Queer Newark Oral History Project
Terri Suess
Interviewed by Kristyn Scorsone
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Kristyn Scorsone: Today is December 7th, 2016. My name is Kristyn Scorsone. I am interviewing Terri Suess at Rutgers Newark, for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you for doing this. First question, when and where were you born?

Terri Suess: I was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1950.

Kristyn Scorsone: Who raised you?

Terri Suess: …I was raised by my parents, Maggie and Everett Suess, and my brother, who's seven years older than me, was instrumental in my young life and my upbringing. His name was Jim Suess.

Kristyn Scorsone: How was he instrumental?

Terri Suess: He was the older brother. It was almost like having a second dad, only who was a little bit more understanding than your own dad. …Those were the three people. Then we had a little extended family around us of cousins, aunts, and uncles, and my grandparents. Well, my grandfather. My grandmother had passed away by then. That was the grandfather on my mom's side who actually built the house that I've lived in—from when I was born, and I recently moved back to. It's been an interesting bookends.

Kristyn Scorsone: What's the age difference between you and your brother?

Terri Suess: Seven years.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you grow up in the same house? Did you move around a lot?

Terri Suess: No, (We did not move at all.) Same house. I lived in that house from when I was born until I graduated from college in 1972.

Kristyn Scorsone: How would you describe yourself as a child? Your personality?

Terri Suess: Let's see. Well, in Seattle at that time, a lot of us were outdoors people. We grew up camping, and we loved that. We spent a lot of time playing outside. When I was very little, my mother used to bundle me up to go down to the neighbor's house, kitty corner around the block, in a snow suit and hats and gloves and all that stuff. Then I'd get down there, and that little girl's mother would want her to play inside. They would spend all this time undressing all my heavy outdoor winter snow clothes, and then we would play about five minutes, and then it would be time to dress to go home.

[Laughter]

Terri Suess: There were kids who loved to play inside with dolls and all that. I liked dolls, but I preferred playing outside. One a funny story on that. We had peach trees in the backyard. We would climb those. We would run around. We had an old shed in the back that used to be a chicken coop. We'd run in and out all the doors. Of course, I had friends who lived up the street. They loved climbing on garages and up on fences. They were very agile. I wasn't that agile. I would follow them. We'd get up on the roofs and be playing. Then their parents would come out. They'd all scamper down. I'd be left on the roof. *[Laughter]* I was always kind of the fall person.

...

Terri Suess: It was a fun young childhood. What I found was my world expanded from first at home. We didn't have preschool or anything. Just playing with the neighbor kids. Then we would go to elementary school a few blocks away. Then junior high was down the hill and further away. High school was a little further away. Then the University. It was like dropping a pebble in the water. These rippled out in my little town. By the time I was graduated from college, I was really ready to go out and see the world. It was like, Okay. That's the next step.

Kristyn Scorsone: College was nearby, too?

Terri Suess: Oh, yeah. University of Washington, four miles away. It was the best school in the state, and my grandfather was an immigrant, of course, he urged all of his kids to get a further education. If it wasn't college at the time, it was—my mom went to dressmaking school. Another sister went to art school, **[00:05:00]** another sister went to business school. Then the boy of the family, (my mom's brother), went to the University of Washington. Years later, it was a real point of pride for him (my uncle) that all of the cousins had gone to college. The grandpa donated some money to get each of us started in our college career. He actually paid for the first semester of college tuition for every grandkid, because that's what it meant to him. He was hoping that his big efforts to get over here from Norway would ripple down. …It was interesting. (Note: He actually paid for the first full year of each of his grandkid's college tuition.)

Kristyn Scorsone: What was your mom and dad's occupation?

Terri Suess: My dad was a telephone repairman. My mom was a seamstress and dress designer and a homemaker.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that's really cool.

Terri Suess: My mom her own business for a little while. Then also sewed all of our family's clothes all the time. ... My whole life. Yeah. She was amazing.

Kristyn Scorsone: For telephone repair, is that where you climb the poles?

Terri Suess: (That's right.) He was a lineman at that point. He was very tall, 6'4". They hired people who had a huge reach to go up the poles and climb (to work on the wires.) Both he and my mom were great storytellers and had a good sense of humor. It was always fun being around them. We were a pretty close family. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: I saw recently at the Norman Rockwell museum, that painting he did of the lineman. It was just one of my favorites.

Terri Suess: You saw that!

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Terri Suess: My dad died, but he had a dear friend (and co-worker)…who actually grew up with my mom. They were in grade school together. My dad's friend Ben Sevold **00:06:54]** was a telephone repairman also. They were a close-knit community. They were CWA union people. I see Ben occasionally, because he's still alive, and I'll have him over for lunch (or dinner). I was over at his place. I saw the framed picture of the lineman by Rockwell Kent

(correction: Norman Rockwell) . I said, "Ben, I need to get a photograph of that." (I liked it so much.) I never knew that the real painting was (on display) somewhere. Where is that museum?

Kristyn Scorsone: It's in the Berkshires, I think, in Massachusetts.

Terri Suess: I can look it up. Oh, I can look it up.

Kristyn Scorsone: It's a great museum. They give wonderful tours.

Terri Suess: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: It was really cool.

Terri Suess: He's an interesting artist. (Norman Rockwell) He was close to many people's hearts for many reasons. It's funny. The person that I gravitated to (as an artist) was named Rockwell Kent, from that same era. He was a socialist. He made litho—well, no. Etchings and prints and woodblock prints. He was a great artist and a great, great painter. Interesting person. But, that's really cool, though, you've seen that (the Norman Rockwell painting of the lineman). Yeah. I could give you a whole history. My dad and my mom and their lives, which were interesting, but we'll save that for another day.

Kristyn Scorsone: What did you major in at the University of Washington?

Terri Suess: Communications and journalism.

Kristyn Scorsone: Then just to go back to your early life, do you recall any events that were transitions or turning points?

[Pause 00:08:38 - 00:08:43]

Terri Suess: When we were kids—well, there were just (so many things we did)—it was just a lot of fun that we had. What set you on one path or another? Well, we were encouraged—all of us, we were part of the Brownie group. Then we were part of the Girl Scouts. Then we were Mariner Scouts. We had a lot of fun with that. That was probably a turning point, because it helped develop leadership and also a curiosity about the world around you. It was probably a good thing. Let's see. Other teachers had big impacts. Let's see. Mrs. Standish was a teacher who taught English and (her assignments) were very difficult. …In seventh grade, (she) taught us how to write a paragraph that hung together. It was really good work for young ages.

I was thinking just the other day about a teacher I had for history or social studies. Mrs. Kucinich. Was that her name? No, that's Dennis Kucinich **[00:09:59]**. **[00:10:00]** It was something similar to that. I'll have to go back and remember that name. (Her name was actually Krachunis – I think.) Anyway, she had a big impact on us. She was from Latvia. That area was her people's history. When I think back, she was somewhat progressive. I had a contemporary problems teacher, Mr. Smart, who actually chose me to go to a peace conference when I was in high school.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow. That's cool.

Terri Suess: Yeah. It was a "big wow", because that broadened my whole life experience—I got out of the neighborhood and went a little further. I forget where it was even held, but I met people from all over the

city. We had to do readings on peace and how to get to world peace. That was back in 1967 probably. Also, that was a big impact on me. …What else? When I was in junior high and high school, we played sports. Not competitively, because they didn't have competitive women's sports then. Title IX was much later. But we did play sports. We were encouraged to learn all about different types of sports. Even though everybody was like, "Ah, gym class, whatever." It actually, I think, was really good for us, and it was a lot of fun. (We played badminton, baseball, basketball, volleyball; we did exercises and even Modern Dance.) It was cool to be able to reflect back on that. Then draw on those skills later in life, just for enjoyment.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was your—I think you touched upon this, but what was your neighborhood like?

Terri Suess: My neighborhood is still, to this day, like it was when I grew up there. ... It's one of the few places in Seattle that hasn't changed much yet. It will. I'm sure. The whole city is changing. But when I grew up there, it (my neighborhood) was very rural. Asphalt streets. No sidewalks. Drainage ditches. Then the homes. The homes had a front yard and a back yard. People had gardens. There was a lot of visiting from house to house by the neighbors. The neighbors knew each other. The kids knew each other. (There were) a lot of trees. Some significant large old trees. (I remember a huge Madrona tree, especially that was across the street from us. (Until last year, there were two very large, old Madrona Trees a couple of lots north. They were probably descendants of that original tree! Sadly, they were recently cut down and sold for firewood.)

Kristyn Scorsone: When you said it's changing, is it similar to the changes, how Newark is? Becoming more corporations moving in, stuff like that?

Terri Suess: Well, Seattle, in all the time that I was absent, really, (things have been changing.) I would visit regularly, my parents. We would go back there often, like several times a year to keep up with them. During that time, Amazon was formed. Starbucks was formed. Microsoft was formed. Boeing expanded. Boeing used to be the only game in town. In the '70s, when they had a severe cutback, the saying was, "Will the last person out of Seattle turn out the lights?" Because (they laid off more than a third of the workforce), it really took an economic toll on the entire city.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Terri Suess: Yeah. Then the whole town did diversify with the whole tech revolution (of the 80s and 90's up to today). There are a lot of new corporations there. There's a lot of construction, like in Newark downtown. One month last year, you would count, and there were a dozen cranes (building new buildings). Somebody said there are 103 construction projects going on right now (in Seattle.) It's definitely booming right now, but what people forget, Seattle and all of America, the cities are subject to boom and bust. What goes up can change.

Anyway, it was a nice little neighborhood (where I grew up). Seattle was an interesting town. It was a segregated city. In the central area is where most African Americans lived. (In another area, the International District, the Japanese and Chinese lived. Italians lived in another area and many Scandinavians lived in

Ballard). I grew up in an era with segregation. To Seattle's credit, and this I think was happening just as I was leaving and moving on to my own careers, (Seattle) was one city in America **[00:15:00]** that made a huge effort to desegregate their schools without a court order. That's a fascinating (and positive part of) history. Being back in Seattle for awhile, I have been able to talk to people about that and the impact that had on their children, and most of them feel that it was very positive. (A thesis or two could be written about Seattle's school desegregation in the '70s and '80s.)

So when I was in high school, there was an opportunity. They were just starting to try to integrate the schools. This was in '68, '67, '65, '66. In there. They offered us a chance (for students from my High School, Nathan Hale) to actually go to a primarily African American school. It was called Garfield (High School) in Seattle. I thought that would be great. My parents definitely did not want us to do that. They just thought it would be dangerous. I think it really disappointed the people who were trying to put that together (and us kids.) What they organized, (instead), was an "exchange" (day). We could go there, and the kids from Garfield could come to our school. We did do that. That was an eye-opening experience for us and a good thing. Then they built on that. There's a lot that has happened in Seattle with that.

I should go back, to show you the transition and the change out there, because I've been thinking a lot about this myself. When I was in grade school, I think it was maybe—what was it? Fourth, fifth, sixth grade. One of those little grades in there. There was an issue on the ballot. It was, "Should Seattle have open housing?" What that meant is, "Should realtors not be able to discriminate?" (and steer people to certain neighborhoods based on their race)

because they had a "closed" housing market (in Seattle). African Americans could only live in one area. Asians (could live in another area,) and white people could probably live anywhere. It was … segregated. Maybe white people couldn't be even allowed to live in the central area. I don't know.

So they put that to a vote in the city… which is totally bizarre. That shows where the '50s were. Right? (As a point of discussion, our teacher) also put it to a vote of the children in the class. I thought… "Of course anybody should—people should be able to live wherever they want." I'm sure that was the (subject of) discussion at home and the whole thing. Then, the teacher took the vote (as part of a lesson). Then they tallied the vote, and out of the whole class, only six of us thought there should be open housing.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow. How many were in your class about?

Terri Suess: Like 30.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Terri Suess: Yeah. These are experiences you have. They were shocking. These are the people you live with. It's like the election of Donald Trump. Sixty-eight percent of men voted for him. ... Fifty-something percent of women. It's like, wow. We're living with these people. ... It's a good thing it's a secret vote.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Terri Suess: Anyway, that was one experience. The high school experience. Different things. It did make me into a person who was aware of

segregation. I remember when I was actually a counselor-in-training at the Girl Scout camps; (that was) the summer that the cities exploded. I remember seeing the fire hoses being used on young girls and young people. To this day, I remember where I was, where I was standing, and what I saw… the dogs (attacking people.)

Kristyn Scorsone: Where were you?

Terri Suess: …I was in a small cabin at a Girl Scout camp, being a counselor-in-training on a break. There was a TV available. We saw that (Fire hoses being used against people, dogs attacking young children.) It was like, "What is that?" These things were just beyond our belief. That first of all, even though we were probably living part of that (segregated society) ... It brought this into high relief to people, and to me particularly. It actually motivated my entire life, because I've spent most of my life trying to have friends who are different from me, because I feel that that's one of the best ways to make change. I also march, and I picket, **[00:20:00]** and I protest, and I write letters. I have read Dr. Martin Luther King('s), Letter from Birmingham Jail, where he describes the process of nonviolent resistance. I've learned a lot from that. I have ascribed to that most of my life (and used that as an underpinning to all the organizing I have worked on.) I also think that what a lot of political people overlook is friendships. That's why it's been very interesting (and positive) being in Newark.

When I first came here, I lived on Ridge Street.

Kristyn Scorsone: What year was that?

Terri Suess: 1979. … I had lived in New York about five years. I went back to Seattle for a little while, but didn't really stick. So I said, "I'll organize anywhere in the Northeast. I cut my teeth on organizing in New York around the city budget cuts at that time in the middle '70s. I thought there's a lot of work to be done there. Everybody's leaving, going west. I'm going to go east. ... I said I'd work anywhere, so I was in New York a while. I didn't get a job (So then) I lived with a friend in Hoboken for a few months.

Then, finally, I landed the community organizer job with—it was an organizer/researcher position—with Newark Coalition for Neighborhoods (NCN). I was their first staff person. NCN was a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-neighborhood organization in Newark that was set up by activists in Newark to try and take on some of the issues that people were facing. So they hired me. I had my master's degree in Urban Studies and public policy from Hunter College in New York. The question was how do you—what do you do with that (degree)? I chose to try to organize from the bottom up. Most people go into programs and then try—and do – make huge effects from the top down. But I thought, "You know. I'm interested in what people have to say. I'd like to help them say it."

I'd worked two years on a daily paper in Bellingham, Washington, before I came east to get my graduate degree. I saw first-hand how the media worked. The reporters had to rely a lot on the press releases they were getting (from businesses) and on the 'powers-that-be' (Mayors, County Commissioners) that gave them the news. Whenever you wanted to go out and interview people who were affected by the news, my editor would say, "But they're not experts." Those are the people I was really interested in. (The

people who were most affected by issues!) And I thought they needed to be part of this story. Later, I took my communication skills, my understanding of journalism, and tried to work in the community, and get news, get press releases and information out to the reporters, so that they could get the (real) feeling of the community.

When I actually left Newark after a few years working with NCN, I went down to Elizabeth and did some organizing there. I was making a press release and working on that (for some of the housing issues we were working on). I sent them out to my press contacts. One guy from the New York Times, I forget his name. He called me back. He said, "Terri, I haven't heard from you for a while" (since I had left organizing in Newark) "and I wondered where you went." …He had taken seriously a lot of stuff we had written and used it. That was cool.

The other thing in Elizabeth, to this day there's a young man—well, he's now older, like I am. But, at the time, he was a young man that I worked with down there. He was the son of the leader of our community organization in Elizabeth, Carrie Thomas **00:24:20]** Her son, Salaam Ismail, **[00:24:23]** watched what I did and took that on. He became …(a very good) communicator to the press. He formed the Elizabeth Youth Council or later International Youth Council and has been a good organizer. You try to live by example. ... Also, listen to people, share with people, and try to move forward.

Anyway, in Newark, we had this community organization, (NCN), **[00:25:01]** and with the board, (and other community organizers) I tried to work out things that we could work on. I was hired to look

at how the community development block grant money at the time was being spent in Newark, because a lot of it, they were wanting to use for central (downtown) economic development, whereas the neighborhoods needed things. So we tried to do an analysis of that. At one point, we actually made a slide show showing what was happening in a certain area and how it was being destroyed at their (neighbors') expense. The money was going to the downtown areas. There's a long history of that (in Newark and across the country).

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that part of the model cities?

Terri Suess: It was after that. The big, big work really was done around model cities, and a lot of people who were really good activists were working on that. I came in a funny (odd) period in Newark. A lot had been happening and had happened. People (African-American Leaders) were then elected. There was an African-American city council (majority), an African-American mayor. Ken Gibson was in when I came. Then Sharpe James was elected. Then I was here when Cory Booker was elected. The school board was going through ups and downs. I didn't have children, so I wasn't so involved with the schools.

…The one thing about NCN that was interesting—we were dedicated to organizing. We were trying to get people to define the problems in their neighborhoods, figure out what they wanted to do about them. Come to city council. Make demands, (publicize their issues) and get problems solved. In the process of that, we hired about—we had a staff, at the end, of about ten people. Maybe eight or ten. (We hired) an African-American woman, (Zakkiyyah Mohammed, who was …very dynamic and became our Director),

and a Cuban-American ... a Cuban woman, a guy from Puerto Rico, (a woman of Polish descent) and African-American women from Newark. (Many other residents of Newark from across the city who organized their buildings and work places worked closely with us). A whole mix and range of people, because I was like, "… I came here. They hired me, and I'm from New York, Seattle, out there. I have ideas and some skills and want to contribute, but we should have more people from Newark working here." And we did. We worked as a collective. We kept the pay grade pretty similar, pretty close for everybody.

Then we worked on some amazing projects. We got an Arson for Profit Project started. …. The Arson for Profit Project we modeled after something that was taking place in Boston. Actually a bunch of us went up there and looked at their project and brought it back. What Boston had found was that in a lot of these older neighborhoods, people were buying up the buildings and then doing paper sales, flipping them, and (artificially) jacking up their prices. …The price was high, and the property could never be sold for that. They'd have insurance on it (for that paper sale high value), and they'd burn the property, (then collect the insurance money. A lot of money was made off of Newark that way.)

(I often say, Newark, because of the rental of slum properties (without code enforcement and upkeep), because of the fraudulent collection of inflated insurance values, and because of huge numbers of city contracts given to firms in the suburbs – Newark made the suburbs what they are today. A lot of money made off of Newark's suffering found its way into the suburbs.)

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, right. Did you ever work with Sister Deborah Humphreys with the El Club Del Barrio?

Terri Suess: Yeah. Oh, Deborah Humphreys hosted me when I came to Seattle as NCN's first office was at South Street down there by Saint Columbus. Then we moved. We were over on Walnut Street where the federal courthouse is now and different things. …She maybe mentioned that?

Kristyn Scorsone: Sorry?

Terri Suess: Did she talk to you about Arson for Profit?

Kristyn Scorsone: No, because since I work at the Newark Public Library, we have her papers, her collection. I've seen pictures of the burned buildings and read a bit in her oral history about the arson problem.

Terri Suess: Yeah. Well, we hired a person to focus on that Arson for Profit project. Then we all worked on it. That person was Trish Jarecke **[00:29:19]**. She had been in Newark as part of the Vista Volunteers and had gotten her degree here. Then (she) stayed on. She needed a job. We hired Trish. We started making a database of the dangerous buildings.

(Those that fit the profile for possibly being burned for profit were usually in terrible condition, had numerous code violations, had been sold several times in the past year – always with increasing value…and sometimes they had had small fires, trying to scare people out. Newark had/has rent control, so many of the apartments were affordable at the time and were occupied by young families or individuals just getting started in life. Also, by

threatening and scaring people to get them to leave, the landlord could increase the rent for the next tenants.)

We actually went out and saved a couple buildings; the methodology was this: You saw the pattern, and then tenants, of course, were complaining against the landlords for not keeping up the buildings and …. (Tenants would then withhold rent and landlords would take them to court and go to court for non-payment – but actually this was the only way tenants could get their issues of horrible/dangerous rental conditions addressed.) **[00:30:00]** Then, in many cases, the building would be burned. People would die. When I was in Hoboken before I came to Newark, I actually looked at a slum building with an apartment that I thought I might move into. I was so appalled (at the conditions), but it was affordable. (I, ultimately, did not move there.) Not two months later, the whole block went up. People died over there.

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Terri Suess: People see these new glittery buildings (now in Hoboken). People have moved into Hoboken as a hot spot, literally, but they don't realize they're moving into what was really viciously taken from people. The affordable housing was let go down and often sold, resold for prices on paper and then burned. That went on in big cities (and older neighborhoods) a lot. People died in those suspicious fires. So we did focus on that (in Newark). We started working with some people who came into the office, who were having tenant problems.

When it looked like that building was fitting the profile of one that was going to be burned. What we did with them, the tenant organization invited us in and we helped them create news releases saying how they feared this (building would burn) and tried to get focused attention on it. Then we went up there, and we all dropped huge sheets out of the windows. … (that read): "No arson for profit here." Yeah. it was a huge campaign. It was very odd, because that was—this one case was in the North Ward. I don't know if you remember the whole history of Newark, but Newark had almost—and this was before I got here, too. They had vigilante groups that were keeping people out of their neighborhoods.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that a lot to do with Imperiale?

Terri Suess: Yeah. Anthony Imperiale led one of those. Here we're up there protecting this building on Montclair Avenue, in the North Ward. We're up there. We're a bunch of kids. …Your age or younger. Probably your age about. We're working' with the people, and the people have children. They're single mothers. Some of them are married. Some of their husbands and boyfriends were coming to help. We had a 24-hour watch on the building. We would go up and stay with them. We would not let them be alone. One night I go up there, and they say, "Guess what? There are these cars driving around. They're Anthony Imperiale's protectors, neighborhood protectors. They're going to make sure nothing happens to the building." I'm like, "That's weird." (Based on earlier history.)

Kristyn Scorsone: They were helping you?

Terri Suess: They were helping us, they said. That was pretty interesting and odd. Then I go up to the building. We're getting ready to do an around the clock, and one of the women's husbands calls me into one of the bedrooms and says, "I want to show you something." I go in. There's a bunch of people there. There's a dresser. He opens the dresser. He says, "If you have any problems, just use this." It's a gun in the dresser!

…

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh!

Terri Suess: My knees go like that (weak). I'm like, "I don't know about that."

…

Terri Suess: I said, "I don't think we'll have any problems." Those were pretty wild times. Then I remember going with Trish to another building.

Kristyn Scorsone: Were they mostly in the North Ward or other wards?

Terri Suess: They were around. North Ward and other areas. A lot of Newark had been abandoned and burned in the Central Ward. We actually had a person who worked with us …who had grown up in the Central Ward. After the riots, she said, "Yeah. We would sit out, and we could see fire over there. Fire over there." …Not from the riots. After the riots. A lot of Newark, people say, was destroyed in the riots. (In reality,) a lot of it (the destruction) happened afterward. This woman was a wealth of information and gave us a real perspective on (conditions in) Newark.

Then another time Trish and I, I remember, we went to this place where a young woman was fighting her landlord. There was a super there. We had to talk to the super about getting something fixed. We were with her. We were supporting her. The super started yelling at her and threatening her. We were like, "Whoa. What's going to happen?" We're a little taller. **[00:35:00]** She's just a short little person. She opens her purse, and she's fumbling in her purse. I thought, "Oh, no." .... She's going to pull out a gun, because he (the super) was really being aggressive. What happened? She pulls out matches and a cigarette (and lights up).

[Laughter]

Terri Suess: It was like, okay. We were okay again. There were a lot of different situations that you ran into. We had a number of people working. Really good people. Doing a lot of things with NCN. Then, there was a shift that happened. A lot of people have said that what happened is (that) the community groups that started on issues morphed into really wanting to provide housing themselves. Once they did that, they became very beholden to the city and to the banks for getting their money. (So they had less of a voice on issues.)

It became very hard to actually do frontline organizing. So we were all let go. ... We put up a little fight. We had some funding that followed us, but it was really difficult. They pretty much laid us all off. We did the Arson for Profit. We were helping the Ideal Toy Factory workers with a strike. We were trying to help people if they were up against losing their jobs. We were doing what people needed to have done, trying to add in. We were doing environmental work down in the Ironbound, trying to help them

with chemical toxic land that was burning down there, and trying to get that stuff (cleaned up) and covered up.

I think at that time also, the whole fight about dioxin arose. There was a factory down in the Ironbound that was called Diamond Shamrock. They made Agent Orange for the Vietnam War, (which contained Dioxin – one of the most toxic cancer-causing chemical known.) That news broke about that time, or maybe a little after. They had guys in white hazmat suits (Hazardous Materials suits) down there collecting dioxin from neighborhood streets, from the (community) swimming pool. They had to close the pool. (Children, and) the neighbors had been subjected to that (terrible chemical for years).

Ironbound Community Corporation really did a lot of work around airplane noise and chemical pollution and corporate attacks on the neighborhood environmentally. Then they had their school and high school and different things. (The Ironbound Community School and Independence High School) They were a multi-faceted organization that has only continued to grow. (Most of) the other neighborhoods had … community organizations that were trying to work on issues, and then got side-tracked or focused on building housing. Once they did that, then a lot of the work on real neighborhood issues (stopped), didn't happen so much.

Anyway, we were let go, and then they hired a director (one person, who) was paid the (total) amount of money we were all paid (before). … Then they continued on as a research arm and would comment on different things. At that point NCN did not do so much organizing. Later they had another director who tried doing more organizing and was a tribute and kept the organization

going quite a long time. It was a little different than when I came and the work that was done around that time period was—we were really trying to help neighbors and help build—empower people to be their own voice.

Then I went to Elizabeth and worked with CUE, Citizens for United Elizabeth. (C.U.E.) (There were) some great organizers down there. You may know the names Sister Jacinta and Edie worked with her. Also Jack Greenspan, who was an old-time labor organizer. (And Carrie Thomas, who organized in the '60s and '70s for decent housing conditions.) I was hired to do weatherization projects and energy efficiency down there in the early '80s. That was when Jimmy Carter was in office. Under Carter, (economists and scientists) had created a whole plan for renewable energy that was written up in a book that was about this thick (two inches thick) . **[00:40:00]** We had a copy of it. (It was called Solar Power.)When Ronald Reagan came in, those books were in a warehouse, and he had them all burned.

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Gasp]*

Terri Suess: Yeah, so this whole thing about global warming and climate change and energy efficiency and what's (to be) our energy sources has been going on a long time. That's why this is such a defeat. (to have Trump elected) I do have hope. A lot of times people—I believe; I've lived my life believing this, politicians are politicians, because they can be pushed and changed. So we'll see what happens.

We did work around that early on. Jack Greenspan had an exhibit at the Newark Museum on energy efficiency and how to

weatherize your house. He was a contractor, but he also was a really good political person and believed in social justice.

…While I was there, we also succeeded in fighting for housing rights. Carrie [**00:41:06]** Thomas was the president of the organization (C.U.E.) while I was there. She was a long time community activist who had lived in terrible conditions in the port (Port Elizabeth). She had worked with others to fight back and she was actually able to buy a house, (across the highway, Rt 1 & 9, in Elizabeth at the time. She came on as president of C.U.E , and between she and Jack , Sr. Jacinta and Edie and some of the tenant organizers around the city, we move from not only doing weatherization but also organizing.

We succeeded in winning space (in warehoused) public housing for a family. There was a woman who had a number of kids. I think about eight kids. She was homeless. We worked for her to get a large public housing unit. They were keeping public housing empty, because they didn't want (poor) people in it. They wanted to empty it and blow it up and turn the land over to developers, displacing all poor people. We actually got the woman and her children into an apartment. We had to have sit-ins (at City Hall) and get newspaper articles, but we won.

Then there was an elderly woman over there, Holly Hall, who everybody wanted to have removed from public housing, because she was a little eccentric. She was probably 90 years old. She wanted to just keep living as she always had. We tried to get her into adult daycare and help her, (but she wouldn't go). She just wanted to keep making the rounds, (walking around town) where everyone knew her and would give her free coffee and a bite to eat.

A few years later, I saw her still walking around – she was in Penn Station in Newark that day.

…

Kristyn Scorsone: Wow.

Terri Suess: She continued to thrive.

Kristyn Scorsone: What were the sit-ins like?

Terri Suess: Oh, the sit-ins? The family came. Then the organizers came. We tried to sit-in and get media coverage about how this family needed homes. Lo and behold, and Sister Jacinta and the Catholic Church at that time in that location has been very progressive and very social justice oriented, as here in Newark. It's made some positive impacts there. **[00:43:09]** Carrie Thomas led the charge on that. We basically shamed the housing authority into finding space for this family. They finally took them in. Those were good things.

Then this big housing complex (Pierce Manor) near where Jack Greenspan lived in the Elmora section, a beautiful section of Elizabeth. This housing was privately owned and was affordable and had a mixture of people in it. Old people, young people, African Americans, white people. It was affordable housing. Well, they decided they were going to throw everybody out and bring in Section 8 housing. (Initially for Seniors only.) There was to be no right of return for the tenants, even if you qualified. Most people didn't really qualify, (they were over the income limits). They were just offered $50 to move. They were thinking that was great.

Well, one of the women there wanted to take this on. Myra Satterfield, the president of the tenant's association there came to us. We did the research and helped with the organizing. Again, she organized people chaining themselves to the gates (of the complex). We had newspaper articles. The whole thing, and that this whole project was unjust! Jack did a lot of research on how much money these developers were going to make, by throwing the tenants out, yet these people had nowhere to go. We fought for them to get relocation assistance, which none of them knew about at the time. They were just leaving (the building and moving away).

Well, when (Myra's) tenant group took it on, and started really fighting, they were holding up the change that people (developers) who owned this place wanted to make. Well, not only did we get relocation, which was (hardly ever provided at the time). It was that if you moved, they would pay the difference in your rent from what you were paying **[00:45:00]** to what you had to pay for—I forget how long. Maybe a year. Something' like that. We're like, "That's nothing." I guess it was also that what they would allot up to a total of $4,000. You could get that payment for a period of time until you used up the money ($4,000). We're like, "That's crummy, because it was impossible to follow all that, and whether you could really get it." We said, "Tenants should get the lump sum, $4,000. If they have to go … Well, we won that! ... It was the first time that had ever been done in NJ. That's the power of people. If people get together, create a demand, create publicity around what's right and just, they can often win things that benefit themselves (and their neighbors).

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you think about people that say, "Oh, direct action is just trouble makers or it's ineffective?"

Terri Suess: They are! I'm sorry. It does make things a little uncomfortable, but there's a Malvina Reynolds song called, "It Isn't Nice." Do you know that song? Well, I learned it in Girl Scouts. ... I never knew what it meant until I came to Newark and Elizabeth. "It isn't nice to block the doorway. It isn't nice to go to jail. There are nicer ways to do it, but the nice ways always fail." Really, to make change, you have to be willing to, first do what Dr. Martin Luther King said. You need to (study and) make your demand. You need to ask people to come to the table. If they don't come to the table, you need to do direct action peacefully (non-violent direct action). You need to get publicity around it. (More) people need to know. (and be invited to speak out.) When that happens, apartheid falls. When that happens, Jim Crow falls. A lot of things fall. Then you match that with people having' a chance to meet each other and become friends. Oh my gosh. You have a whole new world. Yeah. It's pretty interesting. …Anyway, we won that. That was good.

(During this time, we also conducted, as originally intended, numerous workshops on how to weatherize homes and apartments. We prepared materials and educated people on how to save energy and cut their utility bills!)

… After winning the right of return (for Pierce Manor tenants) and the lump sum relocation payments, they (the granting agency) didn't want to renew my weatherization grant to work in Elizabeth. I said, "Boy, I don't know about this. You work real hard to get …organizing going, but nobody really wants that to happen."

I shifted gears. I ended up doing sign painting and graphic arts and different things like that around Newark for awhile…. Actually over at McCarter highway, I was doing a big sign on a gas station. I was up on a ladder. The wind came up and the ladder was going to fall over. This guy walked out of his store right then and put his hand on the ladder. …I thought, "Whoa, that's cool." I didn't fall over, and I thought, though, "I think, by the time I'm 40, I shouldn't be up on this ladder!"

Kristyn Scorsone: *[Laughter]*

Terri Suess: So, I started shifting' gears again. I moved into computers. The Macintosh was just coming out with a graphic computer. We did desktop publishing, and I worked with a friend of mine to do database publishing for a while. Then one thing led to another. I ended up being a technical writer, because I needed to earn a living. A solid, predictable living. But, I decided to stay in Newark. At that point, I had a partner down in Ironbound. We had been researching issues in Newark and organizing together. She was a legal services lawyer.

We moved across town to Vailsburg, because it was a diverse community. We had had some problems in Ironbound. I had been grabbed (by men on the street) several times.…It was just really—crazy and we were actually forced out of an apartment when I had a friend visit. There was a big blow up between one of the son-in-laws and the friend, and other things. It just seemed they didn't want us there anymore. Who knows what else was under all that. (Later, someone was shot and killed in the apartment next to ours!) My partner and I said, "You know what? We have these dogs and cats. Where are we going to move (where we can afford to live

with our pets) —the rents are going up. How are we going to afford them?" Some friends helped us move across town to Vailsburg.

(We decided to buy a house (in the mid-'80s). Vailsburg was affordable, had a diverse community, had a community organization. (Unified Vailsburg Services Organization). (When we decided to move to Vailsburg, many people said "You can't move there." They thought it was a "dangerous" neighborhood. Yet, city workers and others with regular jobs traditionally lived there. We thought we could maybe move up there and see how that went. We were tenants up there for a year and looked for **[00:50:00]** a house and found the affordable house that we're in to this day. Yeah, we skidded in there and stayed.

(All these years we have had affordable housing costs that didn't take up our entire incomes, and left us money to travel and eat out and enjoy life…and we had super nice neighbors.)

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. That's awesome.

Terri Suess: We were received well; what can I say? Wherever we go, we do our work, and we live our lives. I guess I don't identify as a lesbian first.

Kristyn Scorsone: Okay.

Terri Suess: ... I just live my life the best I can. I have marched for lesbian rights, and I contribute, and I participate, but when I move to a new place, I let people get to know me first. I went to some neighborhood meetings up there (in Vailsburg), and I tried to get

involved in stuff (community activities – organizing programs at our local library, helping the block club have a contest for kids to paint litter barrels that were placed on the street, working with neighbors to get a vacant home occupied, and helping a neighbor keep her job!) Actually, one of the ministers who came to some of those meetings basically said that… "There are people in this neighborhood who are thieves and drug dealers and gay! ... I was like, "Whoa!" He was working with me. I guess he didn't really know that I was gay at the time, but little by little, he did come to know that. We worked together. I think it changed his perspective a little bit.

I have to say, we had so many nice neighbors. We were nice neighbors, and we had nice neighbors. That is really something, to be able to say. We were welcomed. We welcomed others. Like Helen Mirren said in an interview that I looked at online just the other day, and she said, "There are lots of ways to have a family." I, for many reasons, decided not to have children, but I'll tell you, (our) neighborhood was full of kids that came over for apples and refreshments after school. Their parents, some of them died of drug overdoses or were in prison or died when they were young. (Many others were working good jobs everyday and doing just fine.) Here we were. We were neighbors, and we were friends. (The kids,) They'd come over and swim in the kiddie pool in the side yard on hot summer days.

(Other times they would make puppets and write puppet shows. One time we had a Thanksgiving picnic and we bar-b-qued turkey dogs! Many years we held Easter egg hunts in the spring. And to be fair, we would always average out the eggs between the little kids and the older kids. As we were doing that one year, a little boy

said: "Ms. Terri, this is a place where a kid and really be a kid!"… That made me happy, that kids could enjoy the yards in Vailsburg, much like we enjoyed the yards throughout our neighborhood when we grew up!)

It was a beautiful, wonderful thing. Those kids grew up, and they're doing' their own lives, and to this day some of their lives are not that easy. (But they still stop by and remember good times they had in the neighborhood as little kids.)

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you and your partner ever marry?

Terri Suess: No, actually we did not. ... We are somewhat eccentric people. Even though there are a lot of advantages that came out of that (Gay Marriage/Marriage Equality) struggle, we pretty consciously did not marry. My partner refers to marriage as a "feudal institution".

[Laughter]

Terri Suess: (Gay Marriage/Marriage Equality) That was a valiant effort and an important effort. We've been to many marriages of our friends, and that's all good. Well, I can't speak for her, but I have to say -- My philosophy is if you love someone and get involved, take it day by day. If the days are more filled with love and happiness, you're good. If they're not, then maybe it's time to do something else. We're free to do that. We've lived by that.

Kristyn Scorsone: …When did you first become aware of your identity or that aspect of yourself?

Terri Suess: Well, I'd say when I was in my mid-20s probably. Yeah. Out living in New York. I think your life experiences create the path you're on. Had my life experience been different, my life would have been different probably. I was on a certain path of the times. There was a lot of freedom in the time I was growing up. Things were not that expensive. People could move around. It was a beautiful, beautiful time in a lot of ways, even though (it was also) a time of great difficulty and great change. When I was in New York, there were lesbians and gay people in our neighborhood. I got to know them.

Kristyn Scorsone: Was that the first time you became aware of other—of gay people?

Terri Suess: Probably. ... I was pretty protected, I think, or just a little dense. I don't know which. Anyway, I met with them (gay friends), talked with them. **[00:55:00]** Just learned some things. I became more sensitive to that. Then, I ended up meeting people, meeting women who were really nice and really great, (accomplished people) and had relationships with them, somewhat. Several of the relationships didn't work out so well. My current partner, I would go and ask her—because she was really identified as a lesbian her whole college career, I'd say, "Why didn't this work out? I can't believe this." She's like, "Well, maybe you should …(get involved with) people who aren't married or who aren't (identified as) straight!".

...

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Terri Suess: I'm like, "Yeah. Maybe that's a good idea."

...

Terri Suess: Anyway, then we ended up getting to know each other. She moved in with me and never moved out. ... It was quite a wonderful, wonderful period of time.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you ever come out to your—did you ever have to come out to your family?

Terri Suess: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Or did you just live your life and they caught up to it?

Terri Suess: …. No, we had to come out to our families. (I never wanted to be afraid that my family would find out from anyone but me.) Yeah. I don't know about my partner's experience quite so much. I think it was smoother than mine. Mine, I was a distance from my parents, and it was a little contentious for a little while. I had to have a serious talk with them. Actually, I hung up on them once. They called me back. That was the threshold of understanding, I think. They grew and changed, to their credit. I think that's a big thing, if you can ask people to change or show people how they need to change and for people to change, (it) is a good thing.

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm. How about your brother?

Terri Suess: My brother was supportive from the very beginning. Yeah. He visited with his family. We had a relationship with my nephews. It was a little easier for them. (My brother, his wife and their children.)

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you grow up with a religion at all? Did that affect you?

Terri Suess: Yeah. I did. I grew up as a Lutheran….

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh.

Terri Suess: My dad's philosophy was you go to the closest church in your neighborhood, which happened to be Lutheran.

…

Terri Suess: They were not really super religious, and in fact, later in life, my mom became not religious at all. She became an atheist. Yeah. I went to their (the Lutheran) Sunday school. This and that. Confirmation into the church and all that. Actually, that had an impact because they talked about angels not having any sex, being amorphous or androgynous. I was like, "Oh, that's interesting. That's a good role model." ...That was when I was quite young.

Then when I got to be older, of course, there were all the challenges related to sexual (gender) roles. ... People had an opportunity to think about (those gender-based roles) and say, "Does that really work for me?" Then say, "Well, why can't we do this or that?" Then also in my younger years, and this was for everybody,. you can talk to anybody my age, there was just so much sexual harassment in the workplace. I suppose it still goes on. It's like, ugh!

Then there was the fact that men made more money and had more privileges. You just wanted to go, like, "Well, that's not fair. I'd rather live with somebody where everything's more equal."

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm.

Terri Suess: It worked out for that.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. Have you found community or support in Newark from the gay community here?

Terri Suess: We haven't been all that involved. We at times did support the center. We were at city council the night that they finally approved some funding for the center. It was really interesting, because everybody just went up and pretty much came out to the whole city that night, saying 'this is the right thing to do'. We weren't really organized to be there for that ..(although many others were.). It was really good to be able to support that. You know. **[01:00:00]** We have had a number of lesbian friends in Newark. (And they described) their experiences staying in the community where they grew up. They were really brave people, because they had to go against a lot of expectations for them in their own community. They were close friends of ours, and we would go to events together or (hang out together at dinners, picnics). We weren't identified just with the LGBT community.

Kristyn Scorsone: You didn't really hang out in any of the, I guess, bars or anything like that?

Terri Suess: Not too much. Early on over in New York a little bit but not too much. I spent a lot of my life trying not to drink too much. ...

We did (go out quite a bit, though), down in Ironbound particularly. There was actually one night in Ironbound when I was out with my friend Trish, and (my partner) Jeanne **[01:01:09]** was out with us, too. The three of us were out. We (Trish and I) were really drinking quite a bit. At the end of the evening, we were at a bar. Some guy started beating up another guy. I can't stand that. I usually jump in the middle of it and say, "Stop! Stop! Go! Run! Get out of here!"….so I did. I broke up the fight. It was in a doorway. I got the guy out. Then we were sitting next to the guy who had started it. I'm like, "What the hell were you doing?" I'm drunk. He's drunk. He's like, "That guy was a fag." I'm like, "What does that matter? That's terrible (to beat up a person for that)." We had a whole conversation about it. That stuff went on. I guess it still goes on. Anyway, it's terrible. I will support anybody in their right to be who they are.

Kristyn Scorsone: Mm-hmm. Did you hear about Stonewall at all when it happened?

Terri Suess: Yeah (I knew about that). No. I wasn't there when it happened. No, I wasn't around then, but I did go on all the marches in New York early on. We watched that grow over the years. It was just remarkable, because we'd go to the Lesbian and Gay Pride Marches (in '76-'77), and there'd be people we knew in little groups. It would be maybe 10,000 people. It seemed like a lot, a lot! The last year we went, around 2012, 2013, there were 2 million people there. .... We were in a contingent for Bradley Manning, Chelsea Manning now.

(Manning was responsible for the biggest release of classified documents during the Iraq War. As a matter of conscience she thought that the American Public should know what was really being done in that war. She released a video entitled "Collateral Damage" that showed American Soldiers gunning down civilians from the air. She was sentenced to 35 years in prison. During that time, she began to transition from being a man to becoming a woman; what she felt to be her true self. Just before President Barak Obama left office, he reduced her sentence to time served and she was released in May of 2017.)

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Terri Suess: Yeah. We really had hoped that she (Manning) would have been the grand marshal of the (NYC Lesbian and Gay Pride) parade. Organizers of the parade were on track to do that. Then it got diverted, which is too bad, because more support for Chelsea Manning is essential. That person has done more for America than so many people and is being punished horrifically.

(In the parade we marched with a contingent that had a person dressed as Bradley Manning in uniform in a cell block made of cardboard with painted bars, and then as people carrying the cardboard stepped to the side, the cell bars rolled away and Manning could step out, walk freely and greet the crowd. It was a wonderful display.)

Kristyn Scorsone: She was a whistle blower?

Terri Suess: Oh, yeah. On collateral damage, showing this video where they shot civilians. The gunners in the helicopter knew they (people

they were shooting) were civilians. They were joking about it. Then, Manning released many, many, many documents that showed a poor policy (around the entire Iraq War). Anyway, that is a horrible thing. They put her in solitary confinement for two months when they first arrested her. Anyway, it's terrible. I try to write to her on a regular basis.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, wow. Does she respond?

Terri Suess: No. I don't even know if she really gets the letters. I don't have any way of knowing. I have a personal commitment on that, because I just feel it's such a human rights tragedy that I need to figure out how to do something every week on that. I think people need to take that on to educate others and not let (Manning) just languish. I'm grappling with that.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's really interesting. When you first came to Newark, what did you think of it? What are your first memories, I guess, of coming here?

Terri Suess: Well, it seemed to be quite a vibrant place, and a lot of people on this street. Like I said, I lived right over by Saint Columba's. Where did I live and how did I get there?

Terri Suess: I guess I was walking to Saint Columbus at the time from Ironbound. **[01:05:00]** Yeah, because when I first came to Newark, I lived up in the North Ward. North Ward or Ironbound was where they directed people who were white. ... Where I knew people. I met some people there. I had two interesting experiences. One was when I was living up there (in the North Ward) on Ridge Street, I would take the city subway up, and then I'd walk down through

Branch Brook Park and go over to this little apartment. (Across from Barringer High School.) Well, and they said it's so safe up there and everything. I'm walking home one night … It's just about getting dark. There are four young guys on the bridge.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, right. Yes.

Terri Suess: I'm like, "Oh my gosh." They have pipes in their hands. They're going' like this. (They were beating the pipes in the palms of their hands.) I'm like, "Oh shoot. I'm going to get mugged." Just then the bells of the cathedral started ringing. I'm just starting a pattern. It's like should I go back to the Kentucky Fried—or should I go home? Where should I go? I'm afraid of these guys. They were teenagers. I start walking in a circle, saying to them, "The bells! The bells! Do you hear the bells?" They're like, "Yeah, yeah. We hear the bells." I'm walking in a circle trying to figure out what to do. Am I being threatened or not? Well, I look at them. I say, "You know what? I'm afraid to walk across this bridge." By then they'd seen me walking in circles, listening to the bells. They think I'm totally whacked.

…

Terri Suess: (When) I look at them and say this, this one guy says, "Oh, don't worry." He said, "I'll escort you." I'm like, "Oh, that's nice." He puts out his arm. I take his arm, and we're walking across. Then I realize he's here (on the left) and the guys are here (by the edge of the bridge, on the right), and I'm in the middle of them. I'm like, "You know what?" I said, "I should be on the outside." He's like, "Oh, no. If a car comes by, you'll get splashed. You have to be on the inside."

...

Terri Suess: I'm like, "Okay." We're chatting all the way across the bridge about school, about how he's doing, about this and that. We get to the other side, he's like, "This has been so pleasant." He said, "I hope you have a good walk home."

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh.

Terri Suess: I'm like, "Wow. That was so nice." But I was so frightened. ... I was like, "Whoa." There were less people up there (on the streets) than in other places. I thought maybe I should move down where I knew people more to Ironbound.

I did check out an apartment down there. You know what happened? It snowed the day I went to look at the apartment in Ironbound. It snowed 18 inches! I had called and found this apartment and went over there. (I could hardly) walk through the snow. I finally reached the house with the apartment, and knocked on the door. The woman looked at me, stunned. I said, "I'm here to see the apartment." She says, "No, Portuguese". (If you didn't speak Portuguese, she did not want me there.)

Terri Suess: She slammed the door in my face.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh.

Terri Suess: It was the first time I had felt what, probably, African-Americans felt all the time. I actually started crying. I was like, "Wow. I

walked through all this snow. I can't even see the apartment." ... Those are real experiences. They're crummy. I had a lot more empathy after that. Yeah. It's sort of interesting. Yeah, but those were early days in Newark. It was a vibrant place. There were still a lot of people here, all ages. We were of course the younger people. Hahnes and Bamberger's were still open when we came. We had the experience of going to the department stores. People who were older who were working in these places would look at us like—or me—and say, "Why are you here? Why did you come here?" I said, "Gee. It's nice. There are nice people here." ….

One time I was coming back from New York on the train, and I was buying a ticket for Newark. The ticket seller said, "You can't go to Newark." ... I said, "Why not?" He said, "Oh, that's a terrible place." I said: "I live there!" I was living up in Vailsburg at the time. I said, "Have you ever been there? Do you know anybody there?" He's like, "No." I said, "Well then, quit saying' that ... because it's a very nice place, and there are a lot of great people there." That's the stuff you would get. **[01:10:00]** Anyway, it's interesting, because I was over in New York for a concert last weekend. I told somebody who lived in Brooklyn I lived in Newark. She said, "Oh, that's where I want to move." I'm like, "What? What?" I've never heard that before.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. Mm-hmm. I've had a city friend say that, too. It's strange.

Terri Suess: They're me 40 years ago. Right? Because I wanted to live in Newark, because it's interesting, and because there are—I'll tell you. There's no better town for progressive people. An issue, you get out there. You talk to people and your neighbors. Boom!

Everybody gets it. Right? It's like, "Wow! This is a beautiful place to live. ...

Kristyn Scorsone: When you did your organizing, did you do going door to door to people to get them to be involved? How did you get the community to care?

Terri Suess: We'd do fliering and leafleting and then work with people in the neighborhoods who'd get their people (friends and neighbors) together. (We would also get information about issues into the local papers and community organizations would spread the word. Ironbound Community Corporation publicized many events through their newspaper, "Ironbound Voices". That was that.

Then, when I started working (at other jobs) we decided to stay in Newark. I started working for corporations (in New Jersey and New York) to bring in a regular paycheck. We stayed in Newark. Then I was involved with issues wherever I could be. That's when we would do door-to-door work or outreach and more fliering and emailing at the time. Things like that … I would work on helping people keep their jobs or help to turnover houses in our neighborhood that were vacant. (Also, we worked to obtain needed repairs at our neighborhood library and have full funding for our neighborhood recreation center.) …things like that.

(We also, at that time, worked to support Ironbound residents' efforts to save the River Bank Park (an historic Olmstead Park), and not allow it to be given away to developers for a Minor League Baseball Stadium. We also organized to push for neighborhood protections from toxic clean-ups. We also went to hearings to oppose sending a one-time lump sum payment from the Port of

Newark to developers for an arena in downtown Newark – when the money was needed for budget items that would directly benefit residents – such as libraries, schools and neighborhood infrastructure. By sending the Port money to the developers for the arena, an artificial "budget crisis" was also created, which was used by Mayors James and Booker to try to lease away the public water system.)

…The big issues (that I worked on) in the last 10 or 15 years were around keeping the Newark water supply public.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right. With Cory Booker. Right?

Terri Suess: Well, it started under Sharpe James. He wanted to turn it (Newark's public water system—The Newark Department of Water and Sewer Utilities—over to a Newark Infrastructure Management Corporation (NIMaC), a private non-profit board thing that would have been out of the city's control. We have a city water sewer utility. It's a department in the city structure. It's a public water system. (Because of that rates are affordable, the quality of water is good and local Newark residents are employed there.)

The Newark watershed under Ken Gibson was turned over to the Newark watershed, NWCDC (Newark Watershed Conservation and Development Corporation). It was (to be) quasi-public.

Donald Tucker and a bunch of us residents—Donald Tucker was a city councilperson. … very powerful person and a really good, good person. Progressive, thoughtful, and he (and we all) mounted quite a fight to keep the water system public opposing proposals

made by then Mayor Sharpe James. We worked with him (Council member Tucker and with Council Member Luis Quintana) on that. We worked with people across the city. Frank Hertz **01:12:58]** came up with great ideas and organized people. We only found out about it (James' plans to lease away the Water System) at zero hour. Sharp James had passed this legislation as a Senator (in the state legislature to allow Water Systems in Cities of the First Class, of which Newark and Jersey City were the only two, to be turned over to private control.) Everything was in place and was happening. At zero hour, we all woke up and said, "This is terrible. If we lose this, we could" (lose affordable and quality public water, and direct control over our water system)—and it would be for not much money to the city and …

Anyway, I got involved as the "Paul Revere" on that. Trying to research and say what was happening (let people know). People came out in droves, because people in Newark grew up going to the watershed (to swim and picnic). They had educational programs up there and everything. They (residents from across the city) were saying "No, no, no." Donald Tucker arranged for hearings in every ward. That was the turning point. We were able to stop it (Sharpe James' attempt to take the water system away from public control.)

Cory Booker rode to the mayoral success on the coattails of that and several other struggles. The arena was a struggle that was hard to fight. We didn't really win. Cory came into office saying he was going to stop that (the arena). He did not. Contracts were in place …. He also came to office after having gone to all these hearings, committing to a public water system. Well, shortly after he's elected, what does he try to do but turn it (the water system) over

to a more quasi-public(-private) control. It's called a Municipal Utility Authority. We're like, "Oh no!" We fought him. There was more support on the council at that point (to keep the water system public). Ras Baraka (then Council Member from the South Ward) was tremendously impactful **[01:15:00]** on the whole battle.

Again, we, with the council, were able to get hearings in every ward. Booker would come, and he would say how our taxes were going to go up (unless we accepted his MUA). "We need this money to balance the budget. We're going to cut here. We're going to do this. …. Well, the West Ward, Central Ward, South Ward totally got it, right. (Residents were) totally "No". "We want to save our public water system. You're not going to take it for that pittance. We're not going to relinquish control." Well, the North Ward and the East Ward, we were worried about the tax thing, thinking they might go for (fall for) the Booker ploy of giving away the water system for a one time lump sum payment in exchange for lower taxes in the near term. We were organizing and writing and publicizing and spreading the word with everybody. The hearings came up in the North Ward. The school (where the hearing was held) was packed with people. Every hearing throughout the city was packed because people just 'got it'. We had done a lot of organizing. But, up there (in the North Ward), to a person, People (said) "No. If taxes have to go up, taxes have to go up. Do not give away our public water. No!" to Booker's proposal. Then the East Ward hearing comes up. We're all at the hearings. We're a little nervous. But then we heard people stand up and say "Raise the taxes! Raise the taxes! Don't sell our water!" (It was a beautiful moment.) Unbelievable. Unbelievable. Magnificent.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Terri Suess: To a T, to a person, except for a few people that testified for Booker. To a T, people were like, "No, no, no. Keep this." (our public water system.)

(But even after his defeats at the public hearings, at every turn,) Booker kept at it. He kept at it. He kept trying to take it to the (state) local control board. (He) had another plan. (And he) was using a lot of the watershed people (NWCDC Director, Lawyers hired by the NWCDC, as well as the part-time "consultant" Newark Water-Sewer Director from Jersey City's MUA) to prepare these (MUA) plans (for Newark) and promote the plans. He never would hire a full time, (permanent) Water Sewer Department Director to take care of the Water System (for us, Newark residents)—this was our demand after the fight with Sharpe James, that we get a full time, permanent water director in there to build this system up, because under Sharpe and under Cory, they were letting it go down. They (Booker) hired a guy who had run the Municipal Utility Authority from Jersey City to come over and be the part-time acting director of our water system. He was writing how to turn it (the system) over to private control. We're like, "Oh, no." (Note: under the next Mayor, Ras Baraka, a full time, permanent Water-Sewer Director, Andrea Hall Adebowale, who had come up through the ranks of the Water-Sewer Department, was appointed to direct and manage the system.)

It was down to zero hour (again). …We had formed and called ourselves the Newark Water Group through all of this. Some people who got involved (most were residents from across

Newark). Also, an economist…who grew up in Newark and lived nearby. Dan O'Flaherty. He and others in the Water Group did a whole research thing into what was going' on with the watershed (NWCDC – of which, Mayor Booker served as the Chairman).

Lo and behold, …. They (the Water Group researchers) found real violations of public trust (and wrote a report called "Hog Wild".) We took that (report) to every councilperson (and to the Mayor.) Nothing. We took it to others. Finally, it got to the state. (Council Member Auggie Amador made sure it was delivered to the State Comptroller and investigators.) They started investigating, but meanwhile, Cory was still trying to turn over the water department (to an MUA). Then he's getting' ready to run for Senate. (Actually, he first went to the Senate as an appointee to take former Senator Frank Lautenberg's seat after Senator Lautenberg died.) We said, "We will do a referendum, an initiative. (to stop the MUA and keep our water system public.")

In about three weeks, we wrote up this whole thing (the formal legal paper work for the initiative) and got all the paperwork in place to go out and get signatures to keep the water system public and to do away with the (NWCDC) watershed commission. A bunch of different things were in there. We got 5,000 signatures or however many we needed. I don't know. Four, five, six. We got those signatures in three weeks, which was phenomenal in Newark. We were out everywhere. People were, "Oh, I want to sign that. I want to sign that."

We're getting down to the clock, because it is the year end, Cory's ready to become a Senator. Booker is fighting the people 'til the very end of his term as Mayor, (to turn over the Water System to

an MUA). In the end he took us to court over the initiative. (Ultimately he dissolved the NWCDC.)

We got the required number of signatures (for the initiative). We got them verified. We took the initiative with the signatures to council September 8th, I think it was, 2013 or 2012. The council passes it unanimously, if they didn't, then it would have had to go to a vote of the people. It's not my favorite thing. I've seen votes that get swayed really easily. But, luckily, it didn't have to (go to a vote of the people.) One council person was absent, but all of those who were there passed it unanimously. It's like, okay. "Save the Water". We've got the water system saved!"

No. He (Booker) takes us to court and challenges the initiative and challenges this and that. There's a big brouhaha. Meanwhile, the state starts taking the (NWCDC) watershed people to court (and pursuing information that had been detailed in the Report "Hog Wild"). The long and the short of it is, **[01:20:00]** Cory Booker becomes Senator. The (Newark) Water Department's still intact, and the court orders that the watershed be disbanded because they are doing so many funny things. (At one point the board of NWCDC tried to change their own by-laws and take control of the Watershed away from the City of Newark, that owns it! In the end, NWCDC enters bankruptcy proceedings, and the watershed gets returned to the Newark Water-Sewer Utilities Department.) So, not only did we not lose our public water resources, we expanded public control!

…

Terri Suess: It was a huge, huge effort by all concerned. Not with a hierarchy. (But instead, just with actions by residents as part of a movement.)

With a “let’s do this. Let’s have a movement to do this.” I was pivotal to that. In fact, when Cory Booker became mayor, he had a tribute to people and he gave me an award through Newark Now for work I had done to save the Newark Public Water System (fighting the Mayor Sharpe James proposals to turn the Water System over to NIMaC.).

…

Kristyn Scorsone: Really?

Terri Suess: It was funny, because when he gave me that award, he was taking pictures with everybody. He wanted his picture with all the Newark Now Award recipients. I was in the picture with Cory and I said, “Cory, here. Let’s make a toast with these glasses of water. Not a (plastic) bottle (of water). A glass of (Newark) water.” He took it (the glass) from my hand and he said, “Put that down.” Right then I thought, “Hmm. I wonder what’s going to happen. That was an odd thing.” Then so, anyway, there was a (huge) battle (with Booker down the road. We should have known!)

Then the other thing with Cory Booker, that I will never forgive him for, was cutting the Newark Library budget 40 percent in ’09. Destroying and cutting, closing libraries. Doing away with library resources. Oh, it was horrible. I worked with POP to throw a picket line outside the library and protest.

Kristyn Scorsone: Can you tell what POP is?

Terri Suess: People’s Organization for Progress. That is a very good group led by Larry Hamm and members all throughout the state and many

from Newark. Joanne Sims (and Jean Lowry) were key activist there who worked to Save Newark Public Water and also the Libraries. Joanne and others wanted to do a protest against the library. Many people came around the library fight. (We also held a 24-hour "Read-in" on the steps of City Hall to protest the huge Library cuts that summer.)

We were promised by the council that they would change that (and fund the Newark Public Library). I actually went to council one day and said, "When are you going to come up with this money, because the library needs this money (to restore services." They did not answer. So I said, "I'm going to stand here until you tell me." They still wouldn't tell me. (After they came to the 24-hour Read-in and said they loved Libraries so much!) Finally, they called the police to remove me… I had to leave. People said to me after that, "I saw you on TV. (and "thanks for fighting for the libraries.")

Terri Suess: … I even wrote to Ras (Baraka) when he was elected. I said, "This could be your legacy. The expansion and the really thriving of the Newark Public Library." It hasn't had much effect I don't think. They, (the Library board and staff), have done a magnificent job figuring out how to keep going. That is a treasure of Newark that needs to be fully developed, fully funded. There are many things undone. ... People have a lot of issues still in Newark with needing access to decent housing, access to being able to buy houses. Anyway, there's tons of work to be done in Newark by the people of Newark. I believe whenever people get together and clarify what they want, they can make huge progress. We might not get

the whole enchilada, but it will take us many steps forward. In many cases, it surprises you. Anyway, that's my life here; it has been as a person who has loved being able to live in a diverse community and being able to contribute a little bit. I've been a lucky person.

Kristyn Scorsone: Is there anything else you'd like to add or anything I didn't ask you that you wish I had asked you?

Terri Suess: I don't know. ... I've just been rambling, probably, on a variety of topics.

Kristyn Scorsone: I guess I'm interested also to ask you if you ever experienced any challenges with your gender or your sexual identity as an organizer.

Terri Suess: Let's see. Well, I did have to come out to some people early on, (because I did not want that to be an issue and used against me or others I was working with). It was okay, because I guess maybe people who gravitate toward organizing are pretty progressive in general. **[01:25:00]** For me, my identity as a lesbian has been protected by the movement. I owe a whole lot to the general movement per say. I've been a part of that movement, not as much as others who've been really out there and done a huge amount (for gay rights).

I'd also like to say that I think history makes people, that often people don't make history. History makes people, by calling them to do what they have to do in certain situations. …When the occasions arise, you try to respond. The movement for lesbian, gay rights has been huge and has made the path a lot easier for people

who have come behind. It has been a little easier. Maybe not a lot (easier). A little easier, because it's never easy in our pretty much heterosexual (and patriarchal) society. There are still a lot of walls.

Kristyn Scorsone: What do you say is the most important thing for people to be organizing around locally and nationally in our current time?

Terri Suess: Oh, wow. Pretty much the streams of issues all need to be fostered. Social justice, peace, gay rights, healthcare. … We just have a lot to defend and to try to progress on. Of course, climate change. That's overarching. (If we don't have a planet, everything else is difficult to fight on!) People are just like me. I'm a regular person. I come from a regular family. Regular people have to step up; wherever we are, whenever we are challenged to try to participate and do something brave. Right?

I learned that at the End (of the Vietnam) War Rally in Central Park in '75 when Joan Baez (a popular American folk singer) **[01:27:20]** was there and said, "You know, the war was stopped not by a decree or the Congress or any super-influential people. It was stopped by everyday people who decided this was wrong and started speaking up about it." I totally believe in that. I believe in that under Donald Trump. In this threatening time. The thing that makes this time different (from the Vietnam era) is how confusing they've created everything. They're trying to obfuscate everything and really confuse people. We are up against a super challenge. The technology has changed, and I think people are still trying to come to terms with that. We're in a dangerous time.

Kristyn Scorsone: You must see it a lot with your background with media.

Terri Suess: Oh, my god. ... Actually, I used to critique the editors for being gatekeepers, because I was a progressive person and wanted more progressive voices in the paper. However, now (on many internet sites) we don't have editors at all. Who's vetting anything? It's an unusual time. ... We are definitely going to have to stay tuned.

There are (also) tremendous opportunities. All I can say is young people are very, very sharp and know a whole hell of a lot and have come forth, beautifully, to speak out. I have the utmost confidence that this (Trump attack era) is going to work out for a positive. Hopefully it will galvanize people in a way that will provide clarity. …Immigrant rights. All of that.

One thing I did not say. I do believe that people change. The reason I say that is because one time I went home and I was looking through an old drawer where I had stashed some old high school papers. Little papers I had written and gotten grades on and thought, "Oh, I'll just put 'em away." Well, one of those was from a social studies class in, I think, the tenth grade. That paper was called, "Why the United States Should be in Vietnam?"

…

Terri Suess: I was like, "Did I write that?"

...

Terri Suess: Sure enough! **[01:30:00]** I wrote that. That was early on. That was probably '66 – '65 or so. Right after that, everything started galvanizing. People write things or think things or learn things or whatever. They can change with education, with information. A lot of this conservatism stuff is because people don't know people. It

comes back to where I opened up. If people will make some friends, they (the conservatives) will much harder pressed to do some of the things they're … doing. It's a funny story.

I have a—well, I don't know if I want to go into all that. I shouldn't. Let me just say generally. There are conservative people out there that I have spoken with. I'll talk to them, because our job and their job is to try and explain ourselves.

Well, I talked to one conservative person, and he was like, "Well, I should tell you." He was very anti-abortion. I said, "You know, the fact is, you don't know a lot of people's (especially women's) experiences. You can sit there and say that, but you haven't had the experience a lot of people have. You should probably talk to (women directly) about that. I'll tell you, point blank, that I had control over my own body, and that was something very important in my lifetime. I think that people need to talk to each other, and they need to hear from people. The woman who did the (Twitter feed)—when the Donald Trump tape came out about the sexual abuse (and assault); some woman threw up a hash tag (on Twitter): "#My first sexual abuse".

Kristyn Scorsone: Right.

Terri Suess: You know she got 25 million hits in 3 days. She was getting 50 hits a minute! It's like, okay. Pay attention. This is not just a few people. This is endemic. It's important that people learn from others and that people try to take that information and use it as best they can for their own freedom and for other people's freedom.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you so much. I appreciate you coming and doing this and speaking with us.

Terri Suess: Yeah. Oh, you're welcome.

[End of Audio 01:32:45]