Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Elizabeth Keaton
Interviewer: Esperanza Santos
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Vetted by: Cristell Cedeno
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Esperanza Santos*:* Today is October 4th. My name is Esperanza Santos, and I'm interviewing Elizabeth Keaton while she is in Delaware and I am at Rutgers, Newark, with—for the oral—for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Good morning, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Good morning. Good morning.

Esperanza Santos*:* Hi. Thank you for joining me today.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I'm delighted to be with you today.

Esperanza Santos*:* How are you feeling right now?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I'm feeling really honored and blessed to be a part of this project.

Esperanza Santos*:* Awww, we're blessed to have you.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Thank you. Thank you. I was saying to someone this morning that I don't know how it is that you slip into a category of ancient of days, but suddenly, I'm feeling very old to be asked to be part of a history project, but here we are. *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* *[Laughter]* You're like, how did I get in this category, but okay.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* So, we're going to start with your childhood and family of origin. Can you tell me when and where were you born?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Sure. I was born in Fall River, Massachusetts, a great little town in Massachusetts, on April 21, 1949.

Esperanza Santos*:* In Massachusetts, who raised you, or what kind of household did you have?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Sure. It was a pretty typical immigrant household. My grandparents had come over from Portugal, and they lived in—on the first floor of a tenement house, and we lived on the second floor, my parents. I'm the oldest of four children. My mother and father had had four children—actually, six. She had lost the first one through stillborn and then a miscarriage and then I was born.

Then she had three more children in—within 22 months to 24 months apart. And so, I spent most of my time downstairs with my grandmother, and I would say that pretty much my grandmother raised me. It was that sort of—we had our own apartment upstairs, but my grandparents were just downstairs, and that's really where I spent most of my time.

Esperanza Santos*:* Being that you spent a lot of time with your grandparents, were your parents at home, or were they taking care of your siblings? Were you with relatives nearby, or was it just like, as Portuguese immigrants, you really had to take care of each other?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. We really had to take care of each other. My grandparents had, well, my grandmother had 20 children—20 pregnancies and 22 children. And so, 15 of them made it to adulthood, so there were always aunts and uncles and cousins coming in and out of the house all the time. My parents were working. They went to work. When my youngest sister was four, my mother went back to work. Ans so, my father worked a night shift 11:00 to 7:00, and my mother worked 7:00 to 3:00 in a mill. Yeah. I pretty much, when my father was napping or sleeping, we were supposed to—and I was home from school, we watched out after the younger ones. But it wasn't just my sisters and brothers. It was cousins who were also—

Esperanza Santos*:* It was like your village?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Exactly.

Esperanza Santos*:* As you grew up in Massachusetts, do you recall any turning point in your childhood or things that kind of struck you as a kid?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Going to school, I didn't speak English. That year, they had a classroom for kids with special needs, and I was put in that classroom with kids who were intellectually challenged, physically challenged. And my teacher, I felt like, why am I in with these kids? My teacher—Mrs. Keliper was her name—knew that I wasn't intellectually challenged, and so she worked with me to learn the English language. By the next semester, I was in with—I was mainstreamed.

That was, I think, the first time I really felt like an outsider. My hair was different. My skin color was different. I didn't look like the English and Irish kids in my class. Because I had started off in first grade with the handicapped kids, I was stigmatized by that. I think, yeah, because I was Portuguese, I felt different, less than,

dirty, yeah, and clearly of less value and worth than the whiter, blond-haired, red-haired kids, blue-eyed kids in my class.

Esperanza Santos*:* This was all in Massachusetts, right? Do you remember the name of your—

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right.

Esperanza Santos*:* Do you remember the name of your elementary school?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yes, it was the—oh, it just slipped out of my head. I want to say Alice Macomber School. I think that was when we were in Westport. I think it was the Alice Macomber School. It began with a B. I will look it up for you. I know I have it written down. It's one of my passwords. *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, how cute is that?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I'll look it up. I'll look it up for you.

Esperanza Santos*:* What is it called? Classes?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I'm sorry?

Esperanza Santos*:* What was the name of the elementary school called again?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Macomber.

Esperanza Santos*:* Macomber.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Alice Macomber.

Esperanza Santos*:* What was your neighborhood like by Macomber?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* We were one of the first Portuguese families in our neighborhood. I remember the kid—my first friend in that neighborhood was a girl named Maureen Tupin, and she was French Canadian. We would play out in the street, et cetera. It was one hot summer day when Maureen said, "I need some water." I said, "Sure." I came to her house, and her mother wouldn't let me in the house and said I could get a drink from the water hose outside. Right.

Esperanza Santos*:* How old were you?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I must have been six—five or six. I remember that clearly and thinking, why can't I—and I remember asking Maureen, "Why

can't I have a glass of water?" She said, "Because my mother is stupid." *[Laughter]* That did sort of relieve the sting a bit, but yeah, I remember that clearly.

Esperanza Santos*:* Was the elementary school riddled with these experiences, or did it kind of change once you got in school or were out in the neighborhood?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* No. As I said, I was stigmatized, I think, after being in that first class with the handicapped kids or what the kids at the time in my class called the retards. I was often introduced as, "Oh, yeah. She used to be one of the retards. Look at her hair. Her hair is so kinky, and her hair is so black." Like that. "Your food smells funny." Because I ate Portuguese food. Yeah. No, I felt it. I've always felt like an outsider, which I've said was good preparation for me to be queer. *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, my. You got your training in early. *[Laughter]*

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I came to see it in that sort of way that, oh, yeah. I know what this feels like. Right.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. Like it's not so foreign once it happened. I understand some Catholics and Italian people to be—some Irish and Italian people to be Catholics.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yes.

Esperanza Santos*:* Was it similar to your religion or different, or your family didn't practice?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Interestingly enough, at that time, and maybe even now, being Roman Catholic was not—it was sort of like being Jewish. It wasn't just your religion. It was a part of your identity. It was a part of your ethnicity. So, there was- for me, being Portuguese and being Roman Catholic was inseparable. In my church, St. Elizabeth's in Fall River, was—there were two masses. One was in Portuguese, and one was in English. I used to go to the daily mass in Portuguese with my grandmother, and then on Sunday, I would go to the regular family mass, which was in English. When I was- when I made my first communion, I was chosen to give a special talk about what it meant to be—to have your first communion in Portuguese.

Esperanza Santos*:* Wow. You were one of the first?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. That's because I could speak Portuguese very well. My family was very involved in the church. Being Catholic was absolutely an essential part of my identity, which made it really difficult when I came into understanding who I am and my queerness, that that part was not acceptable to the church. It was like saying, "You can come in, but we have to cut off both your legs. We have to cut out your heart and then you can be here." It made coming out much more difficult. 'Cause one would expect that, in a community that understood what it meant to be outsiders, that you would not want to have more outsiders, but in fact, when you're an oppressed minority, anything that's different, anything that's different, but especially your sexuality, is—there's an additional weight because you don't want to be different. You want to assimilate.

Esperanza Santos*:* You want to belong as easily as everyone else does.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. That's right. Anything that's different, to straightening your hair to whitening your skin to dressing the way you dress to the foods that you eat, to the way that you talk, and certainly, if your sexuality is different, you don't want to admit that because you want to fit in. You know what the heteronormative is—

Esperanza Santos*:* Absolutely.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* - and what's expected, right?

Esperanza Santos*:* Absolutely. We'll gonna jump a little bit ahead since we're already on the topic.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I'm sorry.

Esperanza Santos*:* No, no, no. Perfect. This is how interviews work. How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Presently, I identify as female. Sexual orientation is so complicated. I have been in a faithful monogamous relationship with the same woman for—it will be 43 years on October 13th. Before that, I was married to a man and had two children. I would have to say that I find—I wouldn't say that I'm bisexual. I would say that intimacy and trust come much more easily to me with another woman than they do with a man. If that makes me a lesbian—it just sounds so clinical medically.

Esperanza Santos*:* That's what the medical industry calls us, that maybe—I don't know if that's not what we use for each other.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Other women, other lesbian women understand what I'm saying when I say that. It's not cut and dry. I don't hate men. There are some especially gay men in my life that I am emotionally intimate with. I can tell them secrets and trust them, but I sure don't have any sexual *[laughter]* feelings about them. It's a lot more complicated than the labels. I guess the standard traditional label would be lesbian, but that's not how I think of my—I think of myself as much more complex and much richer and more whole than that.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. It's a good substitute for people to understand, but it's not as complex as how you'd like to—

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right.

Esperanza Santos*:* - really say it in one word.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. I had two children with this man, and then my spouse and I had—we adopted some kids and had one child together who's now—she was born in 1981, so she has children of her own. It's very complicated and complex and wonderful. It's just being human. You know?

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* How old were you when you got married, had your kids, and then decided this isn't for me, or at least this man isn't for me anymore?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right. Right. Right. I was 21 when I got married. I got married in February. I turned 21 in April. I was almost 21 when I got married and then had two kids very quickly after that. When Barbara and I were—our families were best friends. *[Laughter]* We took vacations together, she and her husband and two kids and my husband and two kids. I think we were 28—27 when we realized that this friendship was more than friendship and that we were in love.

Esperanza Santos*:* That's beautiful.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* Was this all in Massachusetts also?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's correct. That's correct.

Esperanza Santos*:* How did you first learn of the existence of LGBTQ people?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Oh, *[laughter]* well it was not good.

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, no.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* No, it was not. Both Barbara and I—Barbara still is a nurse, and I was. I went to a Catholic nursing school, St. Anne's Hospital School of Nursing in Fall River. What I studied was in abnormal psychology and opened the books, and there were pictures of what they—the title of the chapter—I remember it clearly—was perverts.

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, my God.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* What book was this? What book was this?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* It was a nursing book. We studied homosexuality, which is probably why I have such an aversion to medical labels. There were pictures. I can still remember them 'cause I was so horrified by it because I had some inkling at that point that I had a much more trusting relationship with women than I did with men and just chalked it off to the fact that Portuguese are very matriarchal, and I grew up surrounded by women, and so it was—I just convinced myself that it was just my upbringing that I was just sort of conditioned in this way.

There were the pictures of these women who looked like men. They had Dungarees and T-shirts with a pack of Lucky Strike rolled up in their shirt sleeve and short haircuts, and men who were very effeminate, and just they looked tortured. It was beyond unhappy. It was tortured. Did some work in my psychiatric nursing at Taunton State Hospital. It was a psychiatric facility at the time. I don't think it's open anymore. It was a huge facility. I did three months' rotation there, and there was many gay and lesbian people who had had prefrontal lobotomies.

Esperanza Santos*:* Do you remember what year this was?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Let's see. I graduated in 19—I graduated in '70, and so it would have been '69—'68, '69 that these people were there and had a prefrontal lobotomy, probably in the 40s or 50s, but because they

were so incapacitated, they were now residents of the facility. It was just horrible. Then other people would come in, and they would give them the ice bath treatment. They would wrap them in a sheet and load the thing up with ice because they thought that by changing the body's metabolism, that you would affect their desires. It was horrible. Any thought that I might be a lesbian was just—or homosexual was just pushed way to the back of my head. There was no way that I was gonna be treated like this.

Esperanza Santos*:* You're like, I'm a person, I'm a human, and I don't deserve to be treated this way.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Nobody does. Nobody does. I just couldn't understand why they were doing this to people whose abnormality was love. I mean. yeah. That certainly left a very big impression on me and certainly influenced my coming out.

Esperanza Santos*:* You got married when you were just shy of 21.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos*:* You were able to get with your best friend when you were around 27.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right.

Esperanza Santos*:* How did other people in your life become aware of you being a, quote-unquote, lesbian? I know that's a very limiting term, but it's cool?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Sure. Yeah. We can use it.

Esperanza Santos*:* How did other people come to know that about you or aware of it?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* *[Laughter]* That's another trauma.

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, no.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I was married. We were living in the suburbs of Assonet, Massachusetts. My husband at the time had built a wonderful home. He was a carpenter. We had two children. For all the world to see on the outside, we looked like a very normal successful happy family. Then, as I said, I became increasingly aware that my best friend—that I was in love with my best friend. When we finally talked about it and determined that this was love—I

remember going to church and praying about it and praying to take—for God to take the gay away, and so did she.

We didn't talk about it with anybody else except each other until we decided that, if we were going to have any hope of being together, that we needed to leave Fall River, Massachusetts. We needed to leave the—that area. And so, we ran away from home is what we did. We took my two children. Barbara talked it over with her husband at the time, and he was going to stay with her two children and would allow us to have visitation. We ran away to Bar Harbor, Maine. We took out a map and circled an area for where we lived to an eight-hour ride in any direction 'cause we figured an eight-hour ride would mean that before people would come to visit us, they would have to call. They wouldn't just drop in, right? We figured eight hours was a good—the way you think. Oh, my gosh.

Esperanza Santos*:* No, no, no, no, no. Creating distance to create a sense of safety.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. If somebody called to say they were on their way to visit us, we could then straighten up the house, right, *[laughter]* and make it look like we had separate bedrooms and we were just—

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. Yeah. To straighten up figuratively, but also literally.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. That's absolutely right. That was in '76, '77. '76, I guess, that we—yeah, it was in December that we ran away from home to Bar Harbor because we also heard during our little research that there was a gay community in Bar Harbor. It was one of those end-of-the-world communities. We didn't know any other gay or lesbian people, but we thought, this would be a good place to find them because—rather than Provincetown, which was way to close to Fall River. Bar Harbor had Jackson Lab, which at the time was the premier independent cancer research lab in the country, and also had the College of the Atlantic, which at the time in the late 70s was all about oceanographic and the environment, and that was not an issue that it is today.

Because of those two places, the Jackson Lab and the College of the Atlantic, there were intelligent LGBT people there. At the time, it was just lesbian and gay. We didn't have any other letters. Even then, we fought over whether it was gay or lesbian, or whether you were actually lesbian, or everybody should be gay. We certainly didn't talk about bisexual or transgender people at that time, but lesbian and gay people in the community of Bar Harbor, so that's where we went. Then, as they say, the shit hit the fam.

Esperanza Santos*:* *[Laughter]* Oh, no.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's when everybody knew that we were lesbian. That's how it came down. That's not how we planned it.

Esperanza Santos*:* Wait. What do you mean? You moved and then people knew? Isn't that what you wanted?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* No. We didn't want them to know. We just thought we'd go away. We were so stupid. There weren't any other supports. We didn't know any other LGBT people. We thought if we just went away, out of sight, out of mind, that people wouldn't think anything of it. They would just think that we were roommates and that our marriages were over and we were just taking care of each other. Really, we were that naive to think that it would work. It wasn't until actually—Ms. Magazine was out, had been out for just a couple of years, and I was looking through an issue of it in the library in Bar Harbor and found an advertisement in the back for an organization called Daughters of Bilitis.

Esperanza Santos*:* Daughters of Bilitis.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* DOB, and wrote to them, and that's when I began to actually meet—we began to actually meet other lesbians. We had been there for about six or eight weeks, and my ex-husband came up, ostensibly to visit with the children, and took them for the afternoon and never returned with them.

Esperanza Santos*:* Wait. He took your kids and never returned?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right. That threw us into a five-year custody battle, and that's really when everybody knew because it was the first open lesbian custody case in Bristol County, Massachusetts, at the time. It was in the newspapers. When we appeared in court that first day, the courtroom was filled with other lawyers and with press. The lawyers were all there because they wanted to see how it went down and what happened because this was the first time it was being tested in court.

Esperanza Santos*:* There was no precedent?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* No. That's right. That's right. That's my coming out story, Esperanza. *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, my goodness. *[Laughter]*

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It was pretty traumatic. If I thought being in first grade with kids who were intellectually challenged and how that stigmatized me was—and then being Portuguese, that was nothing compared to being in that courtroom in Taunton, Massachusetts, that day for our first court hearing. Had it not been for Daughters of Bilitis, who helped us find a lawyer—Rabino 00:30:16 was his name—who helped to defend us and who gave us support all through, we never would have made it through. They were just amazing women.

And we're still friends with the founders of DOB in Boston to this day. They're our mothers of choice even to this day, Sheri Barden and Lois Johnson. They were incredible and are incredible women. The first time I ever met another lesbian woman was when I met Sheri Barden, who came to pick us up at the airport. I thought, "Oh, she looks pretty normal." *[Laughter]* We laugh about that when we talk about it even to this day, 40-some years later.

Esperanza Santos*:* Like, oh, homosexuals look like everyone.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Look at that. She looks normal. She looks like me and Lois at the time was not home, but they had a—shortly after that, they had an annual Thanksgiving DOB dinner at their home. They had a five-story brownstone in the south end of Boston. I remember the house was filled, filled, with women on every floor. I remember thinking, how could it be that there were this many lesbian women in the world, much less in Boston, and I didn't know about it? I mean where have they been? It was really exciting and overwhelming and scary and wonderful all at the same time, that very first experience that Thanksgiving in 1977 or '78.

Esperanza Santos*:* It was like your own Pride Thanksgiving.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That was all done in secret you know because Sheri and Lois's phone was tapped by the FBI, you know?

Esperanza Santos*:* Wait. What?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* This was in '78. Yeah. They used to say to everybody when they came into the house, "Now, if you need to use the phone, it's perfectly fine. Call whomever you want, but just understand that we're tapped, so just be careful what you say."

Esperanza Santos*:* How did y'all know you were tapped, or how did they know?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Apparently, they had someone in the gay community who knew that they were being tapped and they were being watched. Yeah. Yeah. Those were not easy days. That was just 40 years ago that this was going on. It's hard to imagine, isn't it, and in a place like Boston. Yeah. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* I guess there's a point where—before and after the kidnapping of your kids, so what happened afterwards, or how did your life change after that? 'Cause you went from being this pretty discreet person in a heterosexual marriage with two kids to now being in the press about this inaugural lesbian case in court custody. What happened?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I think when I realized that—of course, there were no cell phones, so I couldn't reach my husband at the time about where he was and whether he was coming back. Late that night, he called to say that he had the kids and that he had moved in which my parents and my parents were helping him and that I would never see my children again. That was the first—second time—there was gonna be one more time after that—that I was so distraught, I was so—you have to understand that in the Portuguese culture, a woman is—a mother is the highest status that a woman can achieve.

To take your children away as punishment was devastating on all the normal levels it is for a birth mother or even an adopted mother, someone who has that bond with a child. It was a judgment. It was a punishment. I remember just sort of crawling into the corner and crying until I couldn't see and couldn't feel. I think Barbara let me stay like that for a couple of hours. It was a Saturday. On Sunday morning, she said, "You need to get up. You need to wash your face and hands. You need to put on some clothes. We're going to church." *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Pull yourself together, Mary.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I did all of that sort of in a zombie-like state, how devastated I was. Retelling it even after all these years still feels like—my daughters were almost five and almost three. They were babies. They were confused and crying when I talked on the phone. I was just zombie-like and went into church and went into church in Bar Harbor.

Esperanza Santos*:* I'm not sure, but can you pull your phone closer to the speaker? I'm having a hard time hearing you.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Sure. We went to the Episcopal church, and that was my first experience in an Episcopal church. I just felt like I was home. The people were warm and wonderful and lovely, and they seemed to know what was going on. I later learned that it was not uncommon for this sort of thing to happen. The people who worked at the Jackson Lab, College of the Atlantic went to that church, just sort of surrounded us and loved us. That was my first introduction to the Episcopal church and probably one of the reasons that I'm an Episcopal priest today.

Esperanza Santos*:* Absolutely. Follow the love. Where it is, stay.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. That's right. You follow the love. Exactly. What a great expression, Esperanza.

Esperanza Santos*:* Thank you.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Anyway, so it was pretty devastating. That was when I, not coincidentally, heard back from the DOB, and they connected me with—because you didn't dare put your phone number in there, especially if you were being wiretapped by the FBI. We exchanged letters and then exchanged phone numbers and then talked and then they put me in touch with a lawyer. We came to Boston, stayed with Lois and Sheri while we talked to Mr. Rabino, the lawyer, and got our case together. Those months immediately after the kidnapping were a whirlwind of sort of preparing our legal case for the first open lesbian custody case in Bristol County, Massachusetts.

That's basically what I remember during that time was a lot of conversations with the legal team getting documents together, getting our defense together, that sort of thing. It just was all-consuming. It was just all-consuming when we weren't doing that and trying to work *[laughter]* and trying to have some at least phone conversation with the children. That's pretty much my memory of that period of time.

Esperanza Santos*:* Just 'cause I'm not sure what the outcome was, what happened in the end?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* What happened in the end was—the first judgment was that we lost custody of the kids, but we were given what our attorney said was the most generous visitation. We had had a guardian ad litem that was appointed from—somebody who was the chair of the psychology department at University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. He interviewed us, and we had social

workers interviewing us, et cetera. The judge, a nice Jewish man, said that he saw that we would provide a balance was how he said it nicely *[laughter]* to the experience that my children would have with my parents and my ex-husband.

He awarded us visitation twice a month and the entire months of June, July, and August, which my attorney said was unheard of because at the same—that same week, he told us, a nice Italian judge in Beverly—no. A nice Italian judge in Billerica, Massachusetts, had removed custody, parental custody of a lesbian woman and told her that she should never be allowed to see her children ever again, so no visitation and that sort of stern warning. Our attorney was thrilled. He said, "Now you'll just have to live through this until the kids are a little bit older, and they can begin to express their own needs," and that's exactly what happened.

Within five years, I was in seminary at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, and the kids came to visit and said they did not want to go back to their—at that point, he had remarried, and they did not want to live with him and her and her children. We went to court, and at that point in time, I was awarded full custody, and he was allowed visitation. It took five years. In that five years, Barbara and I were doing things like talking to a group of—lecturing to a group of guardian ad litems about our case and talking to family court workers about our case. In five years, the tide had really turned, and we had gone from Taunton, Massachusetts, to Cambridge, Massachusetts and we were awarded full custody five years later.

It was painful and awful and, I've come to understand, one of the really formative times in my life where I understood something about sacrificial love that I had never understood before, and I understood something about identity. I understood that pride was not something that goes before the fall, but if you didn't have pride in yourself, in who you are and how God made you, that you were certainly going to fall. *[Laughter]* Those were hard lessons but important lessons to sort of prepare me for the next phase of my life, which is ultimately what brought me to Newark. I don't want to get ahead of myself, and I want you to answer your—I want to answer your questions and give you time.

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, no. I think I go with the flow. You have full custody of your kids. I keep calling them students 'cause I call my students kids. Yeah.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* You have custody of your kids five years later. You're in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos*:* How do you find your way to Newark?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right. I should probably hit the pause on that question just to say that in the five years that it took fighting to get our kids back, and Barbara's kids were with her husband, and we were allowed to see them. There was never any difficulty with that, so thank God we only had to fight one battle on one front. We also decided at one point, a very low point, that we probably were never gonna get my kids back again and that we were mothers, and we needed kids, and so we started—we applied for and were accepted into a foster care program in Portland, Maine.

We took in foster care kids on emergency basis and short-term basis. We adopted one child who was profoundly retarded and had Down syndrome and had a lot of challenges. We adopted her. Yeah. In 1981, had a child together who we named Maria after my grandmother. We were in Portland, Maine, and I felt the call to ordination. We moved to Cambridge. It was at that time that we won our kids back. I think it was '81 or '82. I'm sorry. We had Maria in '81, so it was probably '83 when we won custody of our kids back. I was doing my work in Boston, and that was right at the time when the first wave of AIDS was hitting Boston.

I became very involved in the AIDS crisis and worked at Boston City Hospital and Boston University Medical Center doing my clinical pastoral education, my clinical training as a chaplain and became—and understood that this was going to be something that affected the LGBTQ community for decades and that we—I felt a responsibility to give back to the community that had saved my life when I was—when we were going through that really dark time. I became very involved. I remember getting ready to graduate from seminary and being ordained, and some of my advisors, meaning very, very well, suggesting that I not put my work with people with AIDS on my resume because that would make it even harder to get a job. *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. It's like stigma on top of stigma.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. That's right. That's right. It was through my work in Boston that I was—it's a circuitous route. Baltimore was also being

hit. I was called to a church in Baltimore and was working—they had a large gay population that came to the church, and I was called there because, believe it or not, because I was a lesbian and because I had experience working with people with AIDS. I was there for about five years and worked on the front lines in Baltimore and so did my spouse, who is a nurse and was—at the time became a nationally-certified AIDS clinical specialist. It was then because of my work there that I met Bishop Spong, who was then bishop of Newark, and in 1991, came to Newark to work as executive director of the St. Barnabas AIDS Resource Center and to be the vicar of St. Barnabas church.

Esperanza Santos*:* The vicar?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I'm sorry?

Esperanza Santos*:* The vicar?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* As the vicar. V I C A R.

Esperanza Santos*:* I'm not sure what that is, but I'll look it up later.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* It's a quirky Anglican term for the pastor of a church that is—that doesn't have enough money to take care of itself, essentially. *[Laughter]* And it was in St. Barnabas, it was in the same neighborhood as the place where the riots broke out, and it was a neighborhood that was pretty fractured still by—

Esperanza Santos*:* Even in '91 when you got there?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. By the riots and also because—oh, what's the highway? Is it 270? No. Not 270. 280. Route 280 was built right through that neighborhood, splitting it up. It was probably one of the first times that I became aware of systemic racism and how pernicious it can be because it was done with absolute disregard for the neighborhood and where people lived and the houses that it took and what it did to disjoint the people. It was almost like a punishment for the riots. They just destroyed the neighborhood by putting in 280.

Now, years later, and we go, oh, yeah. That makes sense. Everybody gets on 280, right? What would we do without 280? But at the time—and it was before 1991 when 280 went in—it was a devastating thing to that neighborhood, still is in many ways. If you drive around that neighborhood, there's still lots of struggling people and disjointed. I came to work at St. Barnabas AIDS

Resource Center in St. Barnabas Church in 1991, and that was my first introduction to Newark.

Esperanza Santos*:* Wow.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* Upon arriving, is there any memory that stands out to you of things you really noticed or—coming from Massachusetts and Baltimore to arrive at Newark, is there anything that stood out to you as different or unique to this area?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Again, remember, this was '91. I remember saying to one of the women, Louise Waiters 00:52:25, who had been there for years—I think she was married in that church—and said, "This is a city that looks like nobody's loved it in a very long time." She said, "Oh, honey, you have no idea." *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Oh, no.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. The word I would use to describe it was gritty. One of the first impressions when I came to the church was that there was a chain-link fence with barbed wire on the top all around it, and that just struck me as so incongruent. There's a church with a chain-link fence, high, an eight-foot chain-link fence with barbed wire on the top of it. The gate in front was always locked, had a chain-link—a chain and then a big padlock on it. Yeah. I was the only white girl, *[laughter]* such as I am, in that neighborhood. In the church, there was—the organist was a Caucasian woman, and then there was Barbara and me and our youngest daughter at the time.

They didn't trust me at all, besides which they had heard that I was a lesbian, and that was not well accepted, but it didn't take too long. Within a couple of months, they knew that I loved them and was trying to help them, and they loved me. That's still the church that—it's now closed, but they also—it was like the outsider welcoming the outsider, and in that place, we were together, and we were family. The other thing that impressed me besides the chain-link fence, two things that happened within the first month of my being there was that, despite the fence all around the church, there were times when the gate was left open. Somebody forgot to close the gate. I made them take down the barbed wire. I said, "Come on. Who's gonna come to a church with barbed wire around it?"

Apparently, some guys would crawl over the fence to get in. I would walk in in the morning and park my car and vials—empty vials of cocaine or heroin or empty syringes would be in the parking lot. I knew that there was—if I didn't know it before, I realized there was a—there's a special something about people who are drug addicts, who are addicted, who find shooting up in church graveyards and churches, that they're drawn to it, and so we'd get a lot of that.

I think it was three weeks—I think I was there three weeks. It was less than a month. There was a hospital right across the street at the time, United Hospital. It's also closed. I looked out my office window towards the street and faced the hospital, and I saw this woman sort of staggering on the sidewalk and being very distraught. I thought she must be wanting to go to the hospital, but a little disoriented, so I got up from my chair and went outside and—to help her. She was so weak, she collapsed. When I pulled her hoodie back from her face, her face was just—she had had Kaposi sarcoma. Do you know what that is?

Esperanza Santos*:* No idea.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Had KS lesions. They're a cancer that happens inside the blood vessel, and it's one of the things that can happen to people with AIDS who are not treated. At the time, it was not available to people in the city of Newark. They had just burst. Her face looked like raw hamburg. She was—

Esperanza Santos*:* Looked like raw what?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Hamburg. I tried to get her up, and I couldn't, so I called over to the hospital. I went back inside and called to the hospital and asked for some help. Mr. Griffin was the head of security, and he was—he had become a dear friend. They picked her up and put her on a wheelchair and brought her over to the hospital. I went over there with them. She died just a couple of hours later. I thought, at that time, Newark was like the streets of Calcutta. People were dying on the street. It was horrible. It was just horrible.

It was one of the things that the women were being—in Newark, the face of AIDS in Newark was women. There were more women with AIDS in Newark per capita at that time than any other place in the country. There was a hotel. There was a welfare hotel. It was called, ironically enough, the Lincoln Hotel. It was on Broad Street. It was where the baseball stadium is. Is the baseball stadium still there in Newark on Broad Street?

Esperanza Santos*:* Maybe. I'm new to Newark.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* It's not too far from the Episcopal cathedral. It's right downtown, but it's at the outer edges of downtown as you're heading over the bridge into Kearny.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. I think they're currently renovating it.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. It was a great baseball stadium, and I used to love to go see the Newark Bears. Before it was that, it was the site of the Lincoln Motel, which was, as I said, it used to be a lovely motel, and then it turned—it fell into disrepair and became a welfare motel. There were more women and children who were HIV-positive or had AIDS in that place than any other place in the state of Newark. Pretty much, the AIDS Resource Center at St. Barnabas had as its special ministry caring for women with AIDS as well as men, but it was a place where women knew that they could get things that women need, like sanitary pads and deodorant and things like that. We also had a group—a couple of support groups that ran, which one was for gay men, and then one was just a men's group, open men's group. There were a couple of 12-step programs that also ran out of that.

That was my introduction to AIDS was at the—to Newark, rather, was really at the height of the AIDS crisis. Depending on where you were in Newark at the time, as I said, people were literally falling down and dying on the streets. Murphy's Bar. I don't know if Murphy's Bar is still open. The last time I checked, it was. It was the only gay bar—I think it was on Halstead Street or Halsey Street. Halstead Street, I think, in Newark. It was mostly men, but some women in that gay bar. They'd tell me that routinely—Mr. Griffith told me that routinely, at least a couple times a week, they would pick somebody up outside of Murphy's Bar who had collapsed, and within hours, they were—24 hours, they were dead at the hospital. That was my introduction to Newark in 1991. *[Laughter]* Not a pretty sight.

Esperanza Santos*:* No. It sounds almost kind of like a war zone that people don't talk about.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right. Right. Exactly. Exactly. To be a dark-skinned Caucasian woman in that place, people either wanted to make you crazy—"She's crazy for doing that. What's wrong with her," or I was like—to some people, I was like Mother Teresa. It was like, "Oh, my God. Isn't she amazing, and isn't she—" and the truth is, I was

just giving back. I was just—and happy to do it, happy to be able to help the community that had helped me. Do you know what I mean?

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. Like the Episcopal church welcomed you when you were in a time of need, and you want to make sure that you offer that to people because there are some things that, for help we've received, we will never be able to give back in that same amount.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Not only that, but also, those amazing women of the DOB who went beyond just the physical need and loved us. I wanted to make sure that people of color, people who had fallen into addiction, people who were lesbian and gay at the time—and we didn't talk about transgender. There were drag queens, *[laughter]* but we didn't call them transgender. We called them drag queens or queens.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. Absolutely.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I just wanted them to know that somebody loved them unconditionally, and if that made me a saint or a crazy person, then so be it. I knew who I was by that time, and I knew what I was supposed to do, and that's who I was, and that's what I did. Yeah. Yeah. Has anybody else talked about Murphy's Bar?

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. I think everyone thinks of Murphy's so fondly. I'm pretty sure it's closed.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. I wouldn't be surprised. It was the only place. It was the only place for community in Newark. Someone said to me once in Newark, "Why are so many gay and lesbian people addicts? Why are there so many drunks?" I said, "Look. If your only place to gather was a bar, what do you think might happen to you?" There's an old saying, I understand, in 12-step programs that, if you hang around a barbershop long enough, you're gonna get a haircut.

Esperanza Santos*:* That's right. That's right.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* *[Laughter]* If you hang around a bar long enough, you're gonna drink, and if you drink enough, and you're predisposed to it, you're gonna become an alcoholic.

Esperanza Santos*:* If that's the only spiritual tool you have, then that's the spiritual tool you use.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. That's right. Murphy's, I know, is thought of, or at least by many people at that time, very fondly, but it also was a place where we poisoned ourselves. *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. You take the good with the bad.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right.

Esperanza Santos*:* As an LGBTQ person, you go where there's community, and if that's where it happens to be, then that's where you'll be.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. That's absolutely right.

Esperanza Santos*:* Is there any other places that you associate with LGBTQ people? 'Cause I know you were—it sounds like, for a lot of the people, it was through the welfare hotel—

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right.

Esperanza Santos*:* - and just on the streets, people dying of AIDS, and Murphy's. Was there anything else that you knew about or even marginally?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Because of my work with people with AIDS and because of my work with Louie Crew, who was a professor at Rutgers and was—he's just a hero figure in the Episcopal Church. He's a gay man and started an organization called Integrity for queer Episcopalians. He introduced me to some of the people in—I knew them as the Houses.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yes.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Where older drag queens would sort of tend to and care for and mentor the younger lesbian and gay and bisexual, I suppose, and queer folks, and they would have fashion shows. Some of the fashion shows that they had were to benefit St. Barnabas AIDS Resource Center.

Esperanza Santos*:* What?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* How cool is that?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* How cool is that indeed, right? They would have events at shows, drag shows at Murphy's. Again, that would be—I don't think we ever got more than 200, $300.00 from one of their events, but who

cared? They were doing stuff for the community. They were using what they had, what everybody else said was sin or was bad, and using it to help other people. That's absolutely irresistible to me. I think God blesses that. That was my other experience in Newark with the queer community was the Houses that were active in helping to raise money and awareness about AIDS and caring for people with AIDS, whether they were queer or not. There were some real bright spots, some real bright spots.

Esperanza Santos*:* That's kind of the glimmer of hope, just being of service and offering what you can to community.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's right. The other thing that happened—*[laughter]* when I left St. Barnabas, I was also helping out at House of Prayer Episcopal Church, which is on Broad Street still and was across the street from not only the Lincoln Motel, but there was a house—I can't remember the last time I was there. It was maybe about two years ago when I was in Newark. There was a five-story walk-up, and on the first floor was a flower shop, and on the second floor was where the owner of the building lived, and then the other floors was a place where prostitutes were.

They would be there out in the morning when I would come into church. If I got there at 7:00, they were still—they were just finishing up their shift. I would put on a pot of coffee, and I would invite the girls over to have coffee. I would hand them some condoms, and we would just talk. I became very close to some of them. The Newark Police Department at the time—this was mid-90s—was looking for chaplains to work with the police department. They were talking with one of the police officers, and he said, "Hey, do you know any women who could be chaplains?" They said, "Yeah. The rev over there." *[Laughter]*

Because of this I got a referral from Newark's finest ladies, and I became part of the chaplains—Newark Police Department chaplains' program. I would work with some of the lesbian and gay police officers, and I also worked with the academy to raise awareness about LGBT people and do some positive training. Also, I also did some work with stress reduction. Whenever a policewoman in Newark at the time—I don't know what it is now, but at the time, whenever a police officer discharged their firearm, whether or not they shot anybody or whether or not they killed anybody, when they discharged their firearm, they had to see a chaplain for at least three sessions.

If they were charged with domestic violence, male or female, they were charged with domestic violence, they immediately had to surrender their gun for a month, their gun and their badge, and they did desk work for a month, and they had to see me. I also had a chance to do some work with the lesbian and gay police officers in Newark in the mid-90s. Those were my experiences with LGBTQ people in Newark during those days. The Houses, AIDS Resource Center, and the police department and Murphy's.

Esperanza Santos*:* For how long were you in Newark?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* In and out. I was in the diocese of Newark from 1991 to 2008, so that's 17 years. All but the last eight years, I had some connection with working in Newark. Up until, as I said, the last eight years, I had an office in Newark, somewhere in Newark, either working for the bishop or working with the churches or in some capacity. From 1991 to 2000, I was very intimately involved with the city of Newark. I must say, even in those eight years when I wasn't in Newark, when I was working in the suburbs, the diocese and offices are in Newark on—they were on Mulberry Street, and now they're—is it Mulberry? It's right across from the NJPAC is where the Episcopal diocese and offices are. It's always good to be in Newark. I have very fond memories—hard memories, but very fond memories—of that time.

Esperanza Santos*:* Throughout your stay in Newark, did you see a change, or was it mostly kind of steady and the same?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I think that when—after the whole Sharpe James—he was mayor for a very, very long time, and there was a lot of stasis when he was mayor. I'm gonna say that when Cory Booker came in and really started to love the city again, and NJPAC came in and the FBI building went up and you could see, at least in some parts of the city, that things were changing, I saw it then. I'm not saying Cory Booker was the messiah, but—because in some of the different wards, you get a very different picture of Cory Booker than the guy that you see on TV running for president, but he really—his energy and his enthusiasm, I think, were infectious, even more than what he was able to accomplish, and with that came a beginning of a change in attitude. I think also, the death of—help me—Sakia. Sakia Gunn.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. In 2003.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Her death galvanized the community in a way that I don't know that it had been before, but I hadn't seen before. I think

having gotten through the AIDS crisis and then to have lost Sakia galvanized the community, the spirit of the community, in a way that I had not seen before. For me, that 2003 date changed something in the collective psyche of the LGBTQ community in Newark in a way that I hadn't seen before. Now, other people may have other benchmarks, but that was it for me, that I noticed a big change. I think the word is stridency. There was a stridency about it that I recognized, that we're not gonna let this happen to another person in our community. There was a resolve. A resolve.

Esperanza Santos*:* Like no more?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Like, this is where we draw the line. If you will kill somebody like Sakia, you'll kill any one of us, and you have been slowly for years, but we're not gonna let that happen. I don't know what has happened in the years since, but it seems to me that there have been changes in the LGBTQ community that I never thought were possible in terms of acceptance and change. I never thought, never in a million years could even imagine that Barbara and I would be married. What? *[Laughter]* Yeah. We spent years not traveling together, not taking airplanes together, because we were afraid that—of what might happen if one of us preceded the other in death and what our parents would do and what would happen to our kids.

Then it just happened—it seemed to happen so quickly. It was like dominos. One state, the next state, the next state, the Supreme Court. Holy cow. I spent some time thinking about, what was it that sort of galvanized that? I'm not sure, but it takes a Sakia Gunn, I think. I think it takes a Matthew Shepard for us all to have our Rosa Parks moment. No. I'm just gonna sit down 'cause my feet are tired. That's why. *[Laughter]* That's why I'm sitting down right here 'cause my feet are tired 'cause I'm a human being, and I have needs, and you're gonna respect them. I think in Newark, it was—for me, an outsider looking in, it was Sakia Gunn's murder.

Esperanza Santos*:* Sad that we lost someone so young and—

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah.

Esperanza Santos*:* - grateful that people rose to the occasion to say something.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Esperanza Santos*:* I'm curious about, between 1991 and before you left Newark, it sounds like, for the most part, that—the only way I can describe it,

that the presence of AIDS was something that people saw but didn't always talk about.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right.

Esperanza Santos*:* Was there, in your eyes or in your experiences—and maybe it didn't galvanize other people. Maybe it galvanized you. Was there a Sakia Gunn moment of a person you knew and then them descending into being unhealthy or unwell?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* In Newark?

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I think that it happened for me in Baltimore it galvanized. When I lost my 50th friend to the AIDS crisis, I decided that I would stop counting or it would make me crazy. I think one of the galvanizing moments was when Louie Crew, Dr. Crew, asked me to come and speak to one of his classes about my work with people with AIDS. I started it as I usually did in those days by—

Esperanza Santos*:* What class? Where?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* He was a professor of English. I think he was chair of the English Department at Rutgers. His name was Dr. Louie Crew, and now his name is Clay. His last name is Clay, C L A Y. Dr. Crew at the time—Dr. Clay now—asked me to speak to one of his classes about AIDS, and then they were to write an essay about it or something. I started off, as I often do, sort of explaining the AIDS 101 and how—what happens to the body, et cetera, and then started talking about some of the people that I knew with AIDS. When you put a face on anything and a story behind the face, it changes everything.

I remember seeing their faces, the students in the classroom, and I remember many of their questions. Now suddenly it was—now they were going back to, how does this happen, and how do you get it, and why didn't the government do anything about it? Suddenly, all the things that I had said earlier became very important to know because now they were energized, and they were—I could see it sort of go around the room until one young man said to me, "So you're a minister, right?" I said, "Yes." He said, "So why does God allow this," which I didn't expect that.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. *[Laughter]*

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. Why does God allow this? I said, "I don't think—I think God allows everything that happens, and we have free will to choose how it is that we're going to respond to whatever it is that happens. I believe that the gift of free will also come with grace so that when we mess up, when we make bad decisions and bad choices, there's always grace to be redeemed. We will always get another shot at redemption, and that we're gonna learn some stuff from this time that we couldn't have learned any other way." He said, "What makes you say that? How can you say that?" I said, "If my life is any example, if my life can be of any teaching, I was tossed away as somebody who had no worth because I'm a lesbian and rejected by my family and my friends and my neighborhood and lost custody of my kids, and yet here I am, in front of you today, with custody of my kids and a good family and able to give back to my community, so I don't think anybody is ever lost. These are the times that try us, but—" and that kid came to me afterwards, and he was crying.

His uncle had AIDS, and somebody else in his family and had been rejected, and he was gay. We talked for an hour after class, and I remember thinking, this is the important work. This is where the—this is the important stuff is having these one-to-one conversations where we share our stories and we tell the truth as much as we're able about ourselves and about our struggles. When we do that, something magic happens. Louie shared the—some of the essays with me and their assignments. I'll tell you what, they just brought tears—I've got it on a stick drive someplace, so I have to take it out and read them over again someday when I'm not feeling so good about myself because it really confirmed for me that certainly, LGBTQ people didn't create the coming out process, but we perfected it.

I think that there's something that I learned in that classroom with those kids in Newark about the power of coming out and being truthful about who you are that I learned in a whole new way, and that was a real—I thought to myself, this city's gonna be okay. If we do this more often, if we tell the truth—then that's when I start to believe really deep in my bones that the LGBTQ community has so much to offer to the rest of the world in terms of our spirituality and what we have learned about ourselves and about our relationship with God and how we define family that I think is a real gift to the—if they would just pay attention. If they would just pay attention, we've got a real gift to offer, and I think it's the whole process of coming out and the struggle to come out. I'm blathering.

Esperanza Santos*:* No. No, no, no. I think it's—these are beautiful words. Thank you.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Did I answer your question? *[Laughter]*

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yes. Yes. We were talking about that—just AIDS in Newark and the hotel and that there was a lot of women who had AIDS.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yup.

Esperanza Santos*:* Maybe this is a false assumption, but was there a lot of LGBTQ people who you connected with who also had AIDS?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yes.

Esperanza Santos*:* 'Cause I think we talked about the gender dimension of it, but not the sexuality dimension.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. No. There were LGBTQ people who were harder to identify for several reasons. One was that they kept that part of their identity secret. It was only after I would sit and talk with somebody for a while, sometimes over months, that they would reveal that about themselves. It was almost easier to say, "Yeah, I'm a black drug addict, I'm a black junkie," than to say, "Yeah, I'm black and I'm a junkie and I'm queer." I would say easily half the people who came to St. Barnabas were also queer.

Esperanza Santos*:* I know that St. Barnabas wasn't always open.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right.

Esperanza Santos*:* Was there a resource that took its place or something that people could go to after it closed, or they were kind of just left?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. There were some resources, but most of them were run by the city, and so people were a little more hesitant to use those resources because it was—they didn't trust the city. They didn't trust the government. They were a little more trusting of St. Barnabas AIDS Resource Center because we were a church and because we never took information on them. We always assigned them a number, so their identity was confidential.

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah. It was easier to be anonymous?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Right. Right. Where if you went to the city, they took down your name, your age, your street number, your everything. It was all

because, in order to get this money from the federal government, we have to be part of this research grant. In order to have research, we have to have information. People went, "Yeah. Okay. I'll see you later."

Esperanza Santos*:* Later. Yeah.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Later. Not gonna happen.

Esperanza Santos*:* Do you know what that resource was called or where it was located?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* You mean other than St. Barnabas?

Esperanza Santos*:* Yeah.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Yeah. It was at City Hall. The city health department. The city health department. Where was that? There were lots of people going in and out of there all the time. It's where people went to get their food stamps and their SNAP. There was a special program for women and babies 18 months or younger. Anyway, it was all in that place. They had different rooms where you get immunizations and all of that. It was at the health—the Newark City Health Department.

Esperanza Santos*:* Our interview is wrapping up. Yeah. Unless there's things that you would like to share more about.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I think that's pretty much it. One other observation, and that is that—that has to do with spirituality and gay spirituality and the arts. I think one of the lessons that I learned about the city of Newark and going back to my observation that is a city that nobody's loved in a very long time, the arts had been suppressed in Newark for a long time, and I don't think that it's not—that it's coincidental that there was a suppression of human sexuality at that time as well. Newark used to be a thriving jazz center. There used to be jazz clubs—and I'm talking in the 20s and 30s—on Halstead Street. There were shops and places where people could sell their art and their jewelry and their paintings and their photography.

When that left the city, a real depression fell over the city. I think that with that kind of suppression of the arts comes a suppression of LGBT people, LGBTQ people. In places where you find the arts flourishing, now with the museum, the Newark Museum being a thriving place that it is, and the New Jersey—NJPAC. I think with that kind of resurgence, there is more acceptance of queer people

than there has been. I don't know what the link is between the arts and the expression of arts and an acceptance of the other, but I think there's a very—I think music and the arts is a universal language that helps to break down barriers in ways that programs can't. Does that make any sense?

Esperanza Santos*:* Yes.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* That's my only other observation about Newark is that it is where it is because there's more artistic expression and more LGBTQ people who are open and honest about who they are.

Esperanza Santos*:* Absolutely. Totally authentically. As a last question, what do you like—sometimes, talking about LGBTQ identities for some can be uplifting, hopeful, depressing, daunting. For you, what do you like best about being LGBTQ?

Elizabeth Keaton*:* I think it's the one thing that scared me the most and was most distressing, and that is being other than, being the other, being the outsider, because I was immigrant, because I was female, because I was a retard, because of my hair, because of whatever, my skin color. Now, all of that is who I am, and all of that is who I am because I'm queer, and I just embrace it. It's part of the joy of being alive, of knowing that you have something—some people would call it different. Some people would call it other. For me, it's about being a unique creature of God, and I love that about being queer. For me, it's queer—the word queer is interchangeable with being unique, and I love that. *[Laughter]* I'm not a cookie-cutter person.

Esperanza Santos*:* Nope. You create your own cookie cutter.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* None of us are cookie-cutter people. We are unique and individual, and that's the wonderful thing about life. Being queer has made me appreciate and value my uniqueness, and I'm so grateful for that gift.

Esperanza Santos*:* Elizabeth, thank you so much for taking time with us.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Sure.

Esperanza Santos*:* This is Esperanza Santos with the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you so much again.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* Thank you, Esperanza. Your name means hope, and you give me hope.

Esperanza Santos*:* Thank you.

Elizabeth Keaton*:* You're welcome. You're welcome. Bye-bye now. God bless.

[End of Audio]

Vetting Notes:
P. 18: Please check spelling of the word Hamburg?
Please check all the names highlighted for correct spelling.