

Interview with Sandra Jaz Reid for the Haringey Vanguard Project

Extract: 00:00 – 12:50

Veronica: Hi, I'm Veronica Mackenzie, interviewing Sandra Jaz Reid. Hi Sandra.

Sandra: Hi Veronica.

Veronica: Sandra, tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up, um and then you realising that you were a lesbian.

Sandra: Okay, um, I didn't know that word when I was growing up. Um, I didn't even know the word sex when I was growing up. Um, uh, I grew up in a strict Catholic household. Um, the type where you went to church every Sunday, where you had to go to Confession every Saturday, where you had to make up a prayer every single night, uh, really really strict. Um, the irony of course was that my parents didn't go to church, uh but the kids had to go, uh-uh, every single uh-week. And uh, obviously, I went to Catholic schools, and um, and my last school was a convent, uh run by nuns. Um, and, we didn't—I don't even remember having any sex education or anything like this, but I was always aware that I was a little bit different. I was always a tomboy when I was growing up, um and uh, you know, I-I liked football and cricket and climbing trees, and all this sort of thing. And I was just known as like the tomboy. Um, and um, I played football, uh girls versus boys, and it would be me and a bunch of silly girls um who'd-who'd scream if-if the ball touches them, and I was doing all the work you know [chuckles]. So, it was like me against a bunch of boys [chuckles] right, scoring for girls. Woohoo.

Anyways, so, um I knew I was different I suppose when I hit my teens. Um, actually, I think I was still quite young when-when, in one of my middle schools when they were talking about sex, and somebody had asked me if I'd ever had sex, and I didn't know what they meant. Because I only knew terms like "having a bunk-up", "roll a day". I knew all the slang terms, I had never heard of sex. So, that was-that was my introduction if you'd like. So-and-as-and I-and I-and I still- by then hadn't even heard of the word uh lesbian or gay. Um, and back in those days I was very—it-it was all very innocent. I was all very very green. Very very green. In fact, I envy some of the kids today, and even the kids before me you know, who-who-who had a much easier time coming out. But obviously because of people like me and people older than me. Anyway, so, I think, that I was in my—I must've been maybe fifteen and sixteen, and I think that I-uh-I had realised then that I was at the very least bisexual. And um... hesitated saying anything to anybody. [Whispers] Pause.

[Recording paused and finished at 3:05]

[Recording restarts 00:00]

Veronica: So, when did you first think of yourself as a lesbian?

Sandra: When the guy I was knocking around with, um who I had—by-I-I-by-by now acknowledged I'd sort of acknowledged that I was bisexual, and I had told a few people. And there was of course some problems especially with my uh best friend, um wh-who-who found it very difficult to get her head around, um, but I hadn't done anything about it. Anyway, so, um, by now, I-I moved out of home quite young, um to live in the YM [YMCA], and I met up with uh a bunch of um SWPs, Socialist Workers Party's, became very good friends, and I started going out with one of the guys um in that group, and-and we hang around. And I told him, that I thought that uh, I was bise-bisexual, and he was-he was brilliant. Um, and um, but I still wasn't sure, until, he uh—a friend of his, a girl, an ex-girl of his came over, um from abroad somewhere, Spain or something, and um, and that was my first attraction. Really pointed uh-attraction to a girl. And that's when I thought, "Oh my God, yes I am". Um, and I told him, and he was-he was upset about it because you know, we were you know, in love. Infatuated with each other, and you know all that [inaudible mumbling 1:26]. And uh, but why he was so lovely was that he would come with me to the clubs. He would come with me to uh gay clubs, he would push me forward to go and ask girls to dance, this sort of thing. Uh, an-and when I look back, I think that was just really good, really noble of him because it was obviously hurting him as well, you know. Um, so that's-that's-that's um, that's when I first actually you know, s-said it out loud and got a positive um, reaction.

Then I went to um—as I said, I left home then went to the YM, and then I went to college to go and do a degree. Um, and-and I now sort of accepted, yup, you know, yup I'm gay. I hated the word lesbian. Still not crazy over it. Um, and that's partly because the word lesbian is used so insultingly. You-you can really just "lesbian" [says the word lesbian in a raspy voice], you can really just spell it out as an insult much more so than gay. Um, so I thought I'd identify as gay more. Anyway, I went to um university, and um, you know uh, education...Jesus, age [chuckles]... I went to college to try and be a teacher. Um, and um, and I was obsessed with anything, any literature to-to do with being gay. Board, books, um uh, focus on boys as well as girls, um Gay News was the paper at the time, um Timeout had a huge um gay section, City Limits was THE magazine to have you know, um in terms of socialising and-and-and clubbing, blah blah blah. And um, and-and I remember that I was in class [clears throat], and this-and this girl walked in a-a week later after the class had started, uh and again, I felt this attraction, um, to her. And uh, she was one of those artist types [chuckles] and um, and yeah, I was attracted to her. And she came [inaudible 03:40] – we had digs back in those days, so I was—I was um—I was living um within the Uni. And uh, I remember her um—she was coming to my room, just to hang, and I suddenly remembered oh no, I've got uh copies of gay news lying-lying around, and I hadn't come out to her yet. And that was a problem. It was always that struggle about coming out to a new person every single time, you know. Um, and I—and I, I could feel myself panicking and she was ahead of me. And uh, I don't know if my room was unlocked, but she ended up in the room before me [chuckles]. As I dragged my feet, and I walked in [laughing] and she was sitting there on the floor, just reading a copy of the Gay News like it was [laughs] like it was the Sun or the Telegraph, you know, so it-I suppose-broke the ice. And I became interesting to her, because she did confess that ha-having come from some exotic holiday and coming into this college, and she said that she just found everybody to be really really prissy. And she included me in that. That we are all boring and all really really straight [chuckles]. Yeah so-so, obviously it gave her some sor-some sort of a new dimension for her. And she

ended up staying the night. Uh so it was my first my first time that I'd ever shared a bed with anybody, let alone a girl. A single bed. And I remember lying on her arm and I was still so broad. And this wasn't a sex thing, or anything like this. And she was just stroking my back up and down and I was just widget.

Both: [laughing and wheezing of laughter]

Sandra: And obviously, I developed an infatuation for her because that's all I do right [laughs]. Especially as she was the first. You know. [laughs] Pause it. [wheezing] I can't—'cos I don't know where I'm going next.

Both: [Laughs]

Sandra: I don't know where I'm going next. [Laughs]

Veronica: So, what about your parents at this time? You said you left home.

Sandra: I didn't leave home because of that. Um, I-I didn't leave home because of that. I guess I-I left home... uh, because I didn't have a great relationship um-um with my dad. And um because I didn't get my A-Levels—I didn't get the right grades at A-Levels from school, so I had to get a job. And I was working in the Telegrams-London Inland Telegrams, which of course no longer exists, and I left after a year, because I decided I wanted to go to college. Um, and so um, my dad threw me out of my room, and uh, I had to sleep in the living room, and the boys took my room because we were overcrowded. And I just thought, oh screw this, I'm just leaving home. Um, which was a big deal again back in those days. Yeah, even to leave home at 18 was like uh the equivalent of leaving home at 14 I think. Um, and I went to the YMCA. Um, and that's where I met um, oh boy um you know, Clinton and all the SWP guys. And then went to college, and-and that was my, of course my introduction to debt, because you had big college fees and everything, and I couldn't get a grant.

Um, so I did co—I did come out to my mum though. Um I can't remember when, but um, I remember that um, you know that I screwed up my courage to go and tell people and I to—my mum was probably one of the first, after Clinton and whatever. Um, and I—and I was still very—I wasn't proud of the fact, I wasn't happy about it [clears throat], and I told her, and she took it very calmly. And I remember asking her why she wasn't sort of jumping up and down, and she was saying you know, well you know, if you—if you have a problem with it you know, then you know, maybe you know, you should see a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Um, and that was really the only negative thing she said. Otherwise she was you know, for an old-school um you know, Caribbean mum, she was actually pretty cool. To this day, I haven't come out to my dad. I've-I've never—I mean if he doesn't know then he's a fool, but uh, I've never told him. Um, and I told my brothers, but I can't remember the you know, when I told them, but they were—they were alright about it. Although, I accept that my little brother seems to be a little bit homophobic [clears throat]. Um.

Veronica: Did you go out on the scene? Did you find any sense of gay community?

Sandra: Right, so when I was at um the college—When I was at the uh-uh-uh college, as I said, I was obsessed with one of the magazines, and I think by then I'd now moved out of um halls, or residence, and gone to live um in rented accommodation, shared accommodation in Mitcham. And um—And this is when I'm thinking, right, I'm in a new area, I got no friends around me and I need to, you know, make some moves. And—and I think I rang Switchboard, Gay Switchboard. Uh, in fact I ended up working at Switchboard, um uh, for volunteering uh for a period. But I know—I know through Switchboard, I came across, um, uh the Brixton [Black] Women's Group, um and I took myself off there down Acre Lane, um and-and met this wonderful group of um Black women. It was my first-time um that I was meeting Black lesbians. Uh, all together i-in one go. Um it was, you know, and uh, I was seen as the cute baby dyke. And um, some of them took me under their wing, and uh, and I think I spent the afternoon there just talking to lots of people um and then, we went clubbing.

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