

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Barbara Bernstein

2014

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Barbara Bernstein conducted by Michelle Patrick and Robert Solomon in February 2011. This interview is part of the Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Collection

Session One

Interviewee: Barbara Bernstein

Location: Telephone Interview (New York,  
New York/ Portland, Oregon

Interviewer: Michelle Patrick

Date: February, 2011

Bernstein: My name is Barbara Bernstein, I live in Portland, Oregon. I am a musician, and an audio producer.

Q: Can you tell me where you grew up, and what your family was like?

Bernstein: I grew up in Worcester, Massachusetts, which is about 40 miles west of Boston. My father was a teacher, and he became a high school principal somewhere when I was in junior high. My mother was a homemaker until I think I was in college myself, and then she finished college, and did some teaching, and was kind of a part-time college instructor. There were two other children in the family, I'm the middle one, and actually my brother went to Columbia Law School, and my sister went to Barnard [College], so we have a lot of Columbia [University] connections.

Q: Are you first generation Columbia?

Bernstein: We're all first generation Columbia, in fact my dad went to Harvard [University], and he wanted us all to go to Harvard, and he wanted me to go to Radcliffe [College], and it broke his heart when I applied early admission to Barnard, and didn't bother to apply to Radcliffe at all.

Q: Why Barnard?

Bernstein: I wanted to live in New York, so it had more to do probably with living in New York, and finding prestigious school, because my parents were really big on going to a prestigious school. So, I wanted to go to a good school, but I wanted to be in New York, and actually from the standards my parents were setting for me, Barnard was the only school that fit both being a good school, and being in New York.

Q: The day you got to Barnard, the first day, first afternoon, how would you describe yourself? Who was that girl?

Bernstein: I was eighteen. I was really dying to get away from home and really dying to get out of Central New England. And, I wanted to live in a big city, I wanted the cultural, and social, and political stimulus that New York had, but I also remember—my brother, who was going to be second-year at Columbia Law drove me to school, drove me into New York, and we were crossing over the Washington Bridge from the Bronx into Manhattan, and I said, "I wonder if there's a viable alternative to going to school," I suddenly got cold feet, and I wasn't sure I really

wanted to do it. And, he laughed at me and he said I sounded like Lyndon Johnson trying to figure out how to get out of Vietnam, which was a big thing, because I was actually very concerned about the war, and wanted to jump into being a real anti-war activist, which is what I did when I got to Barnard. [breaks to remove cat from room] I was a wanna-be anti-war activist. My parents actually were, even though they professed to be very liberally politically, they were very adamant about me not getting actively involved in politics. So, I couldn't, with their knowledge, go to anti-war rallies, or marches, or anything when I was in high school, so I really looked forward to getting away from their everyday scrutiny so that I *could* become an activist. One of the first things I did when I got to Barnard was to go to an SDS meeting, and I started going to protests, and I got real involved politically.

Q: Why were they so anti your being involved in politics?

Bernstein: I'm not exactly sure, I never actually got to have those conversations with them while they were alive. But, I think they just didn't want me to get in trouble. I think they were afraid of sticking out too much. They had been through the McCarthy era, and my father was really, really against McCarthy, however I think it also frightened him to see, I think he might have known people who had their lives destroyed by being blacklisted, and he didn't want that to happen to us.

Q: What were your parent's political leanings?

Bernstein: They were liberal Democrats, they voted in every election. My father voted for Adlai Stevenson, even when he stopped running I think he was still voting for Stevenson after he died. So, that was part of his idiosyncrasy. But, I think that Stevenson represented to my father, like, his political philosophy. But, they were not active at all in any kind of political movements. But, we did, like, we boycotted Woolworth's when I was a kid, I guess starting in 1960, and my mom was very good about never going to Woolworth's as soon as the sit-ins started in the South. And, she—I sort of understood myself what was going on, but she really explained to me why it was good for us not to patronize Woolworth's, and that it mattered that what Woolworth's was doing in the South was reflected by the, you know, we should respond to boycotting it in the North, not to support their racist policies.

Q: So, you became immediately involved with SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], and you were part of the anti-war demonstrations, and scenes from the very first. What were you looking for academically and socially and romantically?

Bernstein: Academically, I came wanting to be a writer, and that was one of the things that actually appealed to me about Barnard, is they had a creative writing program, I could actually major in creative writing. And, I wound up doing that even though, you know, I think, at least when I was there, or we were there, it was like you had two years before you declared a major, so I ran through a whole lot of other fantasies before I finally came back to deciding I was going to be a creative writing major, which was a very pragmatic thing to major in, it really helped my career choices later on. So, I was very interested in writing, I was very interested in literature. I,

I was interested in music also, I played the violin, and I had grown up playing the violin, and I started, I took a bunch of music classes at Columbia, and I also joined a string quartet somewhere in my freshman year. I think there were a couple, I think a couple of people in the quartet were students, and a couple of them were people who lived in the neighborhood.

Q: From the neighborhood or—

Bernstein: From Morningside Heights, I mean, I don't remember, I mean, all I remember is that everybody in my string quartet wound up being in different buildings during the strike that Spring, '68, and our quartet broke up because we were off doing [unclear]. But, when I came to Barnard I had pretty, I think I had relatively traditional ideas about art, and culture, and my politics were pretty much left liberal. I was pretty surprised when I went to my first SDS meeting to find out that liberal was a bad word, and you wanted to be radical or a revolutionary, and that took some processing. I did go do lots of a bunch of avant-garde kinds of things. I remember going to a very early video show, Channel 1 in the East Village, and I went to some clubs, and some other avant-garde theater and music, but it took me a little while to really understand the avant-garde, because I think my idea of unusual and things that challenged the mainstream, like reading the *Evergreen Review*, and off-Broadway, before I got to New York, and then I discovered there was a whole lot more that was way more underground, and way more radical than any of the culture that I had been exposed to in Massachusetts.

Q: Do you remember any of the things that you saw early on?

Bernstein: Yes, I'm trying to remember, there was, the Living Theater, that was one of the strangest things that I went to, and actually I probably, at the time I had a hard time exactly understanding what was going on, and why people thought it was good. And, now probably because I'm a little bit skeptical about avant-garde, or experimental art that's just experimental for the sake of being experimental, I like things to have content, so I might have returned to some of the values that I had when I was eighteen. But, I remember that that really kind of blew my mind when I went to see them.

Q: What was so mind blowing about it?

Bernstein: Well, it was no linear structure, there was no narrative at all in what they were doing. It was kind of like, their theater pieces were kind of like be-in's, in a way. And, so the experience of being amongst all these people that I wasn't exactly sure what was going on, and the difference between what was going on, on stage, and what was going on in the audience, and part of it was to break down those barriers. But, I wasn't so sure that I appreciated it, I think it made me kind of uncomfortable. I also went to a lot of rock concerts, and that was one of the things, I was really into rock and roll, and I remember early on going to my first Who concert at the Fillmore, and loving that. And, not exactly excited by the way they broke their instruments at the end of the concert, but I loved their music, and I went to—I saw Judy Collins the first year I was in New York. I got turned on to Joni Mitchell that year, she put out her first album I guess before the strikes started. And, I remember Bob Dylan came back from his hiatus from his



motorcycle accident, and gave a concert with the Woody Guthrie Memorial in January of '68. I didn't get tickets for that, but I was really excited that he was back and performing again.

Q: Talk about how, already in the fall of '67 liberal was already a bad word at SDS. What was the model of political attitude then? What were you supposed to be doing and thinking?

Bernstein: Well, liberals were the ones who got us into the Vietnam War, or at least that was the perspective, I think it actually started with the Republican party back in the 50's, but the liberals were the architects, like Dean Rusk, and Robert McNamara, the architects of the war, and liberals, I think in the eyes of SDS, and in my eyes as they started opening up, were people who wanted to basically preserve the status quo, they wanted to make a few concessions to working people, and to people of color, but they didn't really want to change the fact that they were in power. And, what SDS was calling for was a complete overturning of who was in power. It's appropriate timing to be talking about this; I think that's what people in Egypt are talking about while they're in the streets right now. So, it wasn't just that you changed a few things in government, but you wanted to have a complete change of ownership of power structures of who's in control. And, also the thinking so that you don't have the same expectations that, like, White men are better than everybody else, and they're the ones who should call all the shots. And, SDS I think really helped me to understand what the needs and the concerns, and the life of particularly Black people, and also growing a deeper understanding of Latino people, that they had a reality, just as valid as the White experience that I had grown up in, and that their realities

needed to be validated in the ways that power was shared, in the ways that all society was structured.

Q: Were there any Black people in SDS?

Bernstein: Of course no. There was one person, and I remember, I have this memory of one guy that was in SDS, but no, SDS was primarily White kids, it was a lot of Jewish kids from Queens and Brooklyn.

Q: Tell me how these people sensitized you to the Black experience.

Bernstein: Well, I think a lot of them, and particularly the ones who grew up in New York, had actually had a lot more relationships with Black people than I had, because Worcester was pretty much a White town, in my high school, I went to actually two different high schools, and the first one I went to it was Classical High, there was one Black kid in the whole school, and actually there was a small group of kids that I hung out with, and he was part of our group. But—and he was not a representative of most of the Black people in Worcester. Then the last year they combined our high school with the Commercial High School, and there were a number of Black kids in the high school, but the school was completely segregated according to who had been going to Classical High and had been going to Commercial High, and I didn't have any Black friends. So, at Barnard there were probably more Black students than I was accustomed to going to school with, but Barnard also was I think very segregated, and some of it—it was also the time

of Black Power, so a lot of Black students didn't feel like they needed to mix. The idea of integration was an anathema to them, because they felt that integration meant giving up their Black identity. And, it was a lot of stuff for me to struggle with, because I, in my mind, believed in integration, and I was, you know, was supporting the Civil Rights Movement, but I hadn't had a really close Black friendship to understand what it was to be Black, and to understand what it meant to really try to be affirming your own cultural identity, and what it took to do that.

Q: Are you saying you felt this from the very beginning, or in the wake of the strike, the racial polarization?

Bernstein: I think I felt it from the very beginning. I mean, I know this, but my memory of it was the Black women at Barnard, they wanted to have a separate table to eat at, and you—I mean, this is my big memory of it, and some of this might have been colored by a lot of distortions that were spoken later on, but I didn't remember feeling very comfortable around the handful of Black students at Barnard, and I think most of that was because I had not really been around Black people very much in my life, and it took me a really long time to start, to develop a comfort level, and to get out of—to break down this barrier that in my mind I wasn't a racist, but in reality it took me a while to understand what, how racism permeates so much of White society, and I was just a product of that. And, so to really have to break through all the assumptions that I had, and to come out on the other side. And, it started perhaps a little bit at Barnard, it really, I think for me didn't make a lot of change—I didn't really get to a place where I saw a major difference, and appreciate what, what's this all about, until maybe like twenty years ago. We

were having some big political struggles here in Oregon around, actually it was around gay rights, and that's when I started making some very close Black friends, and I think when you're, when you're feeling like you're being oppressed enough, then you might start to identify better with other people who have experienced a long, long time of oppression.

Q: Tell me about what you were looking for romantically?

Bernstein: Oh, I'd like to find a boyfriend, and I wanted, I think I had this image of this particular kind of bearded guy who probably played guitar, and was a poet, and, and politically radical. And, I never met him. I met a lot of bearded guys who were poets, and who were politically radical, but I don't think I ever met the guy that I was looking for. And, I did have a boyfriend freshman year, and we basically shared a love of rock and roll, and smoking marijuana, and shit like that. And, we broke up during the strike, because he did not share my activism. But, what was really going on for me, and I didn't appreciate this until I left Barnard was that I'm lesbian, and that my four years at Barnard trying to find the right guy, was I was looking in the wrong direction, and I would have been a lot happier a lot sooner if I had realized that I was really attracted to women.

Q: So, you had no understanding that you were lesbian the whole time you were at Barnard?

Bernstein: Well, I actually—I, I was talking to a friend, I was actually doing an interview with a friend, an old friend of mine for a documentary she did about lesbians living in the country, and

this is probably about twenty years ago. This was a woman that I had known for a really long time in Portland. And, she said to me about how she was always a lesbian, but she hadn't known it until she had realized it whenever, and when she said that, yes, I realized when I was thirteen that I was a lesbian, and I didn't want to own it, and so I just kept pushing it away. But, I had a whole lot of different experiences growing up, and at Barnard, where the—my sense that I was really attracted to women would rise a little bit closer to the surface, and then I just didn't want to deal with, and I would just push it back, and try to find some guy to get interested in.

Q: Did you go with the thought of getting married?

Bernstein: Never went that far, no. Actually, I never had very successful relationships with men. I think the longest I would be with a guy would maybe be eight months, and it just—I just really, I had, a couple times I had really close women friends. One my sophomore year at Barnard, and another one my senior year, she was actually a—I was living in Washington Heights, and I was hanging out with a lot of people who were doctors and nurses up there, and she was a nurse. And, I think in both of these cases I was really drawn to both of these women, but I didn't really want to own it. But, with my friend my sophomore year, we were both real involved in SDS, and we had this real intense relationship, and my roommates would make jokes about us being lovers, or being girlfriends, even though we didn't do anything sexually. But, later when she came out about a year before I did, and we had conversations later on about what it felt like, and all the sexual tension that we were both aware of, but we just didn't—weren't quite ready to own it yet.

Q: So, you dated—

Bernstein: Lots of guys.

Q: Like the rest of us.

Bernstein: Actually, I never thought of expecting—I don't know what you thought but, like, I sort of found my whole period, like, my sort of sexually awakening years, the end of high school and college, was when dating, you didn't really date, you would hang out with people. So, I didn't have the kind of formal dates that I saw people starting to have by maybe the mid- to late-70's, but I, I would go out with guys, and I would hang out with guys, and I would sleep with guys, and I would think I was falling in love with guys, but it was all pretty frustrating actually.

Q: Do you remember your first friend at Barnard?

Bernstein: Yes, actually her name is Susan Brown, and we're still friends. And, we became friends I think it was the first night of freshman week, and she lived right down the hall from me at Hewitt Hall and I don't know what it was, but we were definitely drawn to each other, and were best friends for the first couple years, and then she moved to California. We've stayed friends most of the time since then, there were a few years that we lost touch, and then connected

at the 1968, the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the '68 strike that was two years ago, and we have been really close ever since then.

Q: Was your background similar, or very different?

Bernstein: Her parents were a little bit more left liberal than mine, and more consciously political. I remember I went to Seder, the Passover at her parent's house in the Spring of freshman year, and her father was giving this whole lecture at the Seder about Martin Luther King, who I believe had just been assassinated just before the Seder. I was impressed by that, and I thought her parents were just way more hip than mine. But, basically she was Jewish middle-class suburban Philadelphia; I was Jewish middle-class, a little bit more outside of Boston than suburban, but that kind of suburban life.

Q: The strike, we were involved that first night at Hamilton Hall, did you get involved later, were you there when it was decided not to leave Hamilton? Were you there when it was decided that the White students should leave Hamilton? At what point did you become involved in the strike?

Bernstein: Well, I was there almost from the very beginning, except that—I was going to go to the rally at noon that day, the [sundial] that was going to try to stop the [gym]. I was with this guy that I had met earlier in freshman year, and we both slept in. So, we're dashing up Amsterdam Avenue to get to the strike, or to get to the rally, and I think we ran into the group of

protestors as they were running from the gym site, and going back to campus. So, that's when I connected. I was part of the group of students that went into Hamilton Hall, and stayed, and that's—my boyfriend and I broke up, because when they were first threatening arrest he just left, and I stayed, and that was the end of our relationship. I stayed through the night, I was there when the Black students asked us to leave, and I was part of the contingent that went into Low, broke into Low Library, and was part of the group that first took over [Grayson Kirk's] office. When there was another threat of arrest I was not the first out of the window, but I left Low Library, and I came back the next day, and I was, I was there for the rest of the week, and got arrested at Low.

Q: Talk about the moment when the Black students asked you to leave, what was your feeling at that time?

Bernstein: I think my feeling was a lot of disappointment, in a way, and I also kind of understood it. And, actually it was interesting a few years ago at the reunion, to really for the first time hear the Black point-of-view of what was going on in their minds, because I don't think any of the White students understood that, basically how much more political experience the Black students had had, and how much more serious they were. They saw us as a bunch of partiers—and there was certainly an element of the White students who *were* there for the party. I wasn't, I took it very seriously, and I felt, I felt disappointed in us as White students that we didn't live up to what the Black students wanted from us. But, I also felt that it was really



important that we continue on. I didn't feel like I could just leave Hamilton Hall and just go back to the dorm, and so that's why I was part of the group that took over Low Library.

Q: Talk about being in the library, [unclear] for a number of days. Was it eight, nine days?

Bernstein: I think it was six or seven well, we went in the morning of April 24<sup>th</sup>, and we were arrested at the early morning of April 30<sup>th</sup>, so I guess that would be six days. It was certainly an experience like nothing I'd ever had before, and I don't think I've had too many experiences like that since. Because we were, you really, you couldn't leave, though I did leave—I left twice, and both times I had to fight my way back in, and that was really a challenge. In fact, I went to this peace march in Central Park on Saturday, and then I had to fight my way back in when I came back from the peace march. The person who was preventing me, or trying very hard to prevent me from getting back into the building, as we were climbing up those grates that covered the basement windows of Low Library to get up to the ledge, and then we would be on the ledge and get in the window, and they would let us into [Grayson Kirk's] office.

So I'm trying to get up to the ledge, and this guy is holding on to my legs, and he's my music teacher. It was really a strange situation, that there I am, and this music teacher was somebody I had a lot of respect for, and I'm trying to get away from him holding on to my legs, and he's trying to keep me from doing something I really believe in, and I really want to do. There was this guy in the window, actually on the ledge, and I remember his name was Morris, and he was a pageant player, which was a street theater group from the East Village, and he's yelling at me,

“Kick him, kick him—” and I’m thinking I’m a pacifist; I can’t kick somebody. Then I realized I really wanted to be back in the library so badly that I kicked my teacher, and he let go, and I got back in. That probably also reshaped my thinking about pacifism for a number of years, and that was at the point where I stopped being a pacifist, which I became a pacifist later on after watching the violence excesses of the Weathermen, and things like that. But, that whole time in Low Library, I mean, we had meetings almost non-stop, which was an interesting experience.

I kind of remember going back-and-forth between having these endless meetings, and then sunning ourselves on the ledge—and, there’s actually a photograph that a friend of mine took—well, it was up on display at Low Library two years ago, he took a photograph of that photograph, and showed it to me, and there I am on the ledge with a whole bunch of my friends, and a couple people I don’t recognize. I think we were reading comic books, and I, in the photograph I’m barefoot, and looking very happy, you know, you look so relaxed, just kind of this period of just kind of hanging out, and setting ourselves on the ledge. But, I think that that photograph belies a whole of tension that was underneath that, because the whole time we were there we knew we were going to get busted probably, and we didn’t know what the bust was going to be like. And I guess, before I get to the bust, the other thing that was really life-changing for me was the amount of sharing that we did, that everything was about, everything was communal, everything was about sharing. I don’t know that the meetings were quite so open about sharing, I think that women didn’t speak nearly as much as men, and probably younger people like myself didn’t speak as much as the older students, and the grad students. But, there was a whole lot of caring about people getting fed, taking care of them, making sure they got

enough rest. It was really the first time I had been in a commune, it really was a commune for those six days that we were there.

Then the night of the bust I think was up to that point the most frightening night of my life, and I remember as the tactical police force were pounding at the doors, and trying to break down all the barricades that we'd put in, which we had a whole room full of barricades before they got into the inner office, which is where we were holed up. We were all linking arms, and singing "We Shall Not Be Moved," and trying to support each other. And, a lot of us were really scared. And, then the TPF [tactical patrol force] broke into the room, and started pulling us apart, and I remember them, like, these cops, lifting me up and throwing me to the next cop, and telling me to keep moving, that they're doing it. And, my feet never touched the ground, and then just as we were leaving the last part of the office suite, this cop hit me in the back of the head, and really hurt me. So, the rest of my experience before I finally got to the hospital about forty-eight hours later, was this concern about how much I was bleeding, and how much I was hurt, and the excitement of being arrested for something I believed in, and the discomfort of being crowded in a very small prison cell, I think there were about a hundred holed up in a cell that probably could have held five people comfortably. There was all this exhilaration, and excitement, and commitment to what we were believing in, and then I was also a little bit afraid I might bleed to death, so it was kind of a contradiction.

Q: Talk about these meetings that took the whole day, what was the content of them?

They were—we were talking about whether we were going to hold out for amnesty. We had six demands, and the first demand had to do with the Columbia severing itself from the Institute for Defense Analysis. The second one had to do with stopping the gym, and I'm not sure which one was first, maybe the gym was first, and severing the relationship with the IDA was second. And, then there was a call for getting rid of the charges against a bunch of students, reinstating students who had been expelled from the school a few weeks earlier for demonstrating indoors. Then the last demand was that we were calling, demanding that we receive amnesty, that we not be charged with any kind of charges for breaking the law by taking over the buildings. And, that was seen as the ultimate revolutionary act, to demand amnesty because you believed what you were doing was right, and by taking punishment for doing it, you were actually undercutting your own principles. And, it was a very different approach than the civil rights movement too, the Free Speech movement in Berkeley took, where you would take your just punishments, or whatever is due to you. I mean, many people who were, are heroes spent a lot of time in jail. And, two years ago at the reunion there were still debates about amnesty. And, I'm looking at it now thinking it was maybe a sort of self-indulgent kind of demand, and I think it was very divisive, because a lot of students didn't understand the point of amnesty, and then other students who were holding out for it believed that the ones that didn't understand it were not truly understanding revolutionary principles.

Q: So, there was a lot of chewing and [unclear] about whether amnesty was something to hold out for?

Bernstein: Yeah, and I know that that was a big discussion in every one of the buildings, not just for the Low Library. I think Low Library, overall we were all, the majority of students in Low wanted to hold out for amnesty, and I have a feeling I probably voted for it, because that was the perception that I had, or I was convinced by people who I respected, who I thought had more experience, and were older than I was, and if they believed in amnesty then it must be right, because I was only nineteen, and what did I know? So, and we would have these votes every day, we would have—I don't know how many times a day we had a vote about whether we still were going to hold out for amnesty. I think we talked about other things too, but that's the one thing that really stays in my mind.

Q: These people whose opinion you respected, were any of them women?

Bernstein: One woman was Nancy Bieberman, who is doing great stuff in the South Bronx now, and she was pretty—she was one of the few women in a leadership role in SDS. I'm trying to remember any other women that spoke out at Low Library, I mean, there were not that many women in the library, I think it was probably 30% women, but I think everybody else who was holding forth were guys.

Q: Were you at this time aware of the women's movement?

Bernstein: Not really, I think I became aware of the woman's movement about a few months later.

Q: I'm sorry I didn't hear.

Bernstein: I became aware of the woman's movement probably around June of '68, there were some women who, from Columbia, who went out to [UC] Berkeley, and came back with the woman's movement imbued in them, and they gave some presentations at the liberation school that we had that summer, in one of the fraternity houses on 114<sup>th</sup> Street, that was sort of an outgrowth of the strike. And, at first when I heard about the woman's movement I couldn't relate to it, because one of the things these women were talking about is how mini skirts were sexist, and that women shouldn't follow fashion, because fashion was all in the eyes of men. I was really attached to my mini skirts in those days, and I didn't understand why I would have to stop wearing them.

Q: At what point did the woman's movement start to make sense to you, after Barnard?

Bernstein: Actually, I, my, after my junior year at Barnard I traveled across Canada, and wound up in San Francisco, and I spent some time with this woman who I had met at Barnard, who actually got me to go to my first SDS meeting. And, there, the summer of 1970, she got me to go to my first woman's consciousness group, and really turned me on to feminism. And, I came back from that trip with a whole much deeper understanding of feminism. And, then I was hanging out with these women in Washington Heights that year who were a little older than me, and they were all part of women's group, and I started appreciating the importance of feminism.

Also, Barnard was really kind of having like a transformation, and feminism was really taking hold on campus, and I started appreciating finally that I was going to a woman's school, because the first three years I just wanted to go to school at Columbia, I took most of my classes there. And, my senior year I appreciated that there was something really powerful about being in a woman's school.

Q: Was there a breakthrough moment when you said, oh, I get it, this is feminism?

Bernstein: Maybe, actually, I think it happened for me in San Francisco, I traveled across country with these four guys, and I ran into a lot of other women that were traveling with all these men, and every time I would meet another woman traveling with a bunch of guys, we would have a strong bond. I felt that summer I was looking for women's camaraderie, I was looking for friendship with women, I was not merely looking for a boyfriend anymore. And, I came back from Barnard, I mean, I came back to Barnard, and to New York that fall with a new-found appreciation for really valuing my relationships with women. And, that's one of the things that happened that year with the women that I was meeting in Washington Heights.

Q: Tell me what it's like to travel with a bunch of guys, and no other woman there.

Bernstein: Well, this is 1970, so it would be real different if I were doing it now. One thing, I did, I was, I saw myself up until that trip as always being one of the guys, and most of my friends were guys for the first two years at school, and that's one reason why—I did want to travel, I was

going to travel with another woman friend, and she bailed out on the trip, and that's why I wound up being the only woman on that trip. It felt very lonely. I felt that the guys did their thing, and there were a lot of things that I really wasn't included in, and I also started appreciating the really great difference and sensibility between men and women, when like day in and day out I was just with these guys. And, when I would run into another woman, when we would stop—and, we were following a bunch of rock festivals across Canada, and so I would meet women at the rock festivals, and I just found that I was so hungry just to sit down, and just relate the way you relate to another woman, that's when I started realizing that there was—that I needed a lot more in my life than just spending time with guys, and that there's a kind of nurturing that happens in women's relationships that I wasn't finding in my friendships with men.

Q: Tell me what it was like to be living in a cell for—how long were you in the cell?

Bernstein: We were in the cell overnight, I think I was arraigned some time in the afternoon, it was probably about twenty hours after the arrest that we were arraigned. But, the blood did congeal, so I stopped bleeding after maybe a couple hours, but we had these—we were given blankets before we were arrest to cover our heads, so that if we were hit we would have some protection. And, I had this giant quilt that I had had over head, and I had just taken it off, because I thought we were past the gauntlet of baton-wielding police, and that's when I got hit. So, I covered my hair with this blanket, and I remember actually running into my friend Susan Brown, because she had been in mathematics, and we ran into each other at the first precinct, the 25<sup>th</sup> precinct I guess I guess we were taken to. And, she's all starry-eyed, and she's telling me,



“Isn’t this the most wonderful thing that’s ever happened to you,” I took the blanket off my head and shoulder, showed her how much I was bleeding, and it brought her down a little bit. There was an older woman—older, she was probably like twenty-five—who was in Low Library, I think her name was Sylvia, and I remember kind of, she sort of gave me, like, sort of some maternal support that I needed, and just—she was also advocating to get me medical attention. And, so we finally got a guard to come over, and she was demanding that I receive medical attention, and the guard said that if I went up to the medical floor down at 100 Centre Street, that I would be severed from everybody else. And, I didn’t want to do that, it felt really frightening, and she agreed that it wasn’t a good idea. So, I just kind of bore with it, and, just waited it out until I was finally arraigned, and got taken up to St. Luke’s.

Q: Did you have to have stitches?

Bernstein: Yeah, I think I had six or eight stitches. So, it could have been worse, I mean, it was—I think it was, the other thing that the doctor kept telling me, I think a couple people who knew a little bit more about head wounds than I did, who I was arrest with, were saying, “It looks a lot worse than it is, head wounds bleed profusely, and so it’s not like you’re going to bleed to death, it’s just that there’s a lot of blood in a head wound.”

Q: Were your parents supportive of you having been in the building, or were they appalled?

Bernstein: They were mixed. My brother was at Columbia Law School, and he actually picked me up after the arraignment, and he and his fiancée took me to St. Luke's. And, then he—and, then I stayed with these friends of mine, I had these friends who were in their late 20's, and I babysat for them, and they lived in the West 70's, and my brother took me down to stay with them that night, because staying at the dorm didn't feel like the right thing to do. And, I did want to have somebody just a little older than me help me take care of me. And, so I guess my brother told my parents that I was staying there, my parents called me there, and they started out being really upset with me.

In fact in the middle of the strike there was a message—no, actually I think I got a letter from my father somewhere in the middle of the strike, and he never had written me a letter in my life, and he was basically saying that he was going to come to New York and take me out of the building, take me home, because I was doing something that was so horrible in his eyes. But, after I actually got arrested, and they saw that I really had these principles that I was really sticking up for, they had a little more respect, and they didn't insist that I come home and stay with them, and they didn't insist that, like, kick me out of Barnard. And, they had a hard time with my radical politics for a number of years, but I think they were at least appreciative of the principles that I had, and they respected that I was enough committed to them that I actually got arrested for my principles.

Q: Did they understand that you wanted a racial overthrow of the United State government?

Bernstein: Yeah, well, I mean, they quite understood it, but we would have a lot of arguments about that for the next several years. And, in fact long after I had stopped believing in violent revolution, I think my parents thought that I still did, and would cause these arguments. I had a hard time for many years explaining to them what I really believed in.

Q: When *did* you stop believing in violent revolution?

Bernstein: Oh, I'd say, I moved to Portland in the fall of '71, and moving to Portland really, it just had, it brought me down a few notches, and it calmed me down a lot. One of the things that was really difficult for me in the last year or two that I was in New York was all the interracial tension, and just the violence, and how many Blacks were being killed by police, and how many police are being killed by the Black activists. I just—it was just too tense. So, in Portland, and unfortunately Portland back in those days, and still to some degree, is a predominantly White city, and I missed the cultural diversity for sure that New York had, but it was just a place where I could breathe a little more freely, and I could think about other things besides, well, survival, and I thought that New York was really a tough place to survive in, in 1970, '71 in terms of walking down the street and not getting mugged or attacked. I also got really involved in environmental issues, and in the whole food movement. I mean we had, one of the things that, like, the organizing principles were food coops, and I got more involved with food coops, I got more involved with the health care movement. And, so I started getting involved with things that had to do more directly with improving peoples lives, so trying to overthrow the government

seemed more and more distant, and maybe, at least pointless, and in some ways actually maybe counterproductive.

I started questioning what would we replace it with if we just overthrew the government, and we didn't have some kind of program. I started agreeing more with the people who had argued with SDS about what do you stand for, and you're just against things, you need to be for things, which it was interesting that that's how people like myself say about the Tea Party. But, I do definitely believe that you need to have a vision of the world you want to create, and I started having that vision in Portland. And, then the first summer I was here I heard Sister Elizabeth McCallister, and Dave Dellinger speak at a rally against the Vietnam War, and Dave Dellinger said that being a pacifist, the only difference between being a pacifist and being a violent revolutionary, you're equally militant, but a pacifist is way more creative in the tactics they take. And, I thought that that really resonated with me, and I decided that pacifism was really the way to go.

Q: Did you always think that you wanted a career, or did you think you were going to be like your mom, a stay-at-home mom for a while? Did you want to be a mom at all? What were your goals when you hit Barnard, and had they changed by the time you left Barnard?

Bernstein: Well, I wanted to be a writer actually, from a pretty early age. When I was a little kid I was very interested in science, my father who was a science teacher was grooming me to be a nuclear physicist, or I mean, I started out wanting to be an astronomer, and I got interested in physics. And, then our family joke was I went to see *West Side Story*, and he believed it ruined

my life, because I was so moved by *West Side Story* that I thought I wanted to be a movie maker, or not that, because that seemed way impossible. I wanted to be a musician, or a composer, or probably settle on being a writer. Interestingly I became more of a musician and composer than a writer. But, I didn't think in terms of having a career; I didn't somehow; I wasn't realistic to think about it at all, being a writer is a very difficult thing if you want to actually want to earn a living you can write for sure, but supporting yourself as a writer is certainly a big challenge. So, I went in thinking I would be a greater writer, and that would be my career. And, then by the time I left Barnard, and I guess I thought I might get married, but I didn't want motherhood, and being a wife to be my identity, I really saw myself as being somebody who would achieve, achieve in my own life, and my own way, and definitely have my own meaningful work.

But, by the time I left Barnard I was much more of a hippie, and I had actually was kind of down on careerism, and professionalism. And, I remember that the week of my graduation the cover story in *Time* magazine was "Class of '71, no job prospects." And, I thought, that's fine by me; I don't want a job; that's the last thing I want. So, I went off to the West Coast in search of a place to live where you didn't have to have a job, and actually Portland, Oregon turned out to be a place, because it was so cheap to live here, and people lived in large houses communally, that for very little money I could support myself, I worked, just part-time jobs, a couple of hours a week, and I did lots and lots of community service. I was very serious in my writing then, and I started playing in musical bands, and became, I did a lot of political action. But, political action more in terms of community service, rather than, I certainly wasn't going to meetings all the time like I had the couple of years I was involved with SDS, and apply revolution was much more grounded

in, in really making social change at the grassroots, and really doing it in terms of improving the community.

Q: What sorts of community service did you do?

Bernstein: Well, the first, actually the very first thing I got involved with the day I came to Portland, or the day after I came to Portland, the Attica prison rebellion happened. There were a bunch of us from New York who had just landed in Portland, and there was a community radio station, KBOO, which in those days a very small station, and just about anybody could walk in and do programming. So, we did the special on the Attica prison revolt, because we called up people in New York, and got first-hand reports, second-hand reports, that what was going on, and we did this long special about it. So, that was the very first thing I ever did, and it got me interested in doing more radio. I'd actually been a part of a woman's radio collective in San Francisco for a few months, when I lived in San Francisco for five months before I settled in Portland, so I really was excited about doing community radio. So, that's one thing I did. I also got involved with food coops, and was more than – I volunteered at the coop, I didn't just buy my food there, and pay a membership fee, but I would do food runs, and I'd do the cash register, and was very active in the food coop. And, then I got involved in the women's health clinic in Portland, and learned how to do pregnancy tests, and pap smears, and learned an awful lot about women's health. And, taught classes for other women, and did that for a few years.

Q: Tell me what is community radio.

Bernstein: Community radio is primarily volunteer produced and organized radio. It has—there are different kinds of radio licenses, it's public radio, but public radio can be licensed to a government, or to an educational institution, or to the community. And, KBOO, and actually in New York WBAI, which is licensed for the Pacifica Foundation, are community organizations. And, our radio station it's mostly volunteer produced. There's a paid staff, there's a board like any non-profit would have, and it's pretty freewheeling in terms of the programming, although in the last ten to fifteen years we've become more savvy about actually creating programming that we're going to have listeners for, because we started realizing you can't have programs just for your own pleasure, you'd have to program for the listeners, you have to be able to reach people, and want people to tune you in, and actually learn what it is that you're trying to get across. So, I've been, I've been involved with KBOO off and on since 1971, and have been—

Q: You've been involved in KBOO, sorry, I didn't hear the last—

Bernstein: Oh, since 1971 off and on.

Q: And you are still involved in KBOO.

Bernstein: Right. I mean I, I was on the staff for a while, and I, I've actually part of my life I've supported myself getting grants to do radio documentaries, and to do some other projects that I run through KBOO. So, I've actually, most people at KBOO don't get any money for what they

do, but because I've been pretty good about getting grant money, I actually got paid to do a whole number of radio documentaries. And, now I still do a regular, I do a weekly environmental show, it's an interview show, and it's on every Monday morning.

Q: Tell me about the subjects of your radio documentaries, your favorite ones.

Bernstein: My favorite ones. Well, I did a couple shows in the mid-, late-80's about the Vietnam War, I did one called *War Stories: A Vietnam Retrospectives*, that looked back at the Vietnam War—and, this is where we're closing in on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war. And, I looked back at the war through the lens of writing that had been, writing by Vietnam vets, and then I also had a couple non-vets, like Michael Herr, who was a war reporter. The piece included excerpts of writings that I had dramatically read, and then a lot of interviews with vets, and other people. And, it was an interesting time, way to look back at the war, and see it through the eyes of vets, because I had basically seen it through the eyes of the anti-war movement when I was protesting the war, and then through the eyes of Vietnam Vets Against The War, but I never just talked to, like, vets who were just trying to survive, and didn't have a real political agenda.

Then after that I did a piece about Cambodia, and how Cambodia was destroyed by the United States through bombing campaigns, and the invasions starting in 1969. And, looked at the history of Cambodian culture, and how little survived the war. And, then I got to go to Cambodia a few years ago when it was finally safe to go, and it was quite a moving experience to finally see the country. I've also done a bunch of programs about the religious right, one that was about



their anti-gay, the war against gays and lesbians, and then I did another one about their attack on public education. Then for the last fifteen years I've been focusing on environmental issues, and I did a quartet of pieces, one about salmon issues, and protection—the destruction of salmon runs, and the efforts to try to restore salmon runs in the Columbia watershed. I did one about urban gardening, and protecting urban nature. I did one about forest fires, and focused on a really big fire here in southern Oregon in 2002 called *The Biscuit Fire*, looking at forest management and rethinking the importance of having fire be a part of the landscape of forests in the West. Then I did a piece about climate change, extreme weather, and the way that we use, or abuse or landscapes. So, those are the last few pieces that I've done.

Q: Tell me at what point these part-time jobs and community service turned into a profession.

Bernstein: Well, I went back to school in the late 70's to study music, and I was going to be practical and get my teaching degree, and be a music teacher. But, while I was there I just got so interested in music, and started actually developing some real musical skills. And, I didn't want to waste my time with all the stuff you had to take when you're in the Ed program, so I stopped, I dropped the Ed program, and just took a lot of music classes. And, then somewhere in the course of that I needed a work-study job, and I had been volunteering at KBOO, so I got a work-study job at KBOO. I was actually working in the membership department of KBOO, I wasn't doing a production job, but I spent a lot of time learning radio production, and got really interested, and started doing shows there. And, somehow I brought the two interests together of music and radio, and it kind of honed itself in terms of, like, developing a lot of techniques, recording

techniques, and editing techniques, and I was very interested in electronic music for a few years, which really married music and radio when I did a whole bunch of electronic pieces on tape. And, somewhere in that I discovered that I had a real knack for doing, for producing radio, and for producing documentaries, and so when I started getting funded for it, it was a very nice thing to get paid for doing something that I really liked. And, I also was starting to make some money playing music, I was doing a lot of these theater, dance, and I started a Klezmer band with another friend, and we actually performed a lot, and were performing at schools. And, so for about ten years I was splitting my time—a friend of mine, actually one of the people in my band said he made a quarter of a living doing this job, and a quarter of a living doing that job, and then there would be the other half of the living that he wasn't making. And, I thought that doing a quarter of a living doing radio, quarter of a living playing music, and I had to live really cheap, because I wasn't making the other half of a living. And, I sometimes I've done actually quite well, there was a while when there was a lot of funding available, and I was doing pretty well raising money for my radio documentaries. And, then at times it's drier.

Q: What did you just say?

Bernstein: And other times the money runs out, the money hasn't been so great in getting grants for radio projects for the last couple years. And, I've also done some video, my partner's a video producer, and we've done some videos together, and there were periods in my life where I was spending more time doing video.

Q: At what point did you become aware of the gay and lesbian liberation movement?

Bernstein: Well, Stonewall, when in 1969 I was, even though I wasn't identifying as a lesbian yet, I was very moved and motivated by the rebellion and Stonewall Inn. I watched in fascination as the gay liberation front took shape. And, the last year I was in New York when I would march in anti-war marches, I would find myself marching with the gay liberation front, which I guess was sort of a foretelling of where I would go. And, when I came to Portland I met a lot of lesbians, or women who were considering being lesbians, and there was a real strong lesbian community here, and that was at the point where I really started identifying as a lesbian. And, everything was political in 1971, I mean, and also I think there was a couple years where being a feminist, and being a lesbian were all kind of mooshed together, at least here in Portland. I think also it was true in New York, and in, in the Bay Area. And a lot of women who really were straight kind of experimented with being lesbian, because they either felt pressured to do it, or because it was a political line that you couldn't be a true feminist unless you were completely women-oriented. And, but for me it was more than just political pressure, I also found that I, my true nature was to be with women.

[Interruption]

Q: [Unclear] Drugs were so much a part of life for some, others not. But, I wanted to ask were drugs a major part of your Barnard life?

Barnard: At Barnard yes, they definitely were. I had started smoking pot when I was in high school, and actually that first night at Barnard I met this friend from high school who was going to Columbia, and we went down into Riverside Park, and we had a bottle of cheap wine, and we had some pot, and we indulged. And, I think that set the tone for—I actually was not much of a drinker, I never have been, so the wine wasn't usually part of the scene, but I was very much into pot. And, I started doing mescaline my freshman year, and actually I remember my first mescaline trip, I was at Take-Home Deli, remember that, 115<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, and the mescaline started coming on, and everything was strobing, it was a really—I hadn't read about—it was a very odd setting to have that experience. But, I—and then when I got really involved with SDS after the strike, I actually did less drugs, I probably continued to smoke pot that whole year, but I didn't do very much acid until my junior year. And, then junior and senior year was major acid and mescaline trips, and I was tripping all the time, and had great cosmic experiences. And, mostly by my senior year I had learned not to trip in New York City, so I was spending a lot of time in Boston, and I did most of my drug-taking up there. But, I had great revelations, like I remember being at this beach north of Boston, Plum Island, it was a very beautiful beach, all these rocks. I realized that beauty was what was the most important thing, and that, you know, this obsession I had in New York with the squalor, and the horror, and everybody just being so miserable, and—that there was, in fact, a god, and God is beauty. I mentioned this to one of the people who I'm with, and he's like, "No, no, don't talk about that, don't talk about God, talk about dialectical material," and da da da.

Q: So, your [unclear] was a good experience to you.

Bernstein: Yes, I had a couple bad trips. I, I'm trying to think if I ever had any—yes, well—

Q: Bad trips.

Bernstein: Yes, I had one bad trip in Massachusetts actually with my sister. She wasn't tripping, but I was with her friends, and that was pretty bad when I wound up being back at my parent's house, trying to come down for a whole evening. I fortunately had a Grateful Dead, Live Dead album with me, and so I listened to that over and over again, and it helped me to come down, because I was certainly not—I was not in a very good position to relate to my parents. And I never found out if they knew what was going on that night. But, I think in New York, I can't remember ever having any really bad—because I had one other not great trip in Portland, and actually was out in Columbia Gorge when I first moved here. And, what the bad trips had to do with is not being with the right people, there being tensions of lack of trust between myself and people that I'm with. So, fortunately most of the tripping I did I was either with close friends, or I just lucked out. And, I did a lot [of things] with strangers, actually, but I guess I just chose the right strangers, and had some pretty amazing times.

Q: Okay, so you're active in environmental causes?

Bernstein: Yes, actually—yes, I mean, one of the things that really changed for me—I remember Earth Day when I was a junior, I guess, for the first Earth Day. And, that got me excited, and I

started to learn about the environmental movement my last year in New York. But, it didn't really resonate until I was living in a place that is just stunningly beautiful, and when I came to Oregon there was just so much that was untouched, and it was, there was very little urbanized area, and there's a lot more city now around Portland than there was when I came here, though relative to the rest of the country this place is still relatively unspoiled. And, so it gave me a real strong sense of the importance of protecting it. And, sort of unfolding experience, I'd say in the last fifteen years I've learned an awful lot more about what environmental protection is really about, and understanding a lot more about forest ecology, and fire ecology, and learning about salmon issues, and how protecting salmon is important for protecting the entire ecosystem in this area, just all based on the salmon. And, I also had some strong connections with Native Americans in Oregon, and a lot of my pieces have a lot of infusion of Native American spirit, and a lot of Native American voices, and I think that's all given me a much stronger sense of what protecting the environment's about. So, it's been a really important part of my work, and ultimately just an important part of my awareness. I live right up from a wetland that's on the edge of the Willamette River in Portland, and even though it's an urban neighborhood, probably not by New York standards, it's less than Queens, because we have yards, and things like that, but there's this incredible wetland at the end of our block, and there are hundreds of different birds. And, I feel really lucky to be able to live in this environment, I feel responsible for making sure that it remains protected.

Q: Describe your overall life, what you do on a typical day, and your domestic life, and what you do for vacations, and for fun?

Bernstein: Well, I live with my partner, Elaine Velazquez, she's a filmmaker, and we actually worked together for several years before we got together as partners. I was her sound tech for a couple film projects, and video projects that she did. And, we spend a lot of time working actually, and we work on a lot of projects together. So, that the focus is a lot of work that, we both work at home, I mean, she's in her studio right now in the basement, which is actually a studio, a video studio in the basement, and my audio studio. So, we're down in our studios a bunch doing our work separately and together. And, we have a dog and two cats, and those are our kids. And, we're on our second generation, actually third generation of animals. We've been together for, I guess it's pushing twenty-eight years now, and so a long time, and a lot of changes, a lot of growth, a lot of aging. And, our animals are real important to us, and they do, I guess they are sort of kids. We have a little vegetable garden in the back, which is not doing very much now, but it flourishes in the summer and the fall. And, we live in this really beautiful area, so we do a lot of hiking right in the neighborhood, and another thing, I spend a lot of time hiking on Mt. Hood, and hiking in the gorge, the Columbia Gorge, love going to the Oregon coast, which is an amazing series of beaches, and cliffs, and mountains, and rocks, and all kinds of formations, and just an incredible place to hang out and go hiking.

Q: What are your hopes for the future? Is there something that you want to accomplish before it's too late, or just continuation of what you're doing, your vegetable garden, your cats and dog, and your partner—it sounds really very lovely.

Bernstein: I definitely want to continue—I mean, I know a big part of my life is playing music, and I've been in a band for a few years that's actually starting to take off, and we're doing a lot more gigs, and developing an audience. And, so I want the band to continue, and to become more successful, and to—I also want my musical skills to continue to improve. I feel like I play okay, but I can see myself playing a lot better, and, like, there are songs I want to write that I haven't written yet. I'd like to get back to more creative writing actually, I've been thinking about writing a kind of idiosyncratic memoir, and I'm hoping that I can actually get down in starting that. I have some concerns about old age. I really hope to be able to find a way to stay active as long as possible. I really value my ability, my able-bodiedness, my ability to be really active, and I'm also aware that those facilities are going to at some point be diminished, I want to make the most of my life before I can't do it anymore. I also want to travel a lot more. I've done some traveling, but there are a lot of places I'd like to go that I haven't been to, particularly parts of Latin America that I haven't been to. I've been to Venezuela, and I'd like to travel around the rest of Latin America, I'd like to return to Southeast Asia.

Q: If you could go back to Barnard September, 1967, and give a word of advice, one piece of wisdom to the girl that you used to be, what would it be?

Bernstein: Maybe that it's okay to stand up straight, and to really believe in yourself. And, that if you really want to do something you'll figure out how to do it.



Q: Cool. Oh, I didn't ask you, sorry, have there been major obstacles to your getting where you are?

Bernstein: Major obstacles. Well, I mean, I feel like I'm not as far as I'd like to be because of a whole range of things, and some obstacles are internal, some obstacles are limitations that we're raised to believe in, and self-imposed limitations, I feel like life is a journey of overcoming those self-imposed limitations.

Q: Do you have any particular self-imposed limitations, or are you just speaking in general?

Bernstein: I think it has to do with fully believing in yourself, and I think that when I don't, I don't always fully believe in myself, and then I don't push as hard as I could, or maybe it's not even pushing, maybe it's just knowing how to get in harmony with the right forces, the right energy forces, and things moved. Because I have experienced that a lot, where things just synch up, and I feel like when, the old "go with the flow," but I think there is really a lot of wisdom to that. So, it's maybe not pushing so much against the current. Though salmon swim upstream, so that's the other part. They're a real role model for me to learn how to swim upstream more successfully.

Q: Thank you for giving so much. You have a great voice. You must be really popular on the radio.

Bernstein: Yes, actually that's one of the things that I'm always getting comments about.

[End of Interview]

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