

Oral History Interview: Nickie Valdez

Interviewee: Nickie Valdez

Interviewer: Heather White

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Heather W. This is Heather White, and I am interviewing Nickie Valdez. And Nickie, could you say your name and when and where you were born?

Nickie V. My name is Nickie Valdez. I was born on September 10th of 1940. And I was born in San Antonio, Texas.

Heather W. Can you say a little bit about what you remember about San Antonio, some of the things when you were growing up?

Nickie V. Well, I remember that we were a town, we were not a city. And I was born in almost the downtown area. I was born across the street from the county hospital in a rented space that my parents had, and a midwife delivered me. And like I said, it was more of a town, and we, the Latino community, didn't really...we lived in a certain area in the west part of town and we really didn't travel around too much to any other part of the town.

Heather W. Was there a parish where most of the Latinos went to mass?

Nickie V. Yeah. Our parish was San Fernando Cathedral.

Heather W. Wow.

Nickie V. And at the time we weren't quite emancipated, you might say. We still were asked to sit in the back pews. We still were mostly servants of other people, and we were going to school. We had to go to school. Already there was a law that said we had to go to school. But a lot of the parents were still keeping their kids out of school to help work. We didn't adhere to, or there wasn't a law yet that at a certain age you had to go to school and not go to work.

Heather W. And that was the parish where you were baptized?

Nickie V. Yes. I was baptized there, yes.

Heather W. And did first communion?

Nickie V. My first communion, no. My first communion, I made it at St. Agnes, which was in my cousin's part of the town. [*Coughs.*]

Heather W. There's water if you like.

Deb M. And do have a cough drop?

Nickie W. I have my morning stuff. I was born... I mean, I had to go to communion over there because supposedly I was going to be with my cousin.

Heather W. And I remember earlier you talking a little bit about what it was like going to school, and especially that you weren't allowed to speak Spanish in school.

Nickie V. Right. We were not allowed to. We were given demerits. And those demerits showed up in your grade, your report card. They had satisfactory, unsatisfactory and so on in your little marks.

Heather W. And the other thing I remember you saying was that because your birthday was in September, that also affected when you were able to go to school.

Nickie V. Correct, yeah. The year that I turned six, yeah, school started on the 6th of September, and I didn't turn six till the 10th of September, and so because the rule was that I had to be six years old, they had to hold me back. So I was miserable. I wanted to go to school. And my grandmother said don't you fret about that, I'm going to teach you to read and to write and you're going to speak in Christian. In other words, that was Anglo Saxon, you're going to be in the Latin tradition and you'll learn, you know. And so she taught me how to read and write.

Heather W. In Latin?

Nickie V. No.

Heather W. In Spanish.

Nickie V. In Spanish. But see, Spanish is a Latin language.

Heather W. Yes. So that's what it meant to say that you were going to learn to read and write in Christian.

Nickie V. In Christian, yeah.

Heather W. That's amazing.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. So this may be some older memories. What language—was mass at that point in Latin, when you were a kid?

Nickie V. Yes, it was in Latin. So that's why we learned some, you know, in saecula saeculorum and, you know, different little phrases where we learned to say it. Yeah, that'll take forever.

Heather W. Were there other ways—I'm so amazed by the way that the community and your grandmother related to Spanish as a language. Were there other tensions around...do you remember other tensions or conflicts around when Spanish could be spoken, and some of the pushback from the Latino community there?

Nickie V. Well, mostly, I guess, when they were going to, I don't know, Social Security, courtroom or having to go and take care of some business.
[Coughs.]

Deb M. Do you have a cough drop with you? You want me to go get you one? It's just upstairs. Drink a little bit of water. That might help kind of clear you out. Want me to go get one?

Nickie V. Yeah, please.

Deb M. Okay. I'll be back.

Nickie V. Any business that had to be made had to be in English. And if you didn't understand it, somebody would explain it for you. They would have an interpreter come. And like my grandmother, she didn't even know how to sign her name, so they would sign her name for it. She would see that that was her name and mark a little X. They had her do an X to, you know, say yeah, this is my signature, it's me.

Heather W. Were there Spanish speaking priests?

Nickie V. Oh, yeah. Yes. They all spoke Spanish, especially—you know, they had an English and a Spanish mass, and so the English one, if you went, well, since it was in Latin, it was the universal language.

Heather W. And do you remember the ethnicity of most of the priests? Were they Anglo? Were they Mexican or Mexican American?

Nickie V. They were mostly Anglo or other ethnicities, like German or...there was a lot of German. There was a German community and an Italian community.

Heather W. At what point was it that the Latino—so you said the Latinos sat in the back of churches.

Nickie V. There was an archbishop, Archbishop Lucey, and he was not a very—he didn't cotton well to the Spanish community. We were still kind of servitude. So there was a separation, and we sat in the back pews. Now, there were some Latinos that sat in the front, but those were the big contributors, the families of businesses and stuff like that. They could sit

in the front pews. But they usually—I mean, it was kind of understood. Like I said, my grandmother would not even consider sitting in the front seats of a bus. My grandmother.

Heather W. Oh, wow.

Nickie V. Now, when my grandmother and my grandfather decided to come to this part of the river, there was no border, so they just—it was like moving from here to any state in the nation. They just moved. They preferred to live on this side. And so...cut it off.

[*Break.*]

Heather W. Yes.

Nickie V. When my grandparents moved here, like I said, there was no border, and they decided to move here because in the state they were living in Mexico, Guadalajara, they were going through the revolution. And my grandmother married a Mexican from Mexico, and she was a native from the tribe, for lack of a better word, a Mestizo, and she became, how would you say, unwanted because she married into a family that wasn't acceptable. She was not of the revolution. So they had to leave because they were ostracized. So they had to move. And they moved here because my grandfather had a brother that lived here already, so they moved in with them and had a place to come to before they moved around.

Heather W. And you showed me this identification card.

Nickie V. This was something they gave, the government gave her because she decided to go across the border to go visit family. So when the border went through, they started to have to show a pass, I guess like an immigration, you know. And they named the people that already lived here, what was it, resident alien. She was a resident already, but she was still an alien. So that's why they gave her, you know. And then of course they had to verify who she was and so on.

Heather W. Do you know how long she'd been living in San Antonio at the point when...?

Nickie V. Oh, already quite a few years. This was in '51. They must have crossed over—when was the border up? Thirty something? I think it was in '32 or somewhere in there that they created the border.

Heather W. And you carry this with you.

Nickie V. Only because my brothers and my sisters have been asking where did she come from. And I tell them I don't have any papers, anything that would give more explanation. So I found this and I thought, well, I'll print some up so I can give them the only thing I have, you know, about where my grandmother came from and so on.

Heather W. That's really cool. [*Laughs.*]

Nickie V. So anyway, after they crossed across, well then they ended up in San Antonio, they went to different parts of Texas and lived in Lockhart, in Maxwell, you know, other cities. They followed work.

Heather W. They moved to work.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. What kind of work did they do?

Nickie V. Mostly taking care of the land, doing farming. 'Cause she talks about... My aunt then later told me that they went from farm to farm, and there was good bosses and bad bosses. There were some that worked right along with you and there were some that just expected you to do your work and have it done.

Heather W. What kind of work did your parents do?

Nickie V. My parents, by the time I was born, my dad did—he was a tailor. I don't think my mother worked.

Deb M. And your dad was in the Navy.

Nickie V. Well, yeah, when I was born he was with the Navy.

Heather W. Anything else that you'd like to say or talk about about your growing up years? I mean, one question I could ask that I've asked a number of other folks is do you remember sexuality being, I mean, even an idea that

homosexuality or queer folks, or any...was sexuality even a part of the education that you remembered? Did you have a sense of—

Nickie V. It wasn't.

Heather W. Did you have a sense of what your parents—

Nickie V. In high school we had hygiene.

Heather W. Hygiene class.

Nickie V. Mm-hmm.

Heather W. What was that like? Was it more preparation for family life?

Nickie V. It was more your cleanliness and taking care of yourself as a young woman. [*Coughs.*]

Deb M. Would water be helpful?

Nickie V. Yeah. As a young woman about your menstruation period, what it was about, why you, you know, had the period and, you know, if you had cramps, if you, you know, whatever, they would tell you, you know, you need to do this or do that. And pretty much avoid boys.

Heather W. Pretty much avoid boys, right.

Nickie V. It worked.

Heather W. It worked, it worked. You learned the lessons well. [*Laughs.*]

Nickie V. [*Laughs.*]

Heather W. What other kinds of expectations did your parents or your community communicate about what kind of future you were supposed to have, what kind of grownup you were supposed to be?

Nickie V. Oh, gosh. There was little lessons here and there. I think the one that struck me the most growing up was that when I turned old enough to drive, I guess—no. I thought I was old enough to drive, he didn't.

Heather W. [*Laughs.*] Okay.

Nickie V. But I asked him to teach me and he said you do not have to learn how to drive because when you get married your husband will do the driving. So I was not allowed to learn how to drive.

Heather W. Wow.

Nickie V. And I must have been, I don't know, I was into high school. But I was told I couldn't do that.

Heather W. Did you have a quinceañera?

Nickie V. No. I refused to have one.

Heather W. Really?

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. How did that go over?

Nickie V. Well, my aunt wanted to give me one, but then I said I don't want one. I will not do that. I don't want to get that dress and whatever. And I think she acquiesced because they didn't have the money. It takes money to put on a thing like that. It's almost like having a wedding, you know.

Heather W. Right.

Nickie V. So she said, well, okay, when you graduate you can have a gift. I said, oh, well I want to go visit my aunt in Los Angeles. I had an aunt that lived over there, okay? So when I graduated, true to her word, she said, well, I'll call your aunt and see when you can go. And so I went to Los Angeles.

And that's the other time my father interceded, because when I was up there, my uncle, my aunt's husband, he was very involved with the LULAC community and, you know, he was into the politics. And he found out that while I was there they were holding like sessions at UCLA to see if I could—because I was always doing commercial art and stuff like that—that they needed some people that could draw. They would teach you about dimensions and so on. And you could create the capsule that was going to be a space ship. Because that was before there was anybody that was...

Heather W. Was going into space.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. Wow.

Nickie V. Before space. Before going up into space. So they told my father about it, and my father said no, she needs to come back home. So I didn't get to go to UCLA. There was other liberal things that happened here in high school, like I was, in my art class I was asked to design a poster for the UN. The UN didn't exist either. So I drew a poster for the UN and I got honorable mention all over the United States. I was one of the kids that got honorable mention. And the prize for winning or being named and stuff like that was that you would get a scholarship to the Chicago Institute of Art.

Heather W. Wow.

Nickie V. And rather than sending me, they sent an Anglo young man because I was told that he would probably be able to go because his parents would support that and mine wouldn't. And they're right.

Heather W. Still a disappointment.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. Yeah. Should we talk now about when you came out?

Nickie V. Sure. When I came out, there was nobody out there in the horizon that I could say what do I do, where do I go, what is there, you know. There were some bars. We could go to the bars and meet each other and so on. But there was no organizational support of any kind.

Heather W. What were the bars like?

Nickie V. They were a good mix. In San Antonio there were a good mix of men and women. We always have mixed together. There wasn't any men's bars and women's bars, there was bars. And we all met together. And, you know, it was a very, how would you say? I couldn't look at another person's girlfriend. That was a no-no. That could get you in trouble. You didn't have that open friendliness. You had to be very careful who you talked to.

Heather W. Do you remember the first time going into those bars?

Nickie V. Yeah, it was strange.

Heather W. It was strange?

Nickie V. Yeah. It was...you don't... Watching women and women dance, and... Well, that was not strange because even when we went to weddings and so on, the women danced and the men kind of just sat around and drank a beer or whatever. But watching the man dance with another man, that was different.

Heather W. Did you have to worry about the police?

Nickie V. Oh, yes.

Heather W. Is there a question in here I should be asking? No?

Deb M. Oh, well, I was going to say something about the fact that you worked at a bar.

Nickie V. Oh. But that was...yeah. I was already out.

Deb M. That was later, when you were already—okay.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. So how did you find out about the bars? Were you exploring? Did you have an idea that you were gay?

Nickie V. In school I met a young man that he knew he liked boys and I, you know. And we became very good friends. And if I needed to go to a dance, he would take me, and if he needed somebody to accompany him, I would go with him. And he was a great dancer, so I really enjoyed going out with him. And he would tell his parents I'm going to go pick Mary up. Mary Irma is my name. And they would say okay, you all need to be here by, you know. And I would ask my aunt can I go to a dance with Jimmy, and she would say yeah, it's okay. They trusted him. She knew his family, his mother, and it was okay. So we would go to the bars.

Heather W. Wow. [*Laughs.*]

Nickie V. We wouldn't be going to the movies. We'd go to the bars.

Heather W. That's great. And did he have a boyfriend, did you have a girlfriend?

Nickie V. Yes. He would... I did not have a girlfriend. He would join, his boyfriend would join us and we'd, you know. And they were together and, you know.

Heather W. Did you have to worry about the police?

Nickie V. At the bars, yes. Yeah, we had to be very careful because if the vice squad walked in and observed you dancing, holding hands, kissing, being particularly lovey-dovey with someone, they would take you downtown.

Heather W. Did you also have to watch what you wore, what clothes you wore?

Nickie V. Well, if I left home I had to be in a dress or something. I couldn't just, you know. When I moved away, then I could dress however I wanted. But yeah, no, leaving home I had to look like a woman, a girl, whatever.

Heather W. And did you continue to live in San Antonio through your young adulthood?

Nickie V. Oh, yeah. I have never left San Antonio to live somewhere else, no.

Heather W. And how old were you? So you were going to the bars as a teenager?

Nickie V. No.

Heather W. Okay, you were older than that.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Deb M. Well, she had a break. And I don't know how much we should... She had a break in high school. She entered the novitiate.

Heather W. Oh, that's a...yeah, that's a story. *[Laughs.]*

Nickie V. Yes, it is. Yeah. Like I said, I didn't have a girlfriend, and I knew how I felt about girls. But I hadn't experimented in any way. And I did feel a calling to be a sister and help teach. I started to help teach catechism and help the sisters out. And I enjoyed being with them and among them. And I've always been called to be of service in some way in my religion. And I really felt a calling.

And so they accepted me at this congregation, and when they accepted me they said, well, in our congregation we have a constitutional bylaw sort of thing, and you have to be of a Catholic marriage. You had to be a child of a Catholic marriage. And I wasn't. And I went back and I said, well, I can't join because, you know. And they said well, we can accept you, and then when your novitiate is over, we can try and get you a dispensation. And when that was over, I couldn't get it. I didn't get the dispensation. They were told that in order to get a dispensation, that they had to change their constitution, so they'd have to go back to work the bylaws and so on. So I didn't get accepted.

Heather W. And maybe you said this already, but which order was it?

Nickie V. Missionary Cordi-Marian. They were established in Mexico. So I think the rules, you know, they had moved to this side of the world and they had a convent in San Antonio and one in Chicago.

Heather W. And the Catholic marriage meant that both your parents had to be Catholic?

Deb M. Married by the church.

Heather W. And married by the church.

Nickie V. Married, yeah. Yeah, you had to be Catholic.

Heather W. What was it like there in the novitiate?

Nickie V. Oh. Well, the novitiate was, I would say, pretty normal. I mean, there were rules, you know, getting up in the morning, what kinds of things you had to work at during the day. You had to break and then go to prayer and break and come back. We'd go to prayer before lunch, and have lunch, and then go get back to work. And then in the end, after dinner, you had a long time for prayer.

Heather W. And how old were you during that period?

Nickie V. I was in my teens for that. And that, in fact, came before I really came out. That was before.

Heather W. That was before?

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. Were you struggling with your sexuality or thinking about it at all while you were in the novitiate, or was it just kind of totally separate?

Nickie V. You don't have time for it.

Heather W. [*Laughs.*] So no special friendships?

Nickie V. No, no. Yeah, you could have special friendships, but they got interrupted.

Heather W. Did they?

Nickie V. Yeah. They would say you're spending too much time, Sister. You need to find something else to do or work with somebody else or whatever.

Heather W. So they would actively intervene to make sure that you didn't get too attached to a single person?

Nickie V. Right, yeah. In fact the other thing they did, at least once a year your prayer book, your rosary, all the little things like that were taken from you, given to somebody else, and you never had your same. I don't know what that was for, but, you know.

Heather W. Would you stay in the same room or would you—

Nickie V. You just didn't get attached. You didn't belong here. You belonged to a greater purpose.

Heather W. It must have been disappointing when you weren't able to continue.

Nickie V. It was very. That, yes. In fact that goes into a sense of belonging thing with me, because when I was...I never had known my mother because she abandoned me, and I grew up in my grandmother's house, and my aunt's the one that took over, my madrina, my godmother took over raising me. So yeah, I... But I learned early that I didn't really belong there, so when I went to the nuns I felt like I belonged until they said I couldn't get—it's not ordained—professed. Then I felt that same feeling of not belonging.

Heather W. What did you do at that point after that didn't work out?

Nickie V. I went back to school. I hadn't finished high school at that time, so I went back to school and graduated. And then after that, when I became 21, I came out. And it wasn't long between my graduation and being 21.

Heather W. It was after you were 21 when you started going to the bars?

Nickie V. Oh, yeah. You couldn't—

Heather W. Couldn't go before?

Nickie V. Because that's when I came out. And once I came out I couldn't live at home.

Deb M. But, like, Nick, you said you were going to the bars with Jimmy in high school, so that was before 21, so sneaking in.

Nickie V. Yeah. Well, I knew who I was.

Deb M. But you were sneaking in the bars.

Nickie V. Right. Yeah, we were sneaking in the bar.

Heather W. So you say you came out at 21. What do you mean by that?

Nickie V. Well, I mean that I was a young woman from a, how would you say, a family that pretty much expected their young women to live at home until they left home to get married, so I couldn't just leave home. My father would have gone looking for me and brought me back if I left before I was

21, so I had to be 21. I had to be old enough to be living on my own. Then he couldn't go get me.

Heather W. And when you say you came out, do you mean you came out as gay?

Nickie V. Yes.

Deb M. At 21? You told...?

Nickie V. The whole world knew then. It wasn't just my friends.

Deb M. How did you do that? Did you tell them? You went to your aunt and you went to your dad?

Nickie V. My dad knew, but my aunt didn't.

Deb M. But you went and told your dad?

Nickie V. He intuited that that's what I was doing, that I was coming out, that I was going to be living a life of a libertine, as I was told, okay, and that I should be staying with my aunt because she had given me my education and a place to be, and I owed taking care of her and staying with her until I got married. That was the word.

Heather W. That was the expectation.

Nickie V. Yes.

Heather W. And so your dad intuited that something else was happening.

Nickie V. Yeah, well—

Heather W. It sounds like he was not—

Nickie V. —I started dressing differently.

Heather W. Ah.

Nickie V. He would see that, you know. Because even though I'd left home, and I left home with the explanation that I had met this woman that had children, which is true, and that I was helping take care of the children, and getting paid for it, which was...well, I just, we lived together.

Heather W. So it sounds like you sort of explained what you were doing as a kind of job.

Nickie V. Right. But my dad knew different.

Heather W. Your dad figured it out.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. It sounds like he was a bit upset.

Nickie V. Upset? He was extremely upset. He disowned me.

Heather W. Wow.

Deb M. What did he tell you?

Nickie V. He said if I ever see you dressed up like that out in the streets I'll beat you. That's what he said. He never...we never met in the street. Whenever I would go to my aunt's house to visit her, I wore similar pants, but it was a

more feminine sort of look. I didn't have my butch-y look. But he would walk in, if I was there, and he didn't stay very long. I would say hi Dad, how are you doing? I always pushed. And he would say I'm doing okay. And then no sooner that he came in, he would say I'm going to have to—I was passing by, I was going to go whatever, and he would leave. He didn't want to be around.

Heather W. But your aunt continued to have a relationship with you.

Nickie V. Oh, yeah.

Heather W. Did she know?

Nickie V. No. I tried to tell her and explain to her after a couple of years, not right away, and she says I don't understand that, and how am I going to explain that to your dad? You know, kind of like I was left in charge and I disappointed him, and how do I explain that to your dad? My dad already knew, but... I didn't push it with her. She wasn't going to understand it, so I just... I don't remember saying anything in return to that. I said yeah, well, you know, kind of like I was trying to let you know.

Heather W. What was the butch-y look? What was your style at that time?

Nickie V. At the time it was jeans and a shirt with a collar. And, you know, if you could wear boots, the boots and, you know, kind of a...kind of like something you would wear if you had a motorcycle and, you know, kind of, you know, just very masculine. Because at that time you were either in

your dress and pumps and whatever or you were, if you wore pants all the time and everything, well, that was butch-y.

Heather W. So butch-y and the other style more femme-y?

Nickie V. I'm sorry?

Heather W. More femme? Was that the language you used?

Nickie V. Well, yeah. Oh, there was a big distinction, okay? There was roles, you know. You only did certain things. If you were...you held the job, you, you know, you became the one that had to be the supporting person in the household. And the other women could work, I mean, you know, depending on how butch you were. There were some that wouldn't allow you to go out without them. I never fell into that category, thank God. I wasn't possessive. There, that's a...it was the difference between being possessive and being equal.

Heather W. So when you went into the bars for the first time as a teenager, I'm guessing—well, I guess—here's a question. Did you feel like you naturally gravitated toward being more butch or that you had to pick and so I guess I'll pick this one because—

Nickie V. No, it was natural.

Heather W. So it didn't feel like you... Did you ever feel like you were forced into playing a role?

Nickie V. In several instances, yeah. It always felt strange when my partner wanted to dance with somebody else and had to ask permission, or if somebody came, even in Deborah's day, when we came out, they would come and ask me if they could dance with her. And I'd say I have no idea if she wants to dance with you or...

Heather W. [*Laughs.*] So the possessive aspect was uncomfortable.

Nickie V. Yeah, right.

Heather W. Yeah. Wow. And it sounds like your girlfriend that you moved in with who had the kids—

Nickie V. Yeah. I loved the kids. The kids and I got along great. We would take off and if she was working or whatever, we'd take off and go to the park or whatever, if I had time off. And, you know, the kids and I got along great. And they followed me until way after Deborah and I met. And then they came around because they just liked me, I guess.

Heather W. Sure.

Nickie V. Now she, my... She was... I want to say she was bisexual because, you know, sometimes she would leave and I didn't know where she was going, and she ended up, you know, having a drink with some guys and stuff like that. And she had had children, so I imagined she was bisexual. And I couldn't live with that, so I left. I didn't stay.

Heather W. When in this kind of—at what point was it—you were telling the story the other day of how the Catholic group got started.

Nickie V. Mm-hmm.

Heather W. Was that one of the first—and the other thing you were saying just a few minutes ago was that there were bars, but there were no organizations that really supported you. When did some of those first organizations get started? Were you involved with some of those?

Nickie V. Well, I met some folks, I think, in a bar. Yeah, it had to have been in a bar because there was nowhere else to meet. I met some folks that were interested in their spirituality. We felt more than just people that go to the bars. We felt like we had a calling to be more involved in building community. So we started meeting in homes, and sitting down, doing prayer, reading scripture and trying to figure out how that applied to us.

Heather W. And were you going to churches at this point? Or was this instead of churches?

Nickie V. Because I had gotten told that I couldn't be a nun, there was a time when I didn't attend church. But I knew there was something else that felt right about going and meeting and doing prayer and so on.

Heather W. So those small groups were just a group of other folks who wanted some of the same things?

Nickie V. Yes.

Heather W. And you met in people's houses.

Nickie V. Right.

Heather W. Did you tell other people? Or was there an effort to get other people to join in?

Nickie V. Yeah, there was. They would tell their friends and I would tell mine.
Yeah, we wanted to become a bigger group.

Heather W. And at that point I'm guessing there wasn't a priest involved.

Nickie V. No, there was not. Pretty soon after we started doing that a nun was involved.

Heather W. Yeah?

Nickie V. She helped us out. She would come and help us with prayer, with liturgy. She was the first nun we met that wanted to be a priest, so she fell into that space very fast and very easily because we were ready to have somebody guide us and be with us. And she was a nun, and so we felt like she was helping us to fulfill what we needed.

Heather W. And what were those liturgies like?

Nickie V. Well, she would do like para-liturgy and do the prayers, and, you know, we'd do the gospel and, you know, kind of like having mass. And she would be the one leading it.

Heather W. That's so great.

Nickie V. Hm?

Heather W. That's so great. Do you remember around what year this would have been?

Nickie V. Yeah. That was in the mid '60s, '64, '65.

Heather W. And that preceded... Where does that connect up with some of what you were telling us yesterday about the group that you started before Dignity?

Nickie V. Oh, that was the group.

Heather W. Okay.

Deb M. That's way before Dignity started.

Heather W. Yes.

Nickie V. Yeah. We were just—

Heather W. Meeting in people's houses.

Nickie V. —had time together. And then when Sister Leona—when we started meeting as an intentional group to become a group of people that would call to others and invite them and be part of a liturgy, she kind of lived off to the side and another nun helped us find a space where to meet at, and we met at a Catholic student center at St. Philip's College.

Heather W. And did your group have a name at this point?

Nickie V. No.

Heather W. Still no name?

Nickie V. No name.

Heather W. Was that deliberate?

Nickie V. Huh?

Heather W. Did you decide to not have a name?

Nickie V. Not until we moved from that student center to the other student center at San Antonio College. And by then we felt like we could become official because the priest there—it wasn't a nun any longer, it was a priest, so there was somebody with clout now. And he gave us a space. And the other thing is the archbishop, the one that didn't want us on Catholic Church property left, and Archbishop Flores became the archbishop, and he allowed it, with permission from Father Balty, okay? He's the one that asked can I have this group. I want to have this group. And the archbishop said okay, you know, that's fine.

Heather W. So it sounds like at that point the group became a little bit more official.

Nickie V. Right. We felt we could, you know. And at the same time, around that time is when we heard of Dignity.

Heather W. Okay.

Nickie V. It was now already an established group. It had started in Los Angeles. And we wrote to them and asked to be a chapter.

Heather W. Right. And Deb, you were about to say something.

Deb M. Well, I was going to say but you never really—before you heard of Dignity, you didn't like decide to take on a name of any kind or create any kind of official...

Nickie V. We felt more official, that we could start collecting people.

Deb M. Yeah, I see. And then, I mean, you know, besides your—you should talk a little bit about your involvement with the free clinic.

Nickie V. Well, when I first came out into activism, it was due to the fact that I had heard that the United Way was sponsoring a free clinic, and at this free clinic there was a guy by the name of Carmen Bardo, who was gay, that started this guy switchboard. So that's when I got involved. That was before even meeting in homes.

Heather W. Even before meeting at the homes?

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. And what kinds of things did the gay switchboard do?

Nickie V. Well, we would answer calls and talk to people that were coming out that needed somebody to reach out to. So we did that. And of course and we started as a group getting together to discuss having a party and inviting people, or we formed a newsletter that went out to the bars. We started doing a newsletter called "Together Gay." And we would go the bars and say we've got this newsletter, and we would go to bars and put some of

the newsletters there. And if you have any news that you would like to be included or whatever, let us know. If you're holding a party or a volleyball game on Sunday afternoons or whatever, then it would get advertised—or not advertised, because it was just passing the information and letting the community know what was going on.

Heather W. That makes it possible for groups to meet outside of just immediate friendship circles.

Nickie V. Right. Yeah.

Heather W. What kinds of activities were some of the things that you advertised or talked about in that?

Nickie V. Well, for the most part it was groups going to do a picnic. I don't think we even held fundraisers for this or that or the other. It was not a matter of reaching out, doing outreach, it was a matter of getting together. And if you were interested in volleyball or darts, dances. What else did we do? You would have like a barbecue afternoon in the park and stuff like that.

Deb M. I was going to say, you know, I mean, and they all could have been like for one instance, but you all used to go to—they used to have drag shows, and you all used to get really dressed up for those, right?

Nickie V. Oh, yeah. I'm sorry I didn't mention that, but I don't like to...

Deb M. Well, I guess I remember pictures of you and Jeannie all dressed up, you know. You were all decked out in a suit and Jeannie with her bouffant hairdo and all that stuff. Were those like special dances?

Nickie V. Oh, no.

Deb M. Or were those like New Year's Eve parties or—

Nickie V. Yeah, New Year's Eve parties, yeah. Yeah, we had the regular celebrations—New Year's, Christmas.

Deb M. Like at the bars, were those like super special events where you would dress up?

Nickie V. Yeah, they would make events, yeah. And you'd put them in the newsletter. You know, you can come and have a drink with your friends for the new year and so on.

Heather W. I have two questions about the newsletter. One is what did you use to print it and make copies? Was that hard to get access to that?

Nickie V. The "Together Gay," that was already in print. We would go to a printer to have it printed out. And there was gay individuals that worked at print shops that would print it for you.

Heather W. Got it. Were you at all worried about it getting into the wrong hands?

Nickie V. No, we weren't. We weren't paying any attention to that. Except for the fact that we didn't print people's name, their true names. If you said Bill's

house is whatever, you know, you need to call him if you want to go to this party or whatever, we didn't use a real name.

Heather W. When you started the spirituality group did you also list it in the "Together Gay" newsletter?

Nickie V. No. I don't think I remember printing anything about going to do our spirituality group in the newsletter.

Heather W. Was that because it was mostly through personal networks, or do you remember deciding not to do that?

Nickie V. We felt like it had to be a more intentional thing, and so we would invite our own friends to become part of it. And it just, you know, and they could call. And it was more of an exclusive, if you felt that that's what your need was, to connect spiritually. But it didn't become part of the rag.

Heather W. The rag. When was it that you started advertising to people outside of your friendship networks, do you remember?

Nickie V. For Dignity?

Heather W. For Dignity or the group that met before Dignity, either.

Nickie V. I think we never really did say if you'd like an ad, you know, we can...you need to pay so much or whatever. It was just an informational.

Heather W. I see.

Nickie V. It was not for advertising.

Heather W. Part of the question is when did you start letting other people know—

Deb M. About Dignity. When did you start letting people know? It was more a listing in like a Twit or...

Nickie V. Okay. I think at that point it switched. It wasn't part of the "Together Gay." Then other, the bars then started advertising, okay? They had a listing for—

Deb M. Support groups or—

Nickie V. For organizations.

Heather W. Ah, okay.

Nickie V. You know, like the dart club and the, what is it, the dance? Anyway. Dances and stuff like that, those could advertise. And groups. And—

Deb M. MCC would have been started by then.

Nickie V. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Well, MCC came out of Dignity.

Deb M. Right.

Heather W. I guess one way to ask this question. So when you started meeting in the student center with a priest, with the permission of—

Nickie V. We never advertised.

Heather W. You never advertised.

Nickie V. No. It was all word of mouth. We did not say we have a priest, or come, or mass is celebrated. No. It was just... When we finally got a listing, it would say Dignity Catholic organization meets at such-and-such time. It would never say that we were having mass. I don't think it even says that now, does it?

Deb M. Yeah, it does. On the Facebook page it does.

Nickie V. Okay. But—

Deb M. And in all our flyers and everything.

Nickie V. Yeah, you couldn't incriminate a priest.

Heather W. Right. Right.

Nickie V. Okay, so you didn't mention the priests at all. You just said we meet at this time on Sunday, you know.

Heather W. And it also sounds like once the group affiliated with Dignity, that was also a time when you started announcing the meetings.

Nickie V. Right, yeah. Because then we were an organization, yeah.

Heather W. Right. Instead of more informal word of mouth group.

Nickie V. Right.

Heather W. Good, good. What else should I? So we're sort of now—you talked a good bit yesterday about that organization. I'm also going to check the time

here. How are we doing? It's almost 10:00. Are you good to keep going?
I'm checking to see when the next thing is in our conference. The
conference schedule.

Nickie V. I became very involved with NOW, too.

Deb M. Yeah, but now we're in the mid '70s.

Heather W. Okay. We still have another 20 minutes or so. The next thing starts at
10:30. So you got involved with NOW?

Nickie V. Mm-hmm. And at the time NOW was struggling with accepting lesbians
into the organization because they were beginning to be lesbian identified,
and they were fighting that real hard. They wanted us in NOW because we
were all able to work. You know, we didn't have children at home so we
could do a lot of the work without having to tell my husband I'm going to
go do this or whatever.

Heather W. So the lesbians were good for labor.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. Got it.

Nickie V. Got it, yes. And so we were beginning to feel like, well, but we want to be
part of the leadership, not just do all the grunt work.

Heather W. Not doing the heavy lifting, right.

Nickie V. No. So there was a real struggle there until Karen DeCrow became the president and she said we can't do that. We're either equal or we're not. So I got very involved in that struggle, in trying to convince them that you needed us, but we've got to be named. If you're going to use our labor, we want to be named. Then when she became the president and she said we're all equal. If we're going to do the work, we have to have...you could run for secretary or president or whatever.

And we did a lot of marches, protests and marches, and we would, for example, Anita Bryant—well, Dignity did that, too. That's when we held a fundraiser, because we held a fundraiser to work against Anita Bryant. And through NOW we went and we protested her when she came to San Antonio.

Heather W. Right.

Nickie V. And some of us got arrested.

Heather W. Yeah? Did you get arrested?

Nickie V. Yeah. [*Laughs.*] I was already aware of what would happen if you got arrested. I mean, they'd take you downtown and nothing really would happen. They'd take your name and, you know, you had to get yourself a lawyer that would come in and say this was, you know, there wasn't any... Because there wasn't any confrontation, but they just, you know. I think we marched around the bus, especially when she was about to leave, and the bus couldn't take off. So that's when they—

Heather W. 'Cause you surrounded the bus.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. That's excellent. I think I read about that protest.

Nickie V. Yeah, yeah.

Heather W. In some of...that's great. Had you been arrested before?

Nickie V. Oh, yeah. Now, when I was working in the bars, this is what would go on. There was a vice squad director or whatever that had taken it upon himself that he was going to shut down the gay bars and that activity. His name was Duke [Harvel]. You remembered his name because actually we disliked the gentleman. He would send a vice squad officer together in with a gay guy that maybe they had something on him, okay? Or they would—because the guys prostituted out in the street. They would pick him up and they would say okay, we'll let you go if you go into this bar with the officer.

So the guy would go in with the officer. They would come in and sit down and look like a couple and order a drink and so on. And the vice squad officer would observe everything that was going on. At a certain point in time the vice squad would walk in with their flashing the badges, you know, whatever, and they would let the guy go. And then the vice squad officer would say this one danced with that one, kissed that one, or over here in the corner they were being comfy cozy and holding hands, or this

one got up and danced with that one. They would haul us all downtown, paddy wagon with, you know.

At one point, one time—‘cause I went downtown three times—we were told to line up, all the men on that side and women over here. So I walked this way and the officer said, no, you belong on that side, I don’t care how much you think you’re a girl. And I said I am a girl. He looks at me and he says, okay, well, you go on this side. And they would take us all downtown. And if there was more men, of course, they would take them in a paddy wagon. If there was just a couple women they’d put us in a squad car and take us downtown.

And if we were in a squad car, then of course Duke Harvel was in the car with us. And you would be subjected to all sorts of language, asked about certain sexual perversity, and we had to endure that going downtown. And that’s why we used nicknames, because if they would say do you know Mary Irma, and they’d say no. I was Nickie. And that eventually became kind of a legal name, Nickie.

Deb M. It is a legal name now.

Nickie V. Yes, it is a legal name. Anyway, so that was how we got around not losing our jobs, because the vice squad would call your employment. It didn’t matter if you worked at a restaurant... or if you were in government work or if you were in the military. The government and military, those poor folks suffered a lot. They would, I mean, you’d get demoted or thrown

out, and, you know. But they would call. They would call and say you've got a queer working for you.

Heather W. And at this point you said you were working in the bar.

Nickie V. Yeah, uh-huh.

Heather W. As a bartender?

Nickie V. Right. And I just naturally went because I was part of the group.

Heather W. Did you have any sort of strategies for figuring out what to do when the vice squads came?

Nickie V. Yes. There was several bars that if the vice squad—they would have somebody...they would hire somebody that would be outside, and if they saw that the vice squad was coming, they would flash a light inside. And you went back to just behaving, sitting down, having your drink, not doing anything. If you were dancing you exchanged partners and you danced with a guy and so on. For me, I had to sit down because—or I was working there, actually. I could continue my work. But if I went to another bar and wanted to dance, I had to sit down because they couldn't tell if I was a boy or a girl.

Heather W. So whoever you danced with would be the wrong person.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Deb M. I think one other thing that you should talk about is Robert.

Nickie V. Okay. In 1971?

Deb M. '71.

Nickie V. My partner at the time, Jeannie, decided she wanted to have a child. And I didn't want a child. I thought it would be very hard on the child to be our child, that we were his parents. And I say his because it turned out that she went on to have the child and it was a boy, and his name was Robert. And I guess we were one of the first couples in our community that had a child. And we were very involved with NOW at the time, so we would pack him up, take him with us to meetings and stuff like that. And he grew up being okay, you know. I mean, we tried to give him as best an education as we could.

And we decided that when it was time to go to high school we sent him to Central Catholic High School, which was for boys only, because we thought, well, he's growing up amongst all these women—because our group was all women—and he needs to have that male experience and find out what it was to be a boy or whatever, you know. So then when he was in high school, he had some friends, and I was now at this time already with Deborah. And his friends called him and wanted him to go to play Pictionary or something. They picked him up and he was sitting in the back of a pickup on the way back. They were coming home already. He had called and said I'm coming home. And a drunk driver hit the truck and he was killed.

Heather W. Oh.

Nickie V. And we lost Robert.

Heather W. I'm so sorry.

Nickie V. Sometimes it's hard to talk about it. I do okay.

Heather W. When he was a baby and the two of you decided to have a baby, was that really unusual in the friendship circles that you were around?

Nickie V. Yeah. It was kind of unusual. There was already kids that came around, but they had had them in a straight relationship, and they were now lesbian. But it was...I remember that some of the women...what did they say? I think it was that ridiculous. They wanted us to make him look like a girl and not raise him to be a male because that was oppressive.

Heather W. To have a boy?

Nickie V. Yeah. So we struggled with that within the community.

Deb M. Well, I was going to say, you know, talk about a little bit when he kind of figured out he didn't have a dad.

Nickie V. Oh, yeah. Okay. That was... He was like about seven or eight, and his teacher sent home a notice saying that he was misbehaving, it was hard to get him to pay attention, and he would have fits of anger. So we took him to a counselor and we figured out, or he said that...it got to the fact that he wanted to have a dad, how come he didn't have a dad. So the counselor

said, well, his problem is that he feels he's not a normal kid because he doesn't have a father at home and whatever.

And Jeannie, who had him biologically, said to him, now you have two parents that really wanted you. It wasn't natural for us to just have a child, but we both really wanted you, and that's why you were born, because we wanted a child. And we're sorry that you feel that way, but you are loved. And then she said now look at Miguel over there with his mother. Where's his father? He only has his mother right now. And she was a single parent. And then she turned around and mentioned somebody else and said what about his father? So you've got two women [boys] here that have only their mother, they don't have a father, and even though they don't have a father, they're doing just fine. So his mother is, you know, sending him to school and having a job, and so on, and support. So you've got two parents. They only have one, but you've got two, and we wanted you. And it changed his whole attitude.

Heather W. That made the difference.

Nickie V. It made the difference.

Heather W. I have another... Did you and Jeannie have a ceremony of any kind?

Nickie V. No. We did not.

Heather W. Did you know anyone then who had ceremonies?

Nickie V. No, not at the time. The ceremonies didn't really start until Dignity took hold, and then we started wanting to have a more formal relationship that would tell the community we are together. But I didn't do any of that until I was with Deborah.

Heather W. And you all met at Dignity?

Nickie V. Yes.

Heather W. When was that?

Deb M. 1985.

Nickie V. Yes.

Heather W. Do you want to talk about that?

Nickie V. Well, she came to Dignity. I was already one of the leaders of the group. I don't think I held any office at the time, did I? I was just one of the leaders in the group. And when I saw her, I thought wow, she's real cute, you know. But there was a big age difference. And so it was like, you know, I don't want to get involved with somebody that young.

Heather W. Do you want to say what the age difference is?

Nickie V. And she was with somebody anyway, so it wasn't like...it didn't hit me other than the fact that I thought she was a very good-looking young woman and I liked her. She was very friendly and so on. And then she brought her partner at the time because her partner lived here in St. Louis.

And she would go over and spend time with her in San Antonio, and vice versa. I guess you came up here. So one time we were at Paula's house or something like that, and I said hi, you know—well, we met at Dignity, and during the peace time, you know—

Deb M. Peace or whatever, yeah.

Nickie V. Yeah. I really liked her. And I thought, well, you know, I can ask her about, you know, would she like to do something like go to somebody's house. I think over New Year's was the first time, right?

Deb M. Yeah. Well, I sought out Dignity mostly because my mother had gone through my things and found out about me. And of course that disrupted my relationship with the woman I was involved with at the time, and she just...it was just too much because she contacted her family and, you know, she wasn't out, and it just created a lot of drama, you know. So I sought out, I mean, a friend of mine at the local parish, the young adult minister at the parish referred me to Dignity and said that, you know, I could get some good support there. And that's how I—I mean, I had already gone to Dignity a couple of times, but this was kind of like the formal, you know.

And Paula Reeder, who was the chaplain, one of the chaplains at the time with Dignity, said that, you know, Nickie went through a similar experience. Because my mother had kind of disowned me, and took away my money, and, you know, all kinds of stuff. And so we ended up

establishing more of a friendship that way. You know, we kind of talked about the whole thing of being disowned by the family and that kind of stuff. And so then we kind of started, you know, doing things together, and that's kind of how it evolved.

Nickie V. And then you and Jan—

Deb M. Well, yeah, we had split up, yeah.

Nickie V. So after they split up, I found out that Janet sent her a “Dear John” letter, sort of, and also said I have met this woman in St. Louis and her name is Deb, okay? Now what Janet wanted to do was, well, we don't have to really break up. I could go over there, you know, and over here will... In other words, she wanted to be able to have both. And I found out that Deborah said no, we're not...that that was not going to happen. And I found that very admirable, that she preferred to call it off, go through the heartbreak, and not have Janet as her partner because that was not what she wanted. And I thought, wow, that's pretty good, you know. She's not willing to be a hanger-on and, you know. So that I admired in her. And I started to ask her do you want to do this or do you want to do that? And I guess, I don't know how she felt, but I guess in a way she enjoyed being with me.

Deb M. Oh, yeah, uh-huh.

Nickie V. [*Laughs.*] So we went through a period where I would say to her it's fine, but you're too young. You're going to end up leaving me. I don't want to

get involved. You can, you know, you'll just end up leaving me anyway.
And she would say well, if we get together, you'll die on me.

Heather W. [*Laughs.*] Right.

Nickie V. [*Laughs.*] But we fought that. I wouldn't call her for a time and then she would call, or vice versa. If she didn't call me, I would call her. And we did that for about a year.

Deb M. Mm-hmm, yeah, or so.

Nickie V. I mean, before we finally decided, okay.

Deb M. Give it a try.

Nickie V. We'll give it a try. And so—

Deb M. Thirty, what, two years later?

Nickie V. Two years later, yeah.

Deb M. Thirty-two years later, here we are.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Deb M. There's 21 years difference between us.

Heather W. My partner and I are 19 years difference.

Nickie V. It works.

Heather W. It does. It works real good. You all are great. I love it.

Deb M. I can send—she...

Heather W. I have one more—go ahead.

Deb M. I was going to say I can send you—because she kind of wrote up some stuff for this thing.

Heather W. Perfect.

Deb M. And so it's got some dates and names and that kind of stuff. And then she also wrote an article for the Women Church Convergence newsletter.

Heather W. Perfect.

Deb M. And it's more about her early days and her childhood, upbringing. And I think there's a couple of pertinent—I mean, I think it flows. I mean, I kind of helped her write it. And I can send you that if you want me to just to kind of maybe fill in some of the spaces or whatever, if that's okay with you.

Nickie V. Oh, yeah, sure.

Deb M. Okay. I can send you both of those documents and you can kind of weed through them and take out. I mean, I guess I'm assuming you take all this and kind of make it into a story of some kind or...

Heather W. Well, we can, I mean, we can do... We can post the—and I'm still recording, it's fine—we can post the oral history as is. But also one of the things that Mark does is kind of puts together different stuff on the

website, on the page there. I have one other question for you. And it was kind of near the end of what you were talking about yesterday during the session. And I don't think you got to the point of the Halloween letter.

Nickie V. Oh, yeah.

Heather W. You had just started talking about that. You kind of talked about the different groups that asked you to leave and then the Halloween letter. So I wonder if you could say more about that and how that affected Dignity in San Antonio.

Nickie V. Well, when the Halloween letter came out, we were meeting in St. Mary's Church, and we had about, oh, God, about six priests that would come and do liturgy or celebrate mass for us. And we lost them because the rule went or the word went out from the Vatican that we were not supposed to be accepted on Catholic Church property. Archbishop Flores did not have the heart to throw us out of church property as long as a priest was okay with us being there. But he felt that he absolutely needed to tell the priests that they were not allowed to come and celebrate mass for us.

So we lost... All of the priests at the time were archdiocesan. I don't think we had a... Because there's certain priests that are not archdiocesan, they are order priests—Franciscans, the Redemptorists, the Oblates—they could still come. And even they stayed away because then they felt like they would be incriminated and they'd have to deal with their leadership to be able to come. So we lost all our priests.

But we had learned to do para-liturgy, so we could go. We went on. However, there was usually more people leading than there was in the pews. We lost a lot of people. And that's what's always been difficult about Dignity, particularly in San Antonio. Other groups, like in Boston and in New York and Washington, they have big groups. They're mostly men, but they're big groups. Boston is the only other chapter that's a lot like us. There's a lot of women involved. But they...where was I going? Anyway, they—

Deb M. The priests, having a priest.

Nickie V. The priests were not allowed to come, so we would do our para -iturgies. And we did a lot of para-liturgies during that year. We really did not have priests around.

Deb M. There were a couple of retired priests that would occasionally be available.

Nickie V. Yeah. But eventually—well, even while the Pope was around. What was his name?

Deb M. John Paul.

Nickie V. Benedict.

Deb M. No. That's much later. Benedict's much later.

Nickie V. Oh, that's right. It was—

Deb M. John Paul.

Nickie V. —John Paul.

Deb M. John Paul. And that was in the '80s, mid '80s.

Nickie V. Right.

Deb M. Mm-hmm. And for about a year, year and a half, it was very difficult to find somebody who would preside with us. And then little by little a few would come back, came back. And then...

Nickie V. And then we lost—

Deb M. Then Bill Davis left St. Mary's—

Nickie V. We lost him.

Deb M. —and then we moved on to St. Ann's. And things kind of had mellowed by then, and we were back into a more regular routine. We had regular presiders and that kind of thing.

Nickie V. Yeah. But then the new priests that came in didn't want us there. And that was already...it was always what Archbishop Patrick had said, you know, if you want them there, fine, if you don't, then it's up to you. It's your parish. You can ask them to leave. And this priest met with—we met there for a whole year before he... We kept inviting him to come around and get to know us. And he would come in and sit in the back and watch what went on. And I guess he was trying to figure out, well, if they do something wrong, I can always say, well, they are doing something wrong, that's not according to the rule of mass or whatever. And he just never

really did find anything until about a year later he called us together. He said that he would like for us to either join the mass for—

Deb M. The deaf.

Nickie V. The deaf, that they were special, and it was a special mass, and they could come, we could stay there for that mass, but not have our own individual mass and do our thing. And of course that meant I don't really want you here unless you do this, and you become part of the parish, and you join the mass of the deaf. And so we left. We left again. One of our members asked another priest at St. Ann's, and that priest, Stuart Juleen, took us in. And we were at St. Ann's—

Deb M. Until we were asked to leave the church altogether—

Nickie V. For quite a while.

Deb M. —in 2010.

Nickie V. Until we lost Archbishop Flores. He retired and Archbishop Gomez came in and he did not want us anywhere, so we were asked to leave—

Heather W. To leave altogether.

Nickie V. —Catholic Church property.

Heather W. Wow. Wow. I think we need to wrap this up. It's been a lot of talking.

Nickie V. Yeah.

Heather W. Thank you.

Nickie V. Oh, sure.

[End of recording.]