

Cat Lewis Shand interview with Haringey Vanguard
Extract 00:00 – 12:31

Veronica McKenzie:

Okay. Veronica McKenzie here, and I'm interviewing Cat Lewis-Shand. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the Haringey Vanguard Project. Please introduce yourself.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Yeah, as Veronica just said, my name's Cat Lewis-Shand. I'm a 51-year-old mixed race lesbian from North London.

Veronica McKenzie:

All right, thank you. So tell me about... Did you grow up in North London?

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Yeah, I did. Always lived in Enfield, North London. I went to school around here. Lovely place to live. Yeah.

Veronica McKenzie:

And your family was from Enfield?

Cat Lewis-Shand:

I was adopted when I was a baby, but the family that I was adopted into... My mom is originally from [inaudible 00:00:53] Wales, my dad was from Yorkshire. So I grew up in a all-white family, so everybody's white apart from my brother, who also got adopted into the same family. Everybody else is white in the family, so had some difficult times at school with that. Kids can be cruel and say stuff like, "Why don't you look like your parents? Why are you a different color?" Et cetera, et cetera. My greatest comeback was turning around and saying "At least my parents chose me. With you, they had no choice."

Cat Lewis-Shand:

But yeah, had some horrible times at school with being bullied. Going to school in the early 70s, they just weren't... I was the only non-white person in my class. I remember coming home from school one day and my mom, coming into the bathroom says to me, "What are you doing?" I looked down and I was scrubbing the backs of my hands, and they were red raw. She said, "What are you doing?" I said "Well, I'm trying to get the brown off." I could see that on the other side, it was lighter. I wanted them to be the same, I wanted to be like everybody else in my class.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Then, later on at school, becoming aware of the difference in my skin color to other people's skin color even more so. There were groups at school, in secondary school. I used to hang out with a group of black girls and a group of white girls, and kind of standing with one foot in each camp, if you like. Feeling like I don't really fit into one. There's a song that I absolutely love by Joan Armatrading, in which she says that "Some people say that I'm too

black, and others say that I'm not black enough." That was me. That was absolutely me, for years. Thinking I don't fit anywhere.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

My white friends would say, "Oh, you're hanging out with your black friends today?" And the same with my black friends. I kind of ended up being a bit of a loner because I didn't fit into either camp. That was difficult. Then, of course, growing up [inaudible 00:03:10]

Veronica McKenzie:

Any specific things that were said in either camp?

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Just mainly about, you know. "Are you hanging out with your black friends today? What, we're not good enough?" That kind of thing. I have a really strong memory of going to Town Park fireworks show. I'd gone with a group of white girls from my school meeting up with another group of people. It was a mixed group, so blacks and whites in the group. One of the guys from the mixed group came over, was speaking to me and the girls that I was with. Was kind of saying to them, "Why are you hanging with her? Why is she in your group?" And this, that, and the other. My friends agreed, and I was like, what? I just felt so... Again, one of those light bulb moments with... Hang on a minute. I really don't fit in. I don't like how this feels.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

So, I went and joined a troop... Sorry. Dog bark. I ended up going off with this other group of friends, and that kind of stuck with me for a long time. Getting older, I mostly spent my time with white people until much later in life coming out. Realizing that I knew nothing about culture, and food, and just so many different things that I knew nothing about. Fried chicken, oh my gosh! Yeah.

Veronica McKenzie:

So how old were you when you came out? Or when you first realized that you were a lesbian, or how you define yourself?

Cat Lewis-Shand:

I first realized probably quite young, that I felt different from the way that my friends felt. I'm talking late junior school, which would be I suppose 10 or... Nine or 10. I was getting these feelings for girls. I had a friend of mine who lived up the road and I didn't understand what the feelings were that I was feeling for her, but I wanted to see her all the time. I wanted to be close to her. I suppose that would be when I first started to become aware of those feelings.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Getting into secondary school, those feelings becoming stronger and stronger with my friends at school. I remember being bullied at school because I'd gone on holiday with a friend of mine, and when we got back to school she told everybody that I'd watched her get

undressed for bed. I was so embarrassed, but then I... Well, actually, yeah I did. What are you going to do about it? That kind of thing.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Then it wasn't until probably my late 20s when I really started to realize that's what this is. I don't have those sexual feelings towards men in the same way that I have them towards women. It was a kind of... It was a thing I did because it was to be expected. That's what's expected of you, is to have a relationship with a man. So, I did have sexual relationships with men, and hated it. What waste of time! Almost three minutes, just... Whoo!

Cat Lewis-Shand:

So, yeah. Realizing that that wasn't what I wanted. But, even in my early 20s looking back, realizing that I didn't have any female friends. I had friends of... All my male friends might have had girlfriends, or wives, or whatever, so I knew them but I didn't choose to have relationships with women because I knew how that made me feel. I was in a band in my 20s, and I had two female backing singers. I found myself just falling in love with them. They weren't... To me, they weren't... It wasn't like a physical attraction. It was just because they were women and they got me. There was an affinity between us, and that was all it was. But, realizing I can't keep feeling like this, best thing to do is just not have any females in my life at all. I was like that for years, just spent all my time with guys.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Realizing... I was out on a walk with a friend of mine and his girlfriend, and I was with a guy at the time. Same guy I'd been with. Long term relationship, about 13 years we'd been together. We were out on a walk and the two guys had walked ahead, and I was walking back with this girl. She said to me, "At my college, one of my teachers. A woman. I really like her." I was, "Oh, that's good." She went, "No. I really like her. What do you think about that?" I was like... Wow. [inaudible 00:09:23] Obviously there are reasons why you can't take it anywhere. She said, "But I'm realizing that I'm having this kind of feeling for my teacher."

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Then I realized I had exactly the same thing with my music teacher. Also embarrassing. Now it's just come back to me. I used to, this music teacher who lived up the road from me. I was just besotted with this woman. I used to ride my bike past, she lived on the top floor of a big Victorian house, in a flat. I used to ride past on my bike, pretend to fall off in the vain hope that she might look out of her window, and come and rescue me. How sad is that? Oh my gosh.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

Realizing, yes, I clearly have feelings for women. It wasn't until I think towards the end of the relationship that I was having with this guy. Realizing that I wanted to be spending my time with women. Later on in the relationship, he went off, joined this huge band, and was touring the world for six months at a time. I was spending a lot of time with this woman

who told me that she fancied her teacher. Things kind of went from one thing to the other, we found a house one day and she just...

Cat Lewis-Shand:

She was [inaudible 00:10:55] at her mom's house. She'd gone over there to feed the cats. We were supposed to be going swimming or something. She went, "I've got to pop into my mom's to feed the cat, she's away on holiday." She was preparing all the cat food and everything, the cats had been fed, and we're just standing there. She turned around and she went, "Do you want to kiss me?" I was so shocked. I went, "No," and I meant yes! I'm just... No... And so... Yeah. That was kind of my first full on kiss with a woman. She was stunning, green eyes and red hair. It was amazing. We made our way through a couple of bottles of wine, and just this frantic kissing session that was going on. Then the doorbell went, and our boyfriends arrived. We're like... Oh my god.

Cat Lewis-Shand:

They were like, "Oh, you two look a bit flustered. What's going on?" Oh nothing, we've just been putting away the cat food and everything, we was rushing round to tidy up. We were supposed to have gone swimming, and didn't realize the time. Oh my gosh.

Veronica McKenzie:

So what happened to her?

Cat Lewis-Shand:

She moved away, I've not seen or heard of her for years. Since then. We used to sneak off and go leave our boyfriends at home watching foreign films, and we'd sneak off to night club Trade, in Turnmills. We used to meet up there and spend the evening dancing together, and just hanging out. It was amazing.