Lisa VeneKlasen Oral History Archive of the Global Women’s Movement

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Lisa VeneKlasen Oral History Content Summary

Track 1: [duration: 2:10:34] [Session one: 27 October 2014]

[00:00] Lisa VeneKlasen [LV] Born Santa Fe, New Mexico, United States of America (USA). Describes 1950s Santa Fe, experience of being minority in Hispanic community. Mentions knowledge of street Spanish. LV middle child among four brothers. Describes parents as tough, mid-Western, second generation immigrants, mother from large Italian family in Joliet, Illinois, USA, father World War II veteran, educated through The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill). Mother flight attendant for United Airlines.


[10:40] Discusses self-sufficiency as American phenomenon. Describes affinity with Latin America from Santa Fe and culture shock of attending Smith College, USA. Discusses work ethic instilled by parents, LV working from age eight. Describes job as cocktail waitress age 12 at Desert Inn, Santa Fe, co-workers with more than two jobs.

[15:00] Describes parent’s conservative values, different standard for VK compared to brothers. Mentions school of the Sisters of Loretto, USA, burning down. Describes experience as outsider at Catholic, Saint Francis Cathedral School, USA. Mentions Sister Severina, friends Paula Reyes, Bernice. Attendance of Carlos Gilbert Elementary School, Santa Fe, USA.

[20:00] Describes significance of Catholicism in own life. Describes importance of nature in upbringing. Describes parents growing up in poor families, in Depression. Observes sexual division of labour in household, LV helping mother with domestic responsibilities, cleaning and cooking from age seven. Describes learning to cook at day camp while brothers learned to make tables, leather key chains.

[25:00] Describes parent’s personalities, mother as major influence, role as pioneer in women in sports. LV playing soccer and field hockey unusual in 1950s. Describes mother as great singer and dancer, part of tap-dancing troupe.

[30:00] Describes role of music in family home, father playing jazz piano, banjo. Mentions Earl and Scruggs. LV and siblings required to play two instruments, LV playing flute and piano, all tap-dancing. Mentions player piano, songs from Broadway musicals, Detroit jazz clubs, Boogie-woogie, Ella Fitzgerald, Art Blakey.

[35:40] Describes mother’s demands on LV, and father’s demands on brothers, parents’ creation of community to replace extended family, their significant
contribution to Santa Fe life. Mentions Rancho de Chimayó restaurant. Links upbringing to importance of singing and dancing, partying element, to work at Just Associates (JASS).

[39:30] Describes undercurrent in family of rules not applying to them, sense of freedom in strict household. Story about taking unknown car from public car park aged nine for drive with brother. Describes responsibility for grocery shopping, driving Ford Country Squire aged 11, collecting brothers, aged 12. Describes New Mexico law allowing driver’s license at 13 years.

[45:00] Description of gang life at Carlos Gilbert School, carrying switchblades in socks. Mentions Kelly Kieve, Mrs Baca. Describes own savings account from age six for earnings, to pay for college. Story about childhood impression of Wichita, Kansas, USA. Discusses own unawareness of class.

[50:00] Story about Zelda Gaubledone, leading to attendance of Santa Fe Preparatory School. Describes hippy environment of Santa Fe. Describes Santa Fe Fiesta time. Mentions The Pink Adobe, John Ehrlichman, Watergate scandal. Describes own sensibilities at time, father’s politics.


[1:01:01] Describes impact of eccentric paternal grandmother on childhood, LV sharing room with her. Learning Swedish prayers and culture. Discusses Dutch name. Mentions son. Describes vanity and “girly-ness” as actively discouraged in LV’s upbringing. Story about first time used nail varnish.


[1:20:00] Two stories from childhood together. Describes LV’s rebellion in response to parents’ increasing gender related strictness. Mentions Hells Angels.
[1:25:00] Describes street sense, contradiction of mother’s encouragement to hitchhike. Describes adolescent relations with boys, against backdrop of Catholic indoctrination.

[1:30:00] Describes first sexual experience. Describes skeletal facilities of school. Describes job as manager of Swensons aged 15. Describes viewing college as escape from conflicts at home.

[1:35:00] Describes reading Down East Magazine while waiting for piano lessons, asking teacher about colleges, LV first woman in family to attend university. Describes impact on thinking of school trip living with family in post-earthquake Huehuetenango, Guatemala, 1976, start of mass killing of mining communities, staying near and silver mine in Zacatecas, Mexico, in residence with Mexican labourers, Mexico City, sleeping on coffee plantation in hammocks in Chiapas, Mexico. Attendance of Smith College and ‘overnight politicization and radicalization’, LV establishing new clubs and associations.

[1:40:00] Description of institution of Smith College, LV’s class consciousness. Mentions significance of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) label. Discusses impact of Latin American Studies, role of USA. Mentions Jacobo Árbenz, Guatemala. Describes community work in Holyoke, Massachusetts, USA. Mentions University of Massachusetts (UMASS), Western Massachusetts Latin America Solidarity Committee (Western Mass), Paolo Freire.

[1:45:00] LV’s connection with The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), El Salvador, liberation leaders in Guatemala. Comments on student movements being led by people of same class background as LV, first generation university students. Discusses focus at time on women in business, Goldman Sachs recruitment drive at Smith College, UMASS, Amherst College. Mentions sit-ins for anti-apartheid movement, divestment by Smith College. Describes activism and relationship with David O Russell.

[1:50:00] Internship with United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in Madrid, Spain to enable trip there, living in Cuatro Caminos. Describes teaching English to members of the communist party. Describes love of Spanish literature. Mentions Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s ‘Don Quixote’, Francisco Franco Bahamonde (General Franco). Job as au pair for prominent Cremades de Adaro family, Gandia, Valencia, Spain.

[1:55:00] Describes driving Vespa, connecting with local workers and union members. Story about meeting eldest son of family.


Track 2: [duration: 32:46] [Session two: 29 October 2014]

[00:00] Reflects on not initially being feminist activist despite attendance of Smith College. Mentions Gloria Steinem. Describes activism rooted in personal connection with Latin America and consciousness about class. Describes community work, Holyoke, Massachusetts, USA. Story about arson case. Mentions Wang Corporation, UMASS, Western Mass, El Salvador, Sandinistas. Comments on early activism influences of Paolo Freire, liberation struggles.

[05:00] Describes project looking at Nicaragua’s adult literacy crusade in context of revolution, funded by Robert F Kennedy Memorial Foundation. Journey across USA in Chevrolet Nova to historically important places in social movement building. Description of Highlander Folk School, Tennessee and relationship with Myles Horton. Mentions Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks. Mentions Highlander of the West and new perspective gained on New Mexico of childhood. Describes relationship with John Gaventa as close friend and mentor throughout adult life, his work on ‘power’ significant to work of JASS and organisation’s contribution to feminist thinking. Mentions MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant. Describes importance of discussions between Myles Horton and Paolo Freire to LV. Visit to Mississippi Delta, Arkansas, project working with black women, learning about US citizenship schools, pre-cursor to civil rights movement. Mentions Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Visits to South Side Chicago, The Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma, project Light, San Francisco.

[10:00] Discusses conviction that real change comes from community organizing. Mentions Valdez, New Mexico. Travel to Nicaragua in pursuit of knowledge and experience of impact of literacy effort. Explains background. Mentions Fernando Cardinal, FSLN, Western Mass, Valerie Miller, Cuba, Rivas, Nicaragua. LV’s arrival in Estelí, Nicaragua, 1982, to visit and support education promoters in remote villages in team from Vice-Ministry of Adult Education, Nicaragua.

[15:00] Describes basic living in corrugated shack in back of house of prominent leader Reyna Arróliga. Describes travel by jeep, horseback and hiking to remote areas, including visit to Cuban outpost. Describes passionate arguments with Cuban doctor, Archimedes, about role of Catholic Church. Describes start of US support of contras in Nicaragua, villages targeted, LV involved in self-defence training. Describes ‘red and black’ days spent digging trenches, target practice to defend communities. Mentions Russia, Cuba. Describes moment LV’s hunting rifle skills become known. Describes average age of Sandinista combatants. Discusses feelings as American. Mentions Spanish Civil War.
[20:00] Describes Republican parents’ disappointment, mentions later marrying Rutgers University, New York, professor to ‘win family back’. Mentions World War II. Describes aspect of suspicion and trust in Sandinista leadership, LV’s role within team changing. Introduction to Malena de Montes, outspoken feminist leader, and pioneering participatory research project, LV travelling to rural community in El Regadio, Nicaragua to work with her. Describes Malena de Montes’ role in Ministry of Planning, Leadership Council of the Sandinistas, significant influence in LV’s life. Mentions reading Antonio Gramsci by flashlight and discussing. Description of work in El Regadio.

[25:00] Sandinista leadership arriving by jeep and helicopter to hear recommendations for community development plan. Story about directive to bury adult literacy materials below ground in preparation for attack by contras. Describes being observed by regional leadership, singing revolutionary songs meeting by candlelight, strong atmosphere with background of members of community dying while fighting for overthrow of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Reflects on own loneliness, as difficult time. Describes day to day life, living in home of prominent older woman, Doña Vasilisa. Describes being called into Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Managua where El Regadio community presenting experience on Radio Sandinista.

[30:00] Discusses socialist liberation struggles, standing of El Regadio and Estelí as ‘combatant’. Describes recognition of project throughout Latin America, United Nations and prominent scholars visiting. Describes visit from prominent Brazilian priest as moment of personal reconnection with Catholic Church with different perspective. Describes nuns and priests wearing gumboots, working in field, focus on respect and dignity, LV perceiving them among most radical people met. [telephone rings]

Track 3: [duration: 1:29:16] [Session two: 29 October 2014]

[00:00] Discusses Malena de Montes’ focus on women, Asociacion de Mujeres Nicaraguanes Luisa Amanda Espinosa (AMNLAE), significant role of women in Sandinista revolution. Describes machismo of culture. Story about commandante Bayarto Arce pursuing LV. Mentions Autonomous Women’s Movement (MAM). Describes Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Managua, Nicaragua asking LV to return home to USA. Return to New Mexico, speaking in churches to build solidarity movement.

[05:00] Describes role as community organiser using Alinsky model, working for Massachusetts Fair Share, Worcester, USA. Explanation of Alinsky model and its widespread influence on direct action. Mentions Saul Alinsky, Myles Horton, Paolo Friere. Describes context of work in Hispanic community, confronting police brutality in predominantly white force. Describes approach of JASS today, allowing issues to be determined by community. Mentions Paolo Freire’s influence in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

(ICBL), Nobel Women’s Initiative. Mentions own work on Central American Peace Campaign. Describes taking delegations to Cuba, late night meetings with Fidel Castro. Describes meeting Margaret Schuler. Mentions MaryKnoll nun, socialist democracy project, Chile, Salvador Allende, Augusto Pinochet, Women In Law, and Development. Describes Schuler’s influence on refocusing LV’s work around gender and women. Work to build networks in Latin America following United Nations Third World Conference on Women, Nairobi, Kenya, 1985. Comments on novelty at time of linking Rights and Development. Describes organisation’s work to determine how laws can be useful. Describes working with Schuler in Central America and Mexico, identifying lawyers, development activists and revolutionaries to come together in women’s networks, effort leading to creation of Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women’s Rights (CLADEM).


[25:00] Describes interest in Africa. Describes foundation of Pan-African network. Explanation of mandate to work with lawyers to effect legal change to improve women’s situation, for full citizenship and autonomy in context of Africa and customary law. Mentions Nairobi, Kenya, Zimbabwe. Describes personal life at time and marriage.

[36:20] Story about response of USAID to LV’s involvement. Mentions OEF, Elise Fiber Smith. Describes USAID in Africa at time governed by State Department, influenced by intelligence gathering, controlling revolutionary and anti-colonial movements. Comments that in reality countries hated in region were United Kingdom, France, Portugal. Describes own feelings as ‘true patriot’. Mentions Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Jefferson.

[40:00] Describes presenting case to panel. Comments on ‘sleepy’ Harare, Zimbabwe, home styling, ‘extraordinary’ music scene. Mentions ‘Leave It to Beaver’, Chimurenga revolutionary music, Thomas Mapfumo Oliver M’tukudzi. Describes wedding, difficult marriage, mapping escape. Mentions ‘Sleeping With the Enemy’, JFK Airport, New York, USA. Describes traumatic time as left relationship, the following year as time of powerful change and becoming ‘the impossible feminist’.

[50:00] Discusses commonality of experience among women. Describes return to Zimbabwe with brothers, immersing in community and culture. Mentions Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe. Describes seeding process for WiLDAF in ten countries, formally establishing with first Director, Florence Butegwa. Describes Butegwa and family moving in, operating from LV’s home. Comments that race and racial justice became part of LV’s work perspective. Describes working on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) awareness project with Ministry of Information, Zimbabwe, impact of AIDS crisis on own community.


community, ongoing connection no matter where situated, relationships accumulating, enabling ‘bigger work’. Mentions Ministry of Women’s Affairs, WiLDAF, Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi. Describes JASS as organisation built on personal, political relationships, trust, working together over time.


[1:15:00] Describes own engagement as more connected to international women’s movement in Global South than USA. Discusses significance of Beijing conference. Mentions magnitude of process in India, millions of women involved in pre-Beijing discussions and decisions. Describes voices of grassroots women as loud as professional presence. Comments on Global South moving into leadership of international feminist movement. Mentions Charlotte Bunch, South Asian membership. Describes testimonials of comfort women as ‘show-stopper’, bringing out story of violence from hidden history, as start of new phase of work on Violence Against Women.


Track 4: [duration: 1:18:12] [Session three: 6 March 2015]

[00:00] Background of creation of JASS. Describes working at Asia Foundation, responsible for Global Women In Politics Program. Mentions 9/11. Describes

Comments that gulf between policy and reality of women’s lives not narrowed Beijing+20. Describes organisation’s mission for rights based participatory development, disconnecting from funding trends in determination to retain independence. Describes male component, number of people and countries engaged. Describes funding work through contracts with international organisations, cross-subsidising work with social movements and internal dialogue. Consultancy contracts with Oxfam International, Action Aid International, Catholic Relief Services.

[05:00] Describes developing work on ‘power’ with co-founder John Gaventa, Malena de Montes, Hope Chigudu, Everjoice Win. Mentions Action Aid International, Action Aid, Institute of Development Studies (IDS), United Kingdom. Discusses conscious inclusion of men, importance of race and class to organisation. Describes positioning of JASS in Mexico, Central America, Southern Africa, South East Asia, as women led within broader human rights agendas. Describes ‘unlikely’ partners for feminist organisation, Malawian religious leaders, indigenous people’s organisation in Mexico. Describes partnership with Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). Mentions Bangkok Forum, Joanna Kerr.

[10:00] Discusses backlash against women’s rights further to successes of Vienna, Cairo, Beijing conferences. Mentions CEDAW, Mexico, Central America, Southern Africa, Indonesia, Southeast Asia. Discusses importance of popular education so diverse sectors of society engaged in thinking about values and ideas behind rights. Describes work training feminist community organisers in building networks and alliances that become critical to movements and create agendas. Mentions networks in Southern Africa, Indonesia.

[15:00] Describes ‘re-imagining’, hypothesis that spark for re-energising and re-tooling women’s activism must come from the women and open dialogue in each region, observing global patterns taking shape in each context. Mentions militarisation and security frameworks, reproductive rights technology, trade unionists. Describes first process in what is now JASS Mesoamerica. Discusses how increased violence against female activists is changing nature of work, JASS taking lead in protection of women human rights defenders. Co-founding of Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative, winner of 2014 Letelier-Moffitt International Human Rights Award, achievement of UN resolution on protection of women human rights defenders. Describes transformative model of developing tools, protocols for urgent action, and generating shared consciousness among women about risk, helping mothers pursuing justice for family members to recognise themselves as human rights defenders. Describes work of JASS Southern Africa, focus on HIV positive women previously excluded from women’s rights work.

[20:18] Describes set up in Africa to address AIDS, women not leading. Describes successful campaign in Malawi, Our Bodies Our Lives, dialogue with Ministry of Health to outlaw antiretroviral (ARV) drug treatment causing women’s bodies to deform. Describes Heart, Mind, Body strategy, Southern Africa, putting women’s bodies and feelings at centre of women’s rights movement, to enable speaking out in context of stigma and shame. Describes start of work in South East Asia, Indonesian East Timor. Jokes about China and USA, Pivot to Asia. Describes investment in
young women activists, alliances with Cambodian Young Women’s Empowerment Network (CYWEN), Forum for Young Women Activists in Indonesia (FAMM), regional director in Thailand, JASS Philippines. Describes change in role of USA office, now focused on communications platform, Women Crossing the Line.

[25:00] Describes importance of giving visibility to women on frontlines of inequality and injustice, learning from them. Describes rise of organisation from no budget to position today. Describes staff set up, and influential people who have built organisation. Mentions Alda Facio, UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women In Law and Practice, declaration on Beijing+20 process. Discusses vision for JASS today. Describes trainings and methodology, power tools as central. Remarks on shadow power today, naming Catholic Church in context of USA, nature of ‘patriarchy meeting capitalism’. Mentions Big Pharma. Discusses ‘invisible power’ as internalised socialisation that keeps women from speaking out, role of consumerism in shaping behaviour in Asia, role of fear in controlling women in Mesoamerica. Mentions Honduras. Describes resulting strategy, power framework of JASS training. In-depth explanation of model.

[30:50] Describes layered work in Mesoamerica focused on indigenous and rural women defending territories against mining companies. Mentions Alquimia. Describes “cross-fertilization” with adaptation of methodologies, Honduras adapting Heart, Mind, Body methodology used in Zimbabwe, Myanmar adapting JASS Protection and Risk Assessment methodology. Describes JASS new knowledge platform, We:Rise Movement-Building Reimagined enabling widespread access to activist training. Describes JASS Cross-Regional Dialogues, organisation’s convenings, and unique house terminology. Describes organisational development process under way. Describes collective decision-making process, distribution of tasks according to capacity and expertise, leadership of JASS becoming group of regional directors.

[36:00] Describes donor relationships. Remarks on donors investing with risk on open-ended projects, with shared belief. Describes JASS’s growth facilitated in part by Dutch government. Expresses difficulty with changing donor landscape, organisation now starting to integrate fundraising and resource mobilisation into movement-building model, with team of fundraisers. Comments on corporate sector re-inventing wheels. Anecdote about launch of Nicholas Kristof’s, ‘Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women’ Worldwide’. Remarks that in 300 years the women’s movement has made more progress than any other movement, without killing. Mentions new collaboration, Count Me In! Consortium, between five large international women’s rights organizations.

[40:08] Discusses competition, remarking that one per cent of giving is for women and girls, need to build alliances to work more effectively. Mentions AWID research, Greenpeace, Oxfam. Remarks on scale of professionalization and institutionalization that occurred in LV’s years in social justice and human rights work. Mentions Human Right’s Watch. Discusses role as Board member of Nobel Women’s Initiative, relationship with Jody Williams. Describes link between Nobel Laureate women spotlight bringing legitimacy, power, credibility, enabling JASS leap forward.
[45:00] Describes significance of joint delegation to Mesoamerica. Describes access given by JASS to frontline organizing and exposure to current issues. Discusses innovation and opportunities of Internet and social media, radio. Mentions Radio Internacional Feminista. Discusses personal leadership style. Describes organic growth of Women Crossing the Line as slogan, discussing concept of transgression.

[50:00] Describes mobilisation of effort, example of T-shirts, Indonesia. Remarks that being a woman means crossing the line, discusses contradictions in our individual lives. Describes age of girls in network. Mentions Snapchat Nicki Minaj’s ‘Anaconda’. Describes involvement of boys.


[1:00:18] Describes new JASS programme of Holistic Protection, identifying overwork as high risk, encompassing family and relationships, establishing new ways of understanding community among women. Remarks that Honduras has higher level of violence than Iraq. Discusses importance of solidarity. Describes holistic protection as feminist contribution to understanding of security.

[1:05:22] Discusses family pressure experienced by Central American activists in context of threats, comparing to male human rights defenders seen as heroes. Reflects on status of world. Refers to, I Can’t Breathe, and Black Lives Matter campaigns, yellow umbrellas in Hong Kong, China, as reminders of untapped resistance and resilience. Discusses fine line between crying and anger, potential of powerful expression to build from. Mentions Malawi, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK).

[1:11:08] Describes gaining knowledge from mistakes and setbacks. Describes most difficult setbacks occurring in close relationships, and having fewer expectations with age, lessons learned and care taken. Describes moment when JASS almost folded, 2007. Attributes success of organisation to relationships.

[1:15:44] Reflects on proudest achievements. Comments that working with depth critical to being different player globally.