name for me?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

Betty D. Neeley. B-E-T-T-Y D-period N-E-E-L-E-Y.

LIZZI KEHOE:

Okay. Today is October 30th, 2017. We are in Betty's home in St. Louis on 416 East Bradford Street. Betty, do I have your permission to record this interview?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

Yes.

(00:00:51:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:

Thank you, and thank you for participating.

So, just to get started, could you tell me a little bit about where you come from?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

I was born in a place called Williford, Arkansas, 1936, August the 17th. Both sides of my family came from Arkansas. I was there until the second world war. When that started, my parents came to St. Louis to work with the war effort, and probably to keep from starving to death in Arkansas, so we moved up here. I remember a little bit about living here on Washington Avenue. We had a room. Back then, they took all the big houses and made little rooms out of them, so people would have a place to stay while they worked. And I remember one day my mom and my aunt left, and they locked the door and said, don't open this until we come back. And, as an adult, I'm thinking: holy crap what would have happened if the place caught on fire, and I was trapped in that room—but, that's the way they did things back then.

I spent a lot of summers going back to Arkansas because there was really nobody to take care of me. Everybody was working, so I would go and spend the summers with my grandparents when school was out. Lived in several places in the city [pause] can't think of the name of the street—off of Natural Bridge, I remember living there, and then we lived at Tower Grove and Norfolk, which is really close to our present-day gay area. I graduated from Adams grade school on Tower Grove.

I was always a busy person, I always had a lot of things to do. I worked in the confectionary next door to my house, and there was also a cleaner's there, and, sometimes, on Saturday, I would work in there. I was always a busy person. And I also had a sister, nine years younger than me, that I pretty much had to have in my back pocket all the time and drag her around wherever I went. And we are very close, even today. She lives in Santa Cruz, California, and they're coming here for Christmas. I have a niece and a nephew and that's pretty much my family at this point. I have some second cousins, but I have managed to outlive everybody else. And I don't know, where do you want me to go from there? That's pretty much childhood [pauses].

At that point, when I was out of school, I got in some trouble with this guy. We stole a car from down at a church and went to Arkansas, of all places. I guess that's the only place I knew anybody else [laughs]—ended up being arrested—we did (00:05:00:00) some other stuff on the way down there, and the way back—ended up being arrested and went to jail, in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Then was brought to trial in Little Rock and I ended up having to stay in where one of my grandparents were at the time. I ended up having to stay there and was on probation for about three years. And I went to school there, I want to say, three months? Something like that. Then my grandfather died and everybody had to go back to St. Louis, so I went. But I stayed on that probation for whatever the three years were and got by with that.

When I came back to the city, I started riding motorcycles, and I bought my first one and I used to run up and down the streets and alleys because I couldn't get—not the streets, I didn't run on the streets, I ran up and down the alleys because I couldn't get on the street—until I was sixteen and got a driver's license. That was quite interesting—and I hung around with these guys, pretty much all the time. The stint that I had in Arkansas—I had three months in the ninth grade at Hadley, before I got in that trouble—and then I had three months of ninth grade in Arkansas. That's been the extent of my education, other than I got a high school diploma equivalency when I was thirty-seven because I wanted a real estate license. And that's pretty much how I ran my life: if I wanted something, I just figured out a way to “get” it.

So I did that, and then I took some classes at—[trails off]—I forgot what college, doesn't matter. I took some classes in appraisal for the real estate thing later on, and I think that's the only college classes I've ever had, about real estate appraisal. Let's see—back to the motorcycles—

One night, in a bar, on South Broadway, one of the guys came up to me and said, hey Betty, I think there's some girls back there at a table that I

think you ought to go back there and meet. So, I did, and naturally, they were lesbians. And he knew—I didn't have any words for it—but he knew. So, I met them, and I made sure that I stayed with them long enough to meet everybody they knew, so I could have some ways out in the world, and then I just kind of went on from there. So, I was “out” at an early age.

There's a good story about a couple of women who worked at a dry-goods store on Manchester, who sold me my first pair of Levi's, \$2.35. They took me to a bar, and it was raided, and they threw me out the back door and into an ash pit. And later on, when Steven [Brawley] was doing this history—and I've told him this story: I assumed it was Betty's CB bar, but it was not. Later on, I think we—in a book somewhere, it says that, but the bar was not Betty Woods' bar, at that time, but it was the same building. It was called the California Bar. And her place was called Betty's California Bar. So, I kind of got that wrong in the history things, but Ian [Darnell], who researches things, he found out that that bar, in the time period that I was talking about (00:10:00:00), which is the early fifties, that it had women's bowling league hanging out there. So really, it probably was exactly like I thought. But I told Ian, they tell me that I'm wrong, the bar didn't belong to her, so okay. But I'm positive of a couple things: they took me there; they threw me outside; and there were a lot of women there. And I'm pretty sure it was that same building—you just don't forget things like that.

What do you want to move on to? You want to ask some questions—

[pause]

(00:10:52:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:

I guess can you tell me more about the bar scene and what that was like for you?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

Well, at that time, at that really early time that I'm talking about, at fifteen, you really, you really just went into a bar and drank. And they had what they called “no-touch bars,” of which is what Betty Woods' bar was, pretty much. Now, the men's bars that I went into—they were a little bit different. They were touchy-feely, but it was all on the sly. But the women, you just didn't touch anybody; you just went into the bar and you drank. And they still got raided.

One of the things I can tell you is that when you stepped into the bar, you needed to know whether you were butch or femme. Not—there was just rules, that you either had to be one or the other, and the conversation now is whether the lesbians were emulating heterosexual marriage, and you

know, and like, who cares [laughs] what they were doing? There doesn't have to be a rhyme or reason to whatever—they were making it up as they went along!

Somebody asked me one time, did you know that you were doing historical things back then? I said, no, I was just trying to get from one day to the next. There was nobody out there making rules for any reason. You had a rule like you had to take up for yourself—you had to not let people walk on you, stuff like that. And about being the butch and femme, they had all this stuff in the bar—like Cindy [Betty's partner] couldn't buy a drink. I had to go buy the drink. Even in the eighties, I remember being in the Kitty Kat Club, and I was going with this gal by the name of Kim, and Kim went up to the bar, and the bartender looked at me to see if it was okay if she had a drink. And I hadn't had that happen in a long time. Kim came back to me and said, did I miss something there, am I not allowed to buy a drink, or what? And I said, no it's fine. But there was some people—that mentality, you grew up with it, so you still have some of that mentality. And I have friends who, they're still playing those roles. And that works for them, and I guess your mom and dad, they play a role.

Me, when I got a little bit older, I pretty much did whatever got in my way. I'm a really good cook; I don't bake much but—I used to be a really good cook. We're talking now, I forget that I'm cooking [laughs]—oh, yeah, smell that? It's burning! OK. I'm a halfway decent carpenter, or plumber. I don't do much electric work anymore, but I can teach you how to do it, you know? (00:15:00:00) But I can't sew. That's my one downfall. I am not able to sew—not even a button. So, the needle just breaks.

So, you had that to contend with when you were in the bar—you never, ever just walked up to a femme and said, let's dance. You had to go ask the butch first, can I dance with your lady? And that lasts us somewhere in the late seventies or early eighties where I personally started saying, I don't know, ask her if she wants to dance with your ass! [laughs] Are you a good dancer, or what? I don't know!

(00:15:57:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:

Did that ever cause any problems for you?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

Not for me—I used to be five foot nine inches, and like 170 pounds, and with boots on, I was almost six foot. So, not a lot of people messed with me—I'm probably not even five foot five inches now, probably something

like five foot four and a half or something. So now my 235 pounds in this short body--[laughs]

Not that I didn't have words with people—I was known as a “you didn't mess with me” type of person. And plus, I rode motorcycles, too and that's always—Later on, we had, what I want to call a “nice bar,” over on Olive Street, Shelley's Midway was the name of it, where they wouldn't let me in because I had on a motorcycle jacket and boots, you know, so I said, okay, I guess I'm not coming in here [laughs].

Because I didn't quit riding motor cycles for a long time—I probably still had motorcycles in my early forties. I was still riding. I guess I could still ride if they brought one here and put me on it! [laughs] So, I pretty much carried that stigma with me. The bars, well, you had all the rules, but they were the place where you went to find out what was going on because there were no telephones back then in your pocket. There was no computers. I mean when I was growing up, there was no books, there was no TV, so you didn't get the stuff that everybody just switches, turns something on now, and they have all this information at their hand. You had to get out and “dig” for it, learn it. [coughing]

There wasn't much going to the library and getting much information until the seventies, so I spent pretty much twenty years with no info, except street knowledge. I was at a function Thursday evening, and was talking to a couple of young people like you from SLU [Saint Louis University]. And we were chit-chatting, and she said where did you study at? And I said, the streets! [laughs] I studied at the streets, and I know that that's hard for young people to realize about the phones and the information and everything, but it's all very, very true, as well, I guess your parents are what—about forty-five?

LIZZI KEHOE:
Fifty-nine.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
So, you're older than I think--[laughs]

LIZZI KEHOE:
Maybe.

BETTY NEELEY:
Maybe [laughs]. (00:20:00:00)

I was pretty much the type of person who—I didn't have one night stands, and I've never been into drugs. I was pretty boring, I was boring. No drugs. Only one time in my life did I let alcohol interfere with my runnings-around. I started drinking a little bit too much and got kind of shaky, and I went, woo, that's not anything I want to do with my life—I think I was about twenty. So I've never had any drug problems, or stuff like that. I never did want to lose control; that was just my thing.

So, consequently, I did a lot of what would be termed “long-term relationships” in gay people. I was with someone for a couple years, or six years. Before Cindy, I was with this lady for fifteen years, and we are still friends. Cindy and I have been together—I think we're working on twenty-eight [years]—so I don't have maybe that many women. I've pretty much been with one, and that was okay with me. I like having a home and stability and working. Cindy is the first person I've ever been with—well, I guess maybe the one I was with for fifteen years, she had a really good work ethic. Cindy and I, we're just workaholics. Even if we don't have anything to do, we're workaholics, so.

When I got to be thirty, maybe a little bit older than thirty, the bars became less important to me, and I had—I started working at Carter Carburetor. I worked there for twenty-two, twenty-three years, something like that, and during that period of time, I had a restaurant, I had a gas station. So, I was pretty into working, and the bars became less important to me, although I still went out with groups that I knew, for special occasions, and anniversaries, and birthdays and stuff. I was still out, but being in the bar every night was not my thing.

Later on, when the fifteen-year relationship broke up, and now I forgot how old I was, it was 1983. I had a really bad year, or two. Maybe three. The fifteen-year relationship broke up, and I lived on forty-seven acres out in Cedar Hill, Dittmer, and I had moved my mom out there to take care of her. She lived in a mobile home, like 300 feet from my house. And my mom got sick and was dying, and the fifteen-year relationship broke up, and I had—I guess maybe what you would call a lot of real estate. I had a lot of real estate. The girl I was with, Charlotte, we had a lot of real estate. The, (00:25:00:00) the interest rates jumped from, I want to say, 8 percent to 19 percent sort of overnight, and I was selling real estate. And I had all of this real estate—actually, I was developing a sub-division when this happened, of land that I had. All of a sudden, it all came tumbling down around me, so I was scrambling to sell everything I had and get rid of stuff so I could keep up with all of this, and her leaving, and my mother dying—it was kind of like a bad year for me. I lost pretty much everything that I had gained in all of that, except that I came out with my credibility. The guy at the bank told me I should've filed bankruptcy, but it didn't set right with me, so I did not do that.

But, at that time, after my mom passed away, and I sold that place I had out there, I had already sold—there was forty-seven acres and I had five houses on it. And a swimming pool, and a pavilion, and a whole bunch of stuff, so I sold off—one, two, three houses, and then I sold the rest of it to this guy. And so I came out not owing any money, and I had two or three houses left that were outside of that complex. I didn't come out with very much money, but I come out with all of my bills and her bills paid, and that was good for my soul. And I came back into the city, and I had a friend who owned an apartment complex, and I called her up, and I said do you have an apartment for me? And she said, have I got an apartment for you—I'm getting married, I'm moving to Illinois, come over here and live in my apartment, and run my building for me.

So I did that for about fourteen years, and in that period of time, I was really depressed. Because after I had a grieving process for my mother, then I realized that I had never grieved my relationship, so that sent me into a whole other thing. I met this young kid who insisted that I go and see somebody. And I said, you know, my name's Betty Neeley, and I take care of my own problems, blah, blah, blah—but I finally went to see somebody, and it helped me tremendously, and she said—I can't remember how long [the therapy] went, doesn't matter—she said to me one day, I think you ought to be running your own train, now. I was working over here on Brentwood at a place called Essen Hardware—Carter Carburetor moved out of town—maybe to make it a sequence here, Carter Carburetor had moved out of town before the thing happened with my relationship and my mother. And I was selling real estate, plus owning all this real estate, and with the interest rate thing, everything kind of fell apart. So, I had worked at a restaurant, under the table, then I started working for the Essen Hardware. I don't know, it was some ridiculous, low amount of money, and I was working there when the counselor, I guess she was, told me that I need to be running my own train.

So, at that time, I started painting some rooms for these women who came in the hardware store who said—and I'm very knowledgeable about all that stuff, anything to do with houses—come over and do this for me, come over and do that for me, and I'm like, (00:30:00:00) okay, I'm going to do this. So I started doing that, and then I told the people at the hardware store, I just want to work nights. So, in the mornings from eight o'clock to twelve o'clock, I would do painting, and laying tile floors and all this kind of stuff. And then this lady hired me to clean up her house because she was going to sell it, and the real estate agent told her, you gotta get this house clean and presentable. So I started working on that. So I started this company called Clean Etc., and after about a month, I'm like, Betty! The money is in the cleaning! You could starve to death—this was in the eighties—waiting for somebody to hire you to paint their whole house, a

woman, to paint their house. So I started doing the cleaning and whenever I started making more money in the four hours than I was making at the hardware store, I quit. I went from zero to \$160,000 the second year. That's gross, not money in my pocket, but, you know, I was pretty proud of that. We had, I don't know, ten or twelve employees at different times, but I would never, after the experience with owing all of this money, I had to have cash to pay for it. I wouldn't go in debt—I'm not even sure I had a credit card! Maybe Sears, to buy vacuum cleaners with, and finally, I went in debt because I needed to buy a new truck for the business, so anyway. That's what I was doing, now meanwhile, this kid, who had forced me into seeing this counselor is long gone. [laughs]

Anyway, that's what I was doing when I met Cindy. There was like eight years in between the fifteen-year relationship and her, and I lived with somebody for a couple of years in there. I always kind of felt like everybody was just passing through, was not important, and then whenever I met Cindy, I really didn't want to do that either because she's like twenty-five years younger than me. But we talked about it a lot, and we eventually decided, okay, you know, we'll do this, if it lasts six months, or six years, we'll just do it, and go on! So, it worked.

(00:33:27:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:

How'd you meet her?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

I was going with this gal by the name of Kim, and she was in her first relationship—I think she like twenty-six—with her first relationship with a woman. And the woman she was going with and the woman I was going with were friends, were best friends, actually. So, we went to the hospital to see this one friend, and I met her there. Then, a couple years later, I broke up with this girl, and she broke up with that girl, and she called me, basically, because she didn't have any friends outside of that relationship. So, I friended her for about ten months, and then I said, hey I don't want to do this friends crap anymore, so that's all I can take of that. But I was seeing other people. Like I said, I've always been really busy, fingers in a lot of fire.

So, she came in and we ran the company together for—[pause]

(00:35:00:00)—I can't remember when I sold it to her, but I had a lot of problems with my back, and I had to quit working. So, whenever I did that, I went on disability. I think when I was sixty-one, I don't know, something like that. I then sold the company to her so she could continue running it, and I could get my disability. Then in ninety-eight, whenever the hell that was [laughs], they fixed my back and gave me my life back!

Yes. So that was a good thing. Since the back, I've had two knees, and if they keep making parts, I guess I'll keep—[laughs]

LIZZI KEHOE:

[laughs] Give 'em to me.

BETTY D. NEELEY:

I don't know, ask me some questions. We moved here twenty-one, twenty-two years ago. We've been working on this house for twenty-two years.

LIZZI KEHOE:

It's beautiful.

How has your experience been with the St. Louis LGBTQ community?

[pause]

(00:36:33:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:

This is Lizzi Kehoe. I am back with Betty Neeley. We just paused for a moment to re-group, now we're back again. So, yeah, could you tell me a little bit more about your experience living in St. Louis, how the LGBTQ community has been?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

After the bars, before I got involved with Cindy, I met these people, I met this person at the Kitty Kat Club called Totty Dunham. She was managing a softball team, and softball was something I always did, so I met her, and she was getting together a group of softball players to form a team to go to the Gay Games. 1987, 1988 was when I met her. So, myself and my employees became their biggest supporters. When we'd get off of work, we'd go wherever their game was and cheer them on. Then we started having all of these bowling events, and potlucks, and blah, blah, blah, type of stuff to gather money to get this group to Vancouver in 1990. And then, in the process of knowing Totty, I met Kris Kleindienst, who owns Left Bank Books, and her girlfriend at that time, Deb Law, and all these other awesome lesbians who got things done. And I so wanted to emulate them—

LIZZI KEHOE:

Running their own trains?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

Yeah, running their own trains. So, I did. I got involved with that, and Totty, who had had a heart attack, could not fly and asked me to drive her to Vancouver. So, I did and there's no way I can convey by the time we hit, I want to say, Ohio, and turned left, to go to Vancouver, British

Columbia, that I saw all of these people with these rainbow flags. And every place we went to eat, there were gay people, and every place we slept in the motel, there were gay people. By the time, we hit the Canadian place where you go into Canada, they said, they asked me where are you going? And I said, I'm going (00:40:00:00) to the Gay Games! Totty almost died over in the other seat. [laughs]

I had never experienced anything like that, been with that many people. Neither had she. It was just the most awesome thing I ever got involved in. There was 7,500 athletes there. One of the greatest experiences of my life. I became very involved with Team St. Louis at that time—well, I was already involved, and I became even more involved. With things that were going on in St. Louis, like the women's movement, and all sorts of things, I became involved in, not the bar scene, but the political, the let's move it forward group. Since then, that's one of the biggest parts of my life. I'm still involved with Team St. Louis, although I'm not going this year. I guess this is the first year I haven't went. I have shot pool all over the world—Vancouver; New York; Amsterdam; Sydney, Australia; Canada—

What's the two biggest towns? Not Toronto, the other one?

LIZZI KEHOE:

Montreal?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

Montreal! I shot pool in Montreal; Cleveland, Ohio! That was the last one. They're going to Paris, and I'm not going this time. I've already been to Paris, and I can't afford it, so, there. At my age, I probably could ask the Gay Games, and they would pay my way, but there's other people more deserving to go, that are going to participate, and I can no longer see well enough to shoot pool. In Cleveland, I knew at least six or seven people there from other events, and I told them, gather around, I will teach you how to lose gracefully. [laughs] So, it's pretty much not worth it. Say, if I hadn't have been to Paris before—but when I went to Amsterdam, I went to Paris first, and drove. Okay, now I've got all wound up—

I have been involved with Team St. Louis, two of the centers, two of the LGBT centers, I have volunteered at—there's probably not many places I haven't volunteered. Volunteered with SAGE. I had a little experience with SAGE. I volunteered to do whatever this transgendered person needed—I actually started out visiting—that was the rule, you could go and visit. I actually did this because I wanted to learn about transgender. Well, that is not the way to learn about transgender, because they're not going to open up to you. So, anyway, then we severed our ties with SAGE, and I just started taking her wherever she needed to go, like the beauty shop because their rules would not allow me to take her in my car because of

the repercussions of somebody suing, so anyway—when I say I severed my ties, my agreement with them about her, we severed that—and then for four years I did this, and I wasn't any smarter about transgender people than I was before. But I wanted to try and understand. And I had one of the counselors at the (00:45:00:00) center say to me, about wanting to know more about them, okay, Betty, tell me who you are, tell me why you are who you are. Well, you can't do that! You have no idea. I'm assuming that's the way it is with the transgendered people.

I have, well, through association with Team St. Louis, we've done the liquor booth at Pride for like fifteen, sixteen year because most people in Team St. Louis are very honest and probably don't need the money, to be a petty thief, you know, to take drink money, and we have run their alcohol booth for forever, so I'm involved with them in that way. What other groups?

Well, that OLOP group did that oral thing—well, the people that did that, they're associated with the OLOP group, but they're not them—they're a little bit too old for me, and I tried to be involved with them a couple of times, and they're just way too stodgy? Is that a good word? Okay, we'll go for it, they're really boring. Stodgy. And boring. So, I couldn't handle that, but the group that did the oral history, now those are some really cool people. And, let's see, what else, SAGE, I've been involved with SAGE, and PROMO, I've stuffed envelopes for them and gave money to them, been a part of that since before it was called PROMO, and it was called something else, I can't think of the name of it, doesn't matter. Somebody knows it!

A few years ago—ten years ago, to be exact—I started a thing that we now call Party in the Park, for all of the old lesbians who don't go to the bar anymore and who are not involved in anything, to be able to see each other, and be together, and know what's happening. That has been one of the most awesome things I've ever done in my life. I've had it at my house here for three years. I have like nine steps up the back porch, and during one of these parties that I had at my house, I came outside, and I could visually see sixty women from that step—at various stages of sitting down, standing up, drinking, eating. I have a rather large drive way, and there's these two people standing out in the driveway with big grins all over their faces, so happy to see whoever is coming down the driveway—but I can't see that—but I thought to myself, wow. This is cool.

This year, it was the tenth year, and I did shirts. And I found out that you couldn't put fifty years on the back of the shirt, but I tried. It was a very rewarding thing—there was about 100 people there, and not all of us were decrepit. There were some younger people in the mix that I have invited because I think they're important to the community, and some are there

because they married into it, or in one girl's case, her mother, who was there only one there older than me, she's just, what do they call it, grandfathered in, because of her mother. And one kid because she was such a great softball player, like from twelve on, she's always been hanging around on the edges until she got old enough to be involved. I think she's fifty now. (00:50:00:00)

So, I've had my fifteen minutes of fame, and I'm going to read this to you.

LIZZI KEHOE:
We're pausing really quickly.

[Betty rises to get two trophies from a mantel and brings them to the table.]

LIZZI KEHOE:
And we're back.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
Are we good?

(00:50:39:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:
Yeah, we're good. Will you describe what you're holding?

BETTY D. NEELEY:
I'm holding a 9x9 stained glass [trophy], and it has the rainbow colors on the side of it, in little triangles, and it's an award. It said, TSL—that's Team St. Louis, [reading from award] "Hall of Fame Legacy Award in Appreciation of Your Enthusiasm, Commitment, and Passion, Presented to Betty Neeley, Team St. Louis. 'We demonstrate what tolerance, friendship, and understanding can achieve. This world needs a lot more of these things, and we can give it. Everyone is welcome in our community as an example. We like anyone who likes us.' -Tom Waddell, Activist, Gay Games Founder."

LIZZI KEHOE:
That's amazing.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
And I would like to speak about this guy. I have a clip of him; he's the guy who started The Gay Games. It was his idea, he developed it. In the sixties, he was in the Olympics. He was in Saudi Arabia in the service; he was a doctor. And when he came back, he was in San Francisco, and he said, right away, he got involved in sports. So they had this dinner, and he was awarded some special award. And he said, probably because I was in

the Olympics, and he said, but out of my mouth, on the stage, I said, wouldn't it be great if San Francisco invited the world to play games in San Francisco? And he's doing an interview at the time when he's saying this on this clip I have. And his arms are back, and he's got on this t-shirt that says Gay Games, whatever. Kind of a skinny guy. And he says so, when I said this, everybody jumped up and started clapping their hands and saying yay! And he said, I had to follow up on that. So, it was a simple: I had to follow up on that. So, anyway, Team St. Louis gave me this plaque, and now, every year, somebody who has done something great, and I get to vote on their name, gets the Betty Neeley Legacy Award. That's one of my five-minutes of fame. Every year, somebody is going to have to read my name.

The other one here [referencing a second award]—it's also a triangle, a very colorful triangle. It says, [reading from award] "Betty Neeley, Grand Marshall St. Louis Pride Parade 2013." And one of the reasons I was chosen is to celebrate the past to awaken the future. And I thought that was pretty cool. I was paired with our town's Shane Cohen, who's the 25th Ward alderman, a gay alderman. So that's my fame. (00:55:00:00) I also got a hat. [laughs]

Anyway, and I'm still involved in things. I was in a meeting Thursday evening, a happy-hour, rather, between St. Louis Village, that's an organization in the Central West End that keeps older people in their homes, and SAGE. They had a happy-hour together because the St. Louis Village wants to be inclusive, so they paired up and had a happy-hour. It turned out really well. This is when, I told you, I was sitting with the two young ladies from SLU [St. Louis University].

I don't know, ask me some questions!

(00:56:18:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:

What's something that has changed your perspective on—I guess, with the various changes that have occurred within the LGBT community and are still occurring, what's been something that's been perspective-changing for you, or maybe surprised you, or has been inspiring for you to see?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

One of the things that has been a surprise to me is that I don't much like being, I forgot the word you use—you know, mainstream. Like gay people being mainstream. We used to have a thing called Wired Women. And we brought in all sorts of comedians and singers and whatever from all over, and had these dances here, and you can no longer do that because you can't get anybody interested in buying these tickets! You can't have these people come here because you can't pay them. We lost that by merging in

with, you know, everybody goes wherever the hell they want to go nowadays, so you have no individuality.

This is a conversation I had with Colin Murphy, who used to be the editor of the *_Vital Voice_*, and he said, I don't think I like this, and I said, me either. I want to say this is four years ago, or five years ago, and I said, we're losing our culture. And he said, right. But that's what you give up, and then all of a sudden, it dawned on me, now I have to re-think the whole black thing, because I've always said, how come they have to have their own pride, and their own this, and their own that. And I'm like, that's why! Because they're losing their culture. Because I feel the same way about us being so mainstream that we can't do those individual things—I don't want the straight world to be the only thing I live in. You know I want to be able to—it's okay with me—but I want to be able to step over here and go to the Party in the Park with a hundred people that are my people.

You don't foresee that. So don't let that surprise you when you get older, and hmm, I don't really like this, whatever the hell it is. (01:00:00:00) It's okay, it's not anything you're going to kill yourself over, but you don't really understand that you're not going to like that.

Do I want people respecting me because I'm gay? No, I want people to accept me because I am a human being. I am a woman. I am Betty Neeley. And then I am a lesbian. That to me is the sequence of things, and that people should allow me to live however I want to live because I allow them to live however they want to live. Do I have opinions about it? Yes. But I don't like that people mistreat kids. So I have an opinion. So, that's not been the best thing that has ever happened to us, is to be—

I mean, it is, and it isn't. I don't know. So, it's a—what do you call it? It's something to be conversed about; it's a conversation piece, for damn sure.

(01:01:39:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:

For sure. Any final things you'd like to talk about, or want to add?

BETTY D. NEELEY:

[pause] Young people just need to keep carrying on. There are all of these things that have opened up to the, the thing I was just talking about that I don't like—you know I don't like the word queer. Actually, there's an article in the newspaper that says, Betty Neeley don't like the word queer, because when I was growing up, that was a very nasty, you know—nobody liked to be called that. So, the young people are now taking that, and that's their mantra, mantra? How do you say that word?

LIZZI KEHOE:
Mantra, mantra—

BETTY D. NEELEY:
OK, you know, whatever.

LIZZI KEHOE:
Tomato, tomato.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
If they choose that, that's okay, I just don't happen to think it's a cool word. I'd much rather be called a lesbian, or a homosexual, or whatever, than queer. It's not a word I like. But then, I don't like snot, either, so. [laughs] Who cares?

But, I think they should embrace everything, think about it, and carry on. And! Move all the rocks. Don't let things be left unturned. Don't be my age and say, I wish I had have—do it. If you go in debt, do it. If people think you're crazy, do it.

(01:04:00:00)

LIZZI KEHOE:
Is there a rock that you wish you would've turned over?

BETTY D. NEELEY:
Yeah, it's called education.

LIZZI KEHOE:
OK.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
And that is my own fault. At any of those times when I was doing any of those million other things, I could've been working my butt off to go back to school. And I still, at this point, can't even write a proper business letter because I don't even know where the commas and the hyphens and the—I can't do that. And spell check helps a lot! At least I spell the word right, [both laugh] whether it's in the right place or not—but I wish I had have at least went back to school and learned some things. (01:05:00:00)

Although, life is a pretty good education in itself, and I wouldn't call me stupid by a long shot, but there's a lot of things I wish I had of known and experienced as I was moving it along. Not particularly now—I don't have time to learn anything new, I'm too busy putting my teeth in, or my hearing aids. [laughs] Or soaking my feet in something! You get to the point in life where your main objective is to take care of yourself, and do all of the things that you should do. So that's kind of where I'm at. And I

do what I can on the outside, and I no longer try to be good-looking. Just neat and clean! [laughs] If I get where I'm neat and clean, that's okay.

LIZZI KEHOE:
Maybe brush your teeth.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
Oh, yeah, well you have to remember to clean your teeth, and put them in and out! [both laugh]

LIZZI KEHOE:
Well, thank you so much for talking with me and sharing your story; it was great to hear.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
Well, I wish I could remember some other stuff—was there questions you wanted to ask me from the book?

LIZZI KEHOE:
I mainly had questions about Team St. Louis and how that was for you since that was a big part of the book, and how the Grand Marshall, the Pride parade. I had a couple of questions about early life stuff, which I actually think you kind of got with going to the bars, and the motorcycle, meeting Cindy. I feel like you covered a lot. Do you want to mention anything else?

BETTY D. NEELEY:
Nope, I'm okay if you're okay.

LIZZI KEHOE:
OK, well, thank you so much.

BETTY D. NEELEY:
Thanks for listening!

[end of transcript]

Word List

Amsterdam
Betty's CB Bar
Betty Neeley Legacy Award
Betty Woods
Butch
Carter Carburetor
Cedar Hill, Dittmer
Cindy (Betty's Partner)
Colin Murphy
Education
Essen Hardware
Femme
Hadley, Arkansas
Ian Darnell
Kitty Kat Klub
Kim
Kris Kleindienst
Left Bank Books
Manchester Avenue
Montreal
Norfolk Avenue
Olive Street
OLOP
Paris
Poplar Bluff, Missouri
Pride
PROMO
San Francisco
Shelley's Midway
Steven Brawley
St. Louis Pride Parade
St. Louis University
Team St. Louis
The Gay Games
Tom Waddell
Totty Dunham
Tower Grove
Transgender
SAGE
Washington Avenue
Williford, Arkansas
Wired Women
Vancouver
Vital Voice