

Carolyn Virginia, Crazy Ladies Bookstore

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Interview with Carolyn Virginia (Crazy Ladies Bookstore)

Interviewed by Cameron Wood

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CV = Carolyn Virginia, CW = Cameron Wood

CW: Today is November 16, 2023, I'm Cameron Wood recording via Zoom with Carolyn Virginia and we are going to talk about Crazy Ladies Bookstore today. Can you say and spell your name for me?

CV: I'm Carolyn Virginia.

CW: Alright, people would have known you back when you were running Crazy Ladies as Carolyn Dellenbach. Is that okay to talk about?

CV: Oh sure. I started the bookstore while I was Carolyn Dellenbach and I transitioned that, changing my last name while I still had the bookstore. So yes, Carolyn Dellenbach is my birth name.

CW: Okay, so why did you choose to change your name?

CV: Well I was very heavily involved in the Feminist movement and Dellenbach is my patriarchal name, my dad's last name. And a lot of people were changing, a lot of women were changing their last names to their mother's name being the matriarch but that was still her father's name. So my mother's first name is Virginia so I changed it to her just to be a total woman-centered name. A friend of mine had done the same thing. She changed her last name to Violet, she inspired me. And I did go through the formal process. You know changed Social Security first. I think it was a fluke, you know they were really busy that day when I went in to change it from Dellenbach to Virginia and I think they just let me kind of get away with it. [laughs] And then I did formally change it later on but that's how it started.

CW: Okay, so where and when were you born?

CV: I was born in Wausau, Wisconsin on August 23, 1952. Wausau is a town of about 35,000 in Central Wisconsin.

CW: So, what was growing up there like?

CV: It was very nice. It was very, I had a solid middle class background, very loving parents, Catholic background. Very white, which of course I learned later on more about that, I didn't think about that as I was growing up. A good growing up. Did a lot of reading as a child.

CW: So what brought you to Cincinnati?

CV: I went to the University of Wisconsin and I got a Master's degree in Library Science with an archive specialty. And that I just kind of fell into. Because my undergraduate was English and I just didn't know what to do with that and I got a job at the Archives at the Wisconsin Historical Society which is just on the campus and I worked in the archives. And I loved it, I loved the people I worked with, I loved learning about history so I decided to get the archive specialty which at that time you did through Library Science. So I had that degree and when I got done I got a job at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. It was a grant and so I went to Cincinnati because I got a job there. I loved Cincinnati. I didn't know much about Jewish history either so I just immersed myself in learning Jewish History and the history of Cincinnati. Cincinnati is a beautiful town, very historical so I just immersed myself in the whole community so that's how I got to Cincinnati.

CW: So when you got to Cincinnati what was your initial experience like?

CV: Well it was considered a conservative city but I don't know if I knew that much about that at the time. While I was at the Jewish Archives, some of the people I met, I got very involved in the feminist movement. You know I was involved in the feminist movement somewhat in College but not heavily. You know I supported women's rights and the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment). That was going on in Wisconsin and it didn't pass and I was shocked and I guess I was in school so I just didn't, I was very focused on just getting out of school and getting a job. So once I had a job I got very involved in the feminist movement in Cincinnati. Some of my friends who worked at the library, it was on the campus of Huber Union College, the American Jewish Archives was, so one of the librarians there got, I got very involved in the feminist movement. The ERA was being talked about and being up for a vote in Ohio at that time so I just threw myself into the ERA, abortion rights and feminism just in general. So that's how I started thinking about the bookstore, through the feminist movement. And I also at that time came out as a lesbian. I always said I kind of came out through the feminist movement but I always said that I had to get away from Wisconsin. I was so entrenched, I don't know if entrenched is the right (word), I was so involved with my family and with pleasing my family and all that. That I got away to Cincinnati and I

got to really be who I was. So the feminist movement and then I came out as a lesbian as did my friend who was at the library. It was quite exciting times, heavy times, it was just very very busy and very involved, engaged in friendships and political movements.

CW: How long had you been thinking about coming out before you came out?

CV: Probably I don't think I thought about it until I got to Cincinnati because like I said I was in Wisconsin and I was very wanting to please everyone so I didn't think about it so much then. So it probably, I came out when I was about 23 so probably about two years, three years. It's like a door opened up. It was like it was a possibility and I remember thinking to myself "Oh maybe that's why things didn't really work with men. And just nothing seemed to click that much." And then I had the feeling which a lot of people describe it as, it's just a feeling of coming home. It's like 'Oh I'm home now', everything in the world started making sense to me.

CW: So when did you realize that you were a lesbian? How young were you?

CV: Oh that wasn't until I was like I said about 21, 22. I always say I came out through the feminist movement. I didn't even know it was an option.

CW: What groups were you working with in Cincinnati? For feminism or either finding your community as a lesbian?

CV: First of all I was very involved in NOW, National Organization for Women. So I was involved with that and then also involved with a group called NARAL (National Abortion Rights Action League). I think they're still around. That was for the abortion rights. Those were the two groups that I was very involved in and then like I said there was a whole bunch of us who were involved in those who just all came out at the same time. It was like all of a sudden we realized 'wow, we're lesbians and this really makes sense.' And so like I said it was very heavy times, exciting times. So those were the two and then there was the group in town called the Lesbian Activist Bureau so after I came out I got involved with that group too.

CW: So what led you to open Crazy Ladies Bookstore?

CV: Well as a feminist and a lesbian, whenever I would travel, at that time there wasn't a lot of books about lesbians or feminism and when there were it wasn't easy to get them. A lot of bookstores didn't carry them. Or women's music again another part of that feminist lesbian movement, culture, it was a culture. So whenever I would travel I would always go to women's bookstores. We had and we still do, have a women's

bookstore in Madison which I used to go to, we had one in Madison. And whenever I would travel I would go to the women's bookstores and then I realized the women's bookstores, they carried books for women, they carried women's music, women's magazines which were hard to get at. But they also were like a community center. You'd go there and you would find out where the lesbian bar was or where the coffee houses were. And there would be the bulletin boards which would tell you all of the events going on. So the bookstores at that time were a community center for women, for the feminist movement. So I just felt we needed one in Cincinnati, so that's how it started. So originally there was a group of us who got together and said we're going to do it as a collective or cooperative or something and then it just didn't work. You know everybody had full time jobs and all that. So it didn't work and at one time I was so disappointed I remember waking up one day and I said "Well I'm gonna do it. I'll do it on my own as a small business, I don't need a collective to do this." So that's how it started. It was a need in the Cincinnati community, it was something that was missing.

CW: So was it hard to start up the business at that time? Was it hard to find suppliers, was it hard to find a location? What kind of things, was it hard or was it easy?

CV: It was fun. I was young and I had that library background so I wasn't afraid of books or anything like that. I was very lucky at the job I had at the American Jewish Archives, they allowed me to go part-time. So then I went part-time, so then I'd work in the morning and then I'd have the afternoon off. And then I'd spend the afternoons getting ready for the bookstore. There weren't, let me see, it was just so much fun. I'd get all the different catalogues from the major publishers and then I'd go through them and pick out the women's books. And so I'd do that. There was a women's distribution, I can't remember the name of them now but there was a distribution of women's books, I would go through that. There was another for women's music, there was a distribution for that. So finding the resources and where to get the things that was easy but it took a lot of time figuring it all out. I don't know, I was thinking about that, I'm not sure what I did for health insurance. I mean I'm older now so I'm so concerned about health insurance. I'm assuming I kept my insurance with the Jewish Archives and then I got a loan. There was a bank in the Northside where I, I chose the Northside neighborhood in Cincinnati because it was near Clifton which is the University area and it was a little off of that. But it was kind of the up and coming neighborhood where a lot of progressives and liberals and lesbians were living. And it was affordable. So I knew I'd be wanting to be in the Northside neighborhood so I went to a bank that was in Northside. Maybe it was called Northside Bank. And they gave me a loan. So I got a loan from them and I remember at the time getting the loan they asked me to do a balance sheet. Well I didn't know what a balance sheet was so my father was an accountant so I asked him to help me with doing a balance

sheet. So I did a balance sheet for them and they had to decide if I was a good risk or not. So I got a loan from the Northside bank and I wanted to build that community, that neighborhood the Northside. I wanted the Northside bank to be my bank and so that's how I got it. I don't know how long it took. I can't remember how long it took, six months maybe? And then I found a location and it was right near where I lived, like within blocks of where I lived. And I was renting from a group that was trying to promote the Northside at that time and they had offices and they were like right next door to me. So I rented the space from them. So I had a location and my partner at the time, Deb Vogt, she built all the bookshelves for me. So she did the book shelves and there was a lot of community support, a lot of people would come in and help clean or whatever needed to be done. I don't know, it was just such a heady time, I did it and I'm shocked now that I could do that. I'm kind of, when I make my mind up to do something I just do it so I did that.

CW: Well it sounds like you had good relatives and close people around you. You had a carpenter and an accountant that had to come in handy.

CV: Yes, at one time, my Dad was so sweet I mean he was just confused about the whole thing. You know, the changing of the name, he just accepted it, whatever I did, I did. At one time I was so confused about balancing the checkbook, I couldn't do it. And he actually came down and went through all my books for me and balanced my checkbook for me. Very supportive, very helpful. And then later on I became an accountant myself with the bookstore so I'm kind of shocked at how naive I was about accounting and business practice but I just was going to go ahead and do it. There was a lot of support in the community and there was a lot of support for women's bookstores at the time. There was a feminist bookstore newsletter that was put out and I would get that monthly and they would talk about all the different music. Part of the bookstore was music too, we had all of the books but there was a whole big music scene going on. And so they would tell you about all the newest music to get and all the newest books and some of the problems or the different magazines. And I had support from that side too. There was a national movement and there was even at one point, and I think there was only one of these, they had a conference in Washington DC for feminist bookstores. And I went, so that was fun.

CW: How was business when you first opened?

CV: Well making it profitable was always hard. Bookstores don't make a lot of money, there's not a big profit margin so it was hard. There were some Saturdays that I'd have really good days but there were days when, Tuesdays through Fridays I would be open noon to eight because I worked in the morning but there were days when I wouldn't have anybody come in so it was just empty the eight hours I was open,

nobody came in so it was hard. I had that part time job and I'm pretty sure that's where my health insurance was. But anyway I did it for the love, you know, for the bookstore and for the community. Sometimes on Saturdays I'd have friends who would come in and who would volunteer and they'd take a Saturday for me or work a Thursday night for me. You know I had a lot of support that way. At some point it got tough on me so I did quit working at the Jewish Archives and I tried to have the bookstore be my sole income and that did not work. So that's when I eventually just sold it to a collective. I don't think I sold it, I think I just gave it to them. I don't even think they paid me anything. Maybe they paid for the books. Maybe not even that. I wasn't anything about being profitable.

CW: You mention that these bookstores are also centers for the community. What kind of events and things like, other than just being a bookstore, did you do?

CV: Well of course we would have readings, book clubs. And I say we just because there were just so many around with me that we would kind of do this together. We would sponsor consciousness raising groups, book readings, book clubs. Crazy Ladies was very involved in bringing music to Cincinnati. So like Holly Near and Alix Dobkin who were some of the big people in the women's music scene back then. So we'd sponsor events. If I wouldn't totally sponsor it, we would participate in it. So we did a lot of stuff with the music stuff book stuff. We got really involved with the University. That's when people were starting to run anti-racism things so we would attend seminars on that. A lot of times if there was anything going on, I'd bring books. So I'd bring a table of books for people to see for purchasing. At one point I went up to the women's music festival up in Michigan and I took my books up there. I had a little mini-table so I sold books that way. It was really just about bringing books to the community, books and music to the community. These things were not available other places.

CW: When did you give the book store over to the collective?

CV: I was, so I started it, you know I can't even remember the year. '75-'76? So then I started, you know I didn't know much about accounting and the bookstore so then I started taking accounting classes at the University. Just to understand more of the finances. And then that's when I realized that it pretty much wasn't going to make it, it wouldn't support me. So after 3 or 4 years that's when I realized a collective would have to run it. Somebody else, somebody who didn't have it as their sole means of support. After 3 years I started getting part time jobs as an accountant, bookkeeper and stuff like that. And then I would still help out with the bookstore but I wasn't responsible for it.

CW: Who were the big names of the collective that really helped you keep things going I guess?

CV: It was just friends at that time, it wasn't a collective. So I had my best friend at the time was Penny Smith. She would come in every Saturday. And then my girlfriend at the time was Margie Little, she would come in and help. Roommates Bobby would. One of my best friends is Pat Van Dkye. Phebe Beiser was around, Vic Ramstetter, the Lesbian Activist Bureau was Wendy Sequoia. So it was just, there was just a lot of people who were very involved and very supportive. Part of the bookstore, in my dream of having it be a community center, it really was. There were people who would just stop by just to chat. Because we were open noon to 8. And there were people who would just stop by and sometimes they would buy things. I always had tea water on. I had a dog with me, I had a dog there all the time. And sometimes they would just stop by and chat and see what was going on and pet the dog, just be around. So it was almost like a community center so that part of it was great. I met a lot of good people and made a lot of friends.

CW: Did you ever suffer any discrimination at the store?

CV: I don't think so. I'm just trying to think, I was worried about it. I remember I was laughing that right across the street from me was a bar. And so in the Winter I would be open until 8 and there was just a big window. And there I was sitting at my counter. I'd be counting my money or ordering books or whatever. And I know the people at the bar were aware of me but no, they never said a thing. In fact after a while I kind of felt like they saw me as somebody who was hardworking and industrious. And they didn't, I don't know if they were protective but I didn't have any discrimination that way. I thought I'd get some, I was expecting to and I never did. Which is shocking, considering.

CW: Yeah it is, it is surprising. I mean you were in a friendly neighborhood but still. Were you always in the same location?

CV: I was but after, the collective after I left, they moved two times after that, but they moved just down the street. Just a couple blocks so it was always on Hamilton Avenue.

CW: OK, so over time there were three different locations for the bookstore?

CV: Yes, right.

CW: So thinking about the broader Cincinnati history. What was the lesbian community in Cincinnati like when you were living there?

CV: I would say it was very vibrant, it was very white. We were trying to make inroads with the black community but that was difficult because of the whole systemic racism that we all have. But it was very vibrant, we had the Lesbian Activist Bureau. Wendy Sequoia, who her and her partner Sandy at the time, they ran that. There would be coffee houses, every Thursday, there would be coffees at their house. There was a woman called Theresa Dell who was a musician and I think it was Sunday nights, she'd play at a wine cellar and people would go there. So it was a very vibrant community, very politically active. We had concerts going on all the time. And so it was a very very vibrant community. And again, this is all just white women that I'm talking about. I didn't know, we didn't really interact much with the men. I wasn't necessarily a separatist but I just, I was so happy just having a women's community. It was just so much fun.

CW: Were there any bars that you frequented or that the community frequented?

CV: There was a bar up on the campus, I think it was called Nick's. Yeah there was a lesbian bar up there that we'd all go to. It was run by a guy and he always said his wife was happy that he had that bar because she knew, this was the story he told, because she knew he wouldn't be getting involved with any of his patrons. That was his story. But yes there was a bar that we'd all go to up on campus. And so I of course was going to the bar and all that before I did Crazy Ladies. So that's how I kind of came out, I started going to the bar and met more people there. There's not lesbian bars around now either. There's hardly any lesbian or feminist bookstores, there's not many around or lesbian bars. It was, we had a culture back then.

CW: Because of discrimination, it was a little more cohesive or insular back then. Do you miss that culture?

CV: Yeah I was younger then and yes, you had a purpose and yeah, I do miss it. When I moved here in Madison, I got involved with a church because, it's kind of a long story. I adopted a daughter and then my partner and I wanted to have a more of a spiritual background with her so we went to a church. And our church used to have, they called it Rainbow People and so there would be gatherings. It was a very progressive church and they supported gay marriage and all that. And so there used to be a group called the Rainbow People and we would have potlucks regularly. And again it was a way for us to kind of connect and everything and straight people would come, it was really a kind of progressive church. But after a while it faded away and we realized that we don't need the separate groups anymore because we're kind of

welcome in the rest of the community. It's like you would be in the lesbian community and you would have friends but you could be yourself there and nobody freaked out about it. And the general society especially in Madison, Wisconsin, they just started accepting us. So you didn't have the need for separate groups anymore. So like I said it was very heady times. But do I miss that? Yeah, I mean the friends I made back then, but a lot of times that's how it is. The friends you make when you're young and you're growing up are just very dear to you. You experience something together. I miss that period of time.

CW: You talked about being active in politics nationwide and statewide. Were there any local politics that you became involved in?

CV: Going through some of my old records of mine, I see that I was involved in some things. There was something going on in the city at that time about not wanting discrimination against lesbians and gays and I can see that I was involved in it but I don't remember any of that. If you would have asked me, I would have said I wasn't, but I have the proof I was. So I was involved but it was never to the extent that I was with the lesbian movement. I was all about having women be their potential, see their potential in the feminist culture.

CW: Crazy Ladies, the collective, you had left it by this point. But they shut down in, was it 2012, was it that late?

CV: I don't know.

CW: I think it was 2012. When was the last time you visited the bookstore?

CV: Well I moved back to Wisconsin in the late '80's. Sometime in the late '90's? I don't know, I'm sorry, I don't know. It's about an 8-9 hour drive from Madison and I would come to visit occasionally because I had friends there and I would always visit the bookstore but I wasn't part of the collective at all.

CW: Is there anything else you'd like to say before we wrap up?

CV: I also wanted to say, and this kind of flitted through my mind, when I was starting out there was a bookstore on, in the campus area. New World Books was it called? He had the best maybe feminist collection and so I knew when I was going to have my bookstore that he would probably lose some of that business. He was again, one of those who was really supportive. He basically gave me all of his feminist books at a discount. He was very supportive. And I think that, so yeah that was very sweet. So I did want to mention that I had that support. And then when I was at the bookstore, I

mentioned earlier that I had a dog with me the whole while. So that was really fun, she was Sarah-Jane, she'd come with me every day and then we'd go out in the parking lot and I'd throw a ball for her and she just became part of the book store. And one of my friends made a calendar called the old Sarah-Jane calendar. So it was fun.

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