

Interview with Janice Gutman

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

September 10, 1996

Q: I don't know anything about your cooperative communal experience, so I'd love to just hear a little bit about your background, and maybe what led up to you living collectively.

A: Okay, let's see, well, I was thinking about this a little before you came. First of all, it's a long time ago, so I'm trying to remember what happened where, but when I thought about what kind of led me in that direction, I thought about, I grew up in the middle of Chicago, but I grew up in an apartment that there were five or six of us there at a time, so I think one thing that I recognized about living collectively or communally with people later is that it didn't feel very different from how I grew up in some way, having a lot of people in a shared space, and not really having, I didn't have my own room, I didn't have my own bed, I didn't have many things. I didn't have a lot of space, you know. I didn't relate to things a lot, I wasn't used to having much that was my own, so it wasn't very hard to just move into a collective situation where a lot of things were shared. So, I think that, that's part of it. And, I think that, I'm Jewish, and I come from kind of an extended family, where the family was very organized, we used to have family club meetings every month, and we were very, yeah, like they're still doing it. It's like between one hundred and two hundred families that are all related, that have kept in touch over all this time. Now they don't do monthly meeting so much, but there are annual picnics and there's five year reunions, and in some parts of the country they still do meet more than that, like for holidays, and for stuff like that. But, anyway, I think that's sort of in my blood, like being used to these large groups, extended family kind of thing, so, I don't know, I've always just been a pretty social person, that depends on my friends, and likes having community, so I guess that's mostly what I can think of, before I ever conceived of this idea, this way of living. When I look back now, I see that kind of maybe contributed to me going in that direction. Then, I think, in 1970 I went to Cuba, Brigade, it's called the Vince Ramos Brigade, did you ever hear of that? So, the one I went on, there were, I think nine hundred people, it sounds so absurd, but I think it was nine hundred people maybe that went. It was huge, it was this huge trip. Anyway, it changed my life a lot to go there, and it made me, the first collective I ever really got in was after I came back from Cuba, I helped organized another group to go from St. Louis, and when that group came back, we ended up all living together, not the whole group, but six or seven of us lived in a house together and we had a collective. And so, I think, you know, that the thing about Cuba that affected me that way, I think, that led me into starting to do stuff like that, was seeing that there were these people who had really changed their lives significantly, and they changed their government and they changed their lives, you know, it's like people who didn't know how to read or write, who didn't have a place to live, were economically having a terrible time, I got there, it was about ten years after the revolution that they had there, and now they like, knew how to read and write, they had places to live, they had respect for who they were and their work, and you know, it just really made an impression on me that maybe I could do something that could change something. Like, maybe there was some point in working with other people, cause I think before that, I was pretty critical of a lot of things, but I was pretty cynical, and I felt pretty powerless, I didn't feel that anything I could do, could make any difference. So, I think going to Cuba made me think, well, we could have a revolution here, we could change things, so that first house I lived in, that was a lot of what it was about, the house was called Basta Ya, which means "enough" or "enough already". And we were oriented towards working class, kind of a real Marxist analysis of how to change things, and we were really into working with other working class people, all of us, we were a mixture of classes, I'd say, the people who were in that house.

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Some of us, a lot of us came from working middle class backgrounds, and some of us had been to college, some of us were just out of high school. It was a real mixed group of people.

Q: And, what city was this in?

A: This was in St. Louis. So we got a house together, and we pooled all of our money, and we spent a lot of our time, like we put out a newsletter called On the Line, we were trying to connect with struggles of working people, like strikes, and unions, and different things going on, and we were trying to just be supportive in those situations. We'd write about it in the newsletter, we'd go to lines, like strike lines, and do supportive stuff, be there, hand out literature, whatever, people wanted us to do that kind of stuff. We, actually, the people in the house, I was just thinking about that, a lot of us, nobody worked full time, we didn't have time to work full time, we were like so busy having meetings constantly, day and night we had meetings, and then going out and doing this work, you know, we didn't really work that much. But, we had to work some, we lived on a really low budget, I remember we had things like Macaroni and cheese, which is funny, because that's what I just put in the oven. But anyway, we had like macaroni and cheese and broccoli, or, oh, tuna noodle casserole, that's mainly what we had every night. It was really, we didn't eat well, I'd say that for that collective. But, we did some things that I thought were really, really good. We made some good connections with people and we did things like, we used to have, we used to go out, the teamsters had a place outside of St. Louis where they had like a retreat kind of place. We'd go out there, they'd have us come and lead workshops, and talk with people about different topics, like the things we were writing about in the newsletter, or I remember, I used to do stuff on women's liberations out there, and talk to union women about women's liberation. It was great, I mean, I learned a lot. And then, so that was really the first collective house that I lived in, and I can't even remember how long I lived there, probably, let's see, it was started in 1970, no more than a year, probably.

Q: How do you spell Basta Ya?

A: Basta is B-A-S-T-A, and Ya is Y-A. It's Spanish for "enough already". And then, that house, what happened, I left that house before the house actually broke up, but I remember one thing, when I got out of college, I worked as a computer programmer for awhile, and I saved some money, then I went to Cuba, then I moved in this house and I put all my money in the house, and my brother gave me a car, and we all shared that, there were other people in the house that had cars, but we were, and those things were not even an issue, I don't even remember talking, we just sort of assumed that we would share everything, just talk about politics day and night. And when I left that house, they kept going, but I left because I was having a lot of problems around women's liberations, that's how I felt. We had a lot of political discussions, and I felt like I was trying to talk a lot about, I was just starting to hear things about women's liberation, I didn't know much about it, and I kind of starting reading some books, and I would want to talk about this stuff while we were talking about economics and class, and I'd want to say, Well, what does this mean about women? And I got called some nasty names for that, you know like, I think the favorite one was booshwa individualist, that was a good one. But, anyway, I felt like I needed to leave, because I felt like I wanted to look into that stuff more, and I didn't feel like I was getting support from that house, and that group of people. Some of the people, the women more than the men, I felt supported by, but still, it was, I needed to be somewhere else. So, I moved out of that house, and moved

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next door, which happened to be a farm workers house, that the people who were doing the farm workers organizing in St. Louis were living in that house. Those were the times of a lot of lettuce boycotts.

Q: So this is UFW?

A: Yeah, United Farm Workers, right. But, I didn't live there very long, it was more of a, it wasn't so much of a, like we didn't share, like everybody paid their share of the rent and everybody had their own lives kind of, but we all lived in the same house, so it wasn't the same kind of collective, where we were like doing everything together, and sharing everything we had. And then, I was kind of going through this process of coming out as a lesbian at the time, cause one thing, when I was thinking about all this women's liberation stuff, it made me think why I limited my relationships with women, and so, a lot of things about my past I started to think about. Just my relationships with men and women, I guess this is true for a lot of people, I don't know why it never occurred to me to be a lesbian, I hadn't really thought about it, I hadn't hardly known any lesbians. I was pretty repressed, so probably I had met some lesbians and just sort of wiped it out or something. But, when I went through this political analysis sort of thing, it all started coming up, like it really made sense, but it was a very intellectual process of it all. It wasn't like going, Oh, I want to sleep with women. So, but slowly, as I opened myself up, I think in my mind, to like, this made sense to me. I got in touch with this is really what I wanted, and this is who I was. So, I moved from that house, what happened is I got involved with a woman, kind of, and there was another house in town, and like five lesbians lived in it. And they decided, and it was kind of too small for them, and so the six of us got a house together, one of the women I was involved with was one of those five. So that was, by then it was like 1971 probably, or the end of '71. So, we all moved in together, we started out just being a collective of the six of us, but it was at a time when not a lot of people were really "out" about being lesbians, and we were pretty public about it. We helped start a coffee house for like, a women's coffee house. And so, that house kept growing, like people would come to town from other cities and lesbians, and they would need a place to live, and we'd say, Oh, just move in. Or maybe, somebody had some problems at home with their parents and they were ready to leave home, and they moved in, or somebody would get involved with some woman who lived in the house and they moved in. After about a year of that there were thirteen women living in the house. It wasn't that big of a house, I think there were six bedrooms, so we started out everybody had a bedroom, but by the end there, I shared a room with three people, two of whom I didn't know very well, and you know it was like, it was pretty wild. And we had thirteen cats, I remember, and we had a few dogs, it was a pretty busy house. You couldn't go up and down the stairs without a lot of things happening just on the staircase, you know. So that house, that was another house where we didn't, we didn't share money, it was more a real supportive atmosphere, and it was a place where it was like you knew that if you went there you could be around a lot of lesbians.

Q: What did your neighbors think about what you were doing?

A: Well, you know, I think, the neighborhood, all three houses were on the same block, it was a block in St. Louis that was big old houses. But, primarily, the neighborhood was a lot of black families, a lot of extended families, and so there were a lot of people in a lot of the houses, I think. And there weren't a lot of white people that lived there. But these collective houses that we had were primarily white people

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living in them. So, my memories about the neighborhood was just like, there were not problems, it was pretty comfortable, it was all kind of acceptable, that there were a lot of people in every house was not surprising. It was not a big deal. So, it was interesting.

Q: All those houses were on the same block?

A: Yeah, I just kept moving up and down the block for like quite a few years there. So, that house, by the time there were thirteen people there, I've always described it as it exploded, but then there were three houses that came out of that with like four or five people in each house, which was kind of like a more manageable living situation. And, I went with a group that moved out to the country, outside of St. Louis. First we lived in this little room. We lived on all this acreage, but it was a really little house, it had like a main room, and then it had a little side room, oh the kitchen, that was it. There was an outhouse, there was a pump outside. It was really a bare kind of thing. We lived there through the winter. I remember the experiences there, we'd spend all day cutting wood so we could burn it that night. We were not ahead of the game.

Q: Were most of these people who lived at the previous house?

A: Let's see, three of us had lived, were there five of us involved in that house or four? No, I think there were four of us and three of us came from the other house and then one other woman. And that house, that was terrible, we did not do well in that house.

Q: In the back to the land house?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did it have a name?

A: No. Part of the problem was that there was no space. That was a lot of the problem. It was really stressful to like, not have our wood trip together, our pump froze in November and defrosted in like April or something, so we were hauling water. It was just a very rough winter, I remember that. But, then what happened is four people ended up moving, who were all originally in that first house. Some of us were the same [unintelligible]. Some of the same people that moved to that first country house, two of us from the country house, plus two other women who had originally lived in that big house. We all moved into another house in rural Missouri. That house didn't have a name either. That house was, that was the start of a whole nother collective that started, I don't know how to explain it all. So, after that house, well in that house, there were four people, then one person, no two people moved, it changed who lived in that house a lot. I was consistently in that house, but everyone else changed who was in that house I'd say. In the course of living in that house, a collective formed, of six women where we all shared all of our resources. We shared all our money, we shared all our cars, we shared all our clothes, but everybody didn't live in that house, we lived in different places. Four people lived in that house, well at different times different amounts of people lived in that house. The most that ever lived in that house were four people, and by the end of this six person collective, where we shared everything, we were living in five different places. But, we were still sharing all this stuff. That was really wild.

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Q: It must have been complicated.

A: It was very complicated, and we drove a lot of people crazy. Because we'd like, we'd be at a meeting or something, and for the last half hour we'd be like well who has the car tomorrow, and whose going where, and whose doing this? And everybody would go, just go somewhere else and do this. But, we did do that for quite awhile, we lived like that. And in that house we lived in, where the four people lived, we did things like, we had all our clothes in one room, it was a clothes room, so it was kind of organized like all the pants were here, and all the shirts were there, and we only had three bedrooms, so we would rotate bedrooms. We were pretty extreme, I don't think we'd rotate every night, but we'd rotate every few nights or something.

Q: Were you just trying to be really egalitarian?

A: Yeah, we were trying to be fair about everything, cause one room was like upstairs, and it was kind of like private, and it was like the primo room, cause you could get away from it all a little. And there was one room that was pretty nice because it had doors, that was a real plus, cause the third bedroom was off the kitchen and had no door, that was the drag room. So, we couldn't stick anybody in there permanently, but we never thought long term, we thought like, every few days, so we'd just change every few days, we'd rotate our bedrooms. That was the most collective situation I've probably ever been in, or the most sharing of everything. And, in some ways it wasn't really fair, because you know, Peggy, one of the women in the collective talked to this day about how, she's a big woman, and the rest of us were much more the same size, so she couldn't really share our clothes, you know. It was a nice idea, but it didn't really help her.

Q: What were you guys doing to support yourselves?

A: That is a good question, let's see. In that house, one thing that's really important about that collective situation was that one of the women had a rich family, and that did a lot to support our collective. That was the real plus of collectivity for me, was that, like it really improved my whole standard of living to collectivize with this person, I mean, I love Anne, I'm not trying to be really material or something, but it changed things a lot to have, I mean it's real different to collectivize nothing and to collectivize something. I didn't have much, and some other, well like, one other person joined the collective and she had been, she had a car, and she had been working full time for awhile and she had some savings, kind of like how I came into that other collective before, and she put everything into the collective, and we told her she didn't have to work for awhile, because she brought so much. She was burnt out, and she needed a rest, so she didn't work for awhile. But, I drove a school bus, that's kind of a part time job, I did that. Another person in the house taught music, she taught guitar lessons in town at a guitar store, and let's see. At one point there was an auto mechanics collective in the city that two people who lived in the house worked at the collective in the city, and they would commute.

Q: Was the city St. Louis?

A: Yeah, it was St. Louis. One person, there were some people who did some house cleaning, some people did some gardening, so it was a combination of things, nobody was working, that I remember, like a forty hour a week out there. But, we were working some, we were on food stamps. Well, actually, they didn't have food stamps there, they had commodities. Yeah, we ate so much Spam, it was

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like....And then, one time a friend came out who had money and she saw how we were living and she left us a lot of money when she left. She was like really worried about us. That was really sweet. So, you know, we kind of got by, by various means. The woman, Anne, whose family had a lot of money, her family provided, they sent, they gave her a car, and then she kind of told them that she had sold her car, and they gave her another car, so we had two cars. So that was a big help. You know different situations, people were having different kinds of jobs. But, like in the six people collective, that went on for a lot of years, that went on for quite a few years, so and some people moving different houses, some people living in the country, some people living in the city, and so, people had various jobs, some people, I'm trying to remember what Peggy did, she worked all the time, but I can't remember, oh, she house painted. She painted houses. So it was like that kind, everybody did what they could on their own, it wasn't like we did something together. Later, the six of us ended up in St. Louis, nobody was living out there anymore.

Q: Now were you living together?

A: No, that's when we were living in the five different places, two of us lived together, and everybody else lived in other situations. So, what was I remembering about that? Oh yeah, then we had these two collectives, work collectives, one was car repair collective, and one was a printing collective, now everybody, the six people who shared money did not do both of those collectives by ourselves, but some people from the six people collective worked in each of those places along with other people. I worked in the printing collective, and the woman whose family had a lot of money provided the income for us for quite awhile when we first started the business. So it was like, her money was going out to people who weren't in the six people collective, but we were all being supported by her money for awhile, while we started the business, the printing business. I did a lot of different jobs, at different points I was a waitress, a computer programmer on and off, I was a bus driver, but then when I started doing the printing, that was my main job. Basically, I didn't know how to print, and one of the women in the printing collective had, had an apprenticeship with a print shop for awhile, and she taught me how to print, and then we taught another woman how to print, and so the three of us operated this printing collective, which was more a business than a collective, but it was a collectively owned business, I guess. And, financed by this other person a lot, so...it was confusing. And then, this is a funny story, but I don't know how to use it or if you want to use it, but there was one point where two of us out of the six person collective got busted in Mississippi, for stupid things that I don't even want to talk about. But, you know, there we were in jail, and we needed to come up with money, and our money was six people's money, you know, and between the six of us, we did not have enough money to get us out of jail, out of the trouble we got in, so what happened was we called our collective and said, we need a lot of money. And they sent everything they had, I was one of the people arrested, so I will still hear from them occasionally how stupid it was, what I did, and how it cost all of our money, but then one of the people in the collective had a friend who had money, and so she got her friend to give the rest of the money, because we didn't have enough between us, so this person who didn't even know us, paid for us to get out of this trouble. And then, she ended up being the third person that joined the printing collective. She lived in New York at the time, but she ended up moving to St. Louis and became a part of this printing collective, so that was nice. Complicated, I can hardly remember it all.

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Q: Is there something in particular that kind of kept you guys together, since you weren't living together, did you have some kind of common vision, or ideology?

A: Well, we didn't discuss that kind of stuff very much, I think we did, because I think it's what drew us all to do this, to want to pool everything and share everything, and it was this thing about trying to be equal. But, it's not like we had very theoretical discussions about it, our discussions were very...

Q: Practical?

A: Yeah, very practical. It's like, while I was a part of that collective, I was a part of another collective that like put out a magazine together, and one, two, three, people, four people out of the six worked on the magazine. So there were things that we had in common, you know, like, in the magazine we did talk a lot about our politics and what we believed. But, it was not like one group of people that did all these things together, it was a lot of overlap between all these different groups, but I felt like we were all young lesbians at the time, and we had a lot of, I don't know, you know, a lot belief in sisterhood, and like, you know, believing that we could help each other out, and wanting to, figure out what we thought, and spread what we thought, you know. Like, talk about what we thought in some way or another, so that's a lot what the magazine was about, was, and the way we did the magazine, this was in the living collective, and the way we did the magazine was, we would only print things that everybody agreed with. So, we would have like these hour after hour meetings where we would go over a thing word by word until we could agree on everything we had to say, which was.....We processed a lot. Everywhere. So, it was kind of a belief in a process of you know, collectivity, and trying to meet everybody's needs, and take everybody into consideration. It's an ideal, I wouldn't say that's what the process was that we did that, but I would say that was an ideal that we shared. But, that was a valuable thing to try to do. How does this all sound?

Q: It's fascinating, I love it, because I haven't encountered any groups where they pooled their income and yet didn't live together.

A: Yeah, that is pretty bizarre, isn't it?

Q: Well, although, a lot of them do that I guess, where [unintelligible] will go out two to a house but not all in a big house.

A: And one thing that was good about it, is that we did, I mean, I wish we were all here, five of us, of those six, live in Seattle now, and we're all friends, you know. Anyway, yeah, so I really wish we could all be here, partly for ourselves, because you'd hear six different versions of everything. I'm telling you what I remember, I'm sure everyone has their own memories about everything. But, I don't know.

Q: Did you have meetings?

A: Collective meetings? Yeah we did. We had collective meetings.

Q: Like, regular ones? Like once a week or something like that?

A: I don't think we met once a week, I think more like maybe every two or three weeks we got together and talked about stuff. That's what I was trying to remember, how much we fought about things, how much did we fight. I mean, we didn't really pressure each other, that I remember, like "You have to get a

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job, and you have to.." We didn't discuss how every bit of money was spent, and make sure everybody said that was an okay way to spend money. We didn't really live like that.

Q: Did somebody have control over the purse strings?

A: No, well you know, when we were in the business situation, I think probably everybody got \$200/month to live on. Because that's what I had, and I think everybody pretty well had the same thing. Isn't that amazing that you could live off \$200/month? So, I think that's how we did it, like everybody got the same amount to live on, and how you choose to spend it was up to you, and how much you paid for your rent, or how you did that way.

Q: And your food money would come out of that too?

A: Everything. Yeah, and then we'd put all our money together and that's probably about all we got when we separated it between all, we didn't have like savings. I guess we had some savings, because we wiped them out when we got busted, but it wasn't very much. We didn't have much savings I don't think ever. It's kind of like, if you could survive the month, that was pretty good. You know, I remember the fact that those cars made a really big difference to me, because I got to take a trip, I remember, across country. At a time when I really needed to get away, and I just remember being so thankful that Anne had that attitude, you know, she was the one, the person with the resources, was the most sharing in a way, because she had things to share more than everybody else, and I just couldn't believe it, when I was able to take this trip, when I didn't have the money or the car, or the resources to do it at all, and I was able to do it when I really needed to do it, because Anne had shared those values. I think everybody probably felt like that at one time or another. And then, probably, everybody at one time or another was probably really fed up with everything, wondering why we were doing this. Because it was a lot of processing, and a lot of having to, and I'm pretty sure that we did fight a bit about what it meant, that some people worked and some people didn't work, and you know, we had the idea that if this went for a long period of time, everything will even out and balance out, but you just don't know how long it's going to go.

Q: How long did it go?

A: That's a good question. I think it must have gone for about three years, I guess that's not a long time, it seemed like forever at the time.

Q: No, but to pool your income, that's a pretty long time. Was there any particular reason that it broke up?

A: Three of us, four of us moved out here at once, and that was kind of the end of it.

Q: And you guys that moved out here didn't decide to continue?

A: No, we didn't. In fact, the four of us that moved out here were two sets of people that were lovers with each other. And by the time we got out here, not long after, everybody was broken up.. So, we've all stayed friends, and some of us pretty close, but nobody, the days of collectivity, the pooling income and clothes and everything was kind of behind us. I still, one of those woman and I, actually I lived with both of those women in collective situations since then, two of them women, the third I haven't.

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Q: So you've lived in collective houses out here in Seattle?

A: Not collective in the same sense of like sharing everything, but we called them collectives, but they were like, we all ate together and lived together, and everybody had their own money and their own jobs, and their own vehicles. We didn't, you know people loaned each other stuff or whatever, but it was not a joint ownership kind of situation, but yeah, I lived in that kind of situation a bit in Seattle.

Q: Is that pretty common out here?

A: I think so. I think it's kind of common. In fact, one of those women just moved into a situation of four people this weekend. So, I think it happens a bit. I think it happens more with younger women, it looks to me, especially when I look at myself, I've gotten into controlling my environment more, than I used to. So, I think that's kind of common, I've seen that. But, I haven't seen anything like the level of the rotating beds, the sharing the clothes, I haven't seen that again anywhere, or heard of anybody who did that.

Q: Yeah, that was going to be my next question, if you thought you were unique.

A: I thought we were unusual, yeah, people treated us like we were pretty unusual.

Q: Was there much of a lesbian community in St. Louis?

A: Yeah, there's always been a lesbian community in St. Louis.

Q: I mean, like that was out and supportive.

A: Well, from the time I came out, which was in 1971, which was, God, that's 25 years ago this year. There's always been an identifiable lesbian community, the thing is like, when I was there in the 70's there was a lot of political activity, we did a lot of stuff that was like organized out in the street or whatever, where people, you know there was a coffee house almost all that time. One of them got fire bombed, we had a lot of problems. But, there was a newsletter, there were groups that organized around, well, I was trying to think of what was just lesbian oriented. I mean a lot of lesbians did a lot of work in other fields like battered women's shelters and a lot of things. So, there was a real visible, what else was lesbian oriented, I know there were other things, but, oh there's always been sports, you know teams and so, I think there always, I think they've been connected to bars a lot, you know sponsored by bars. There's always been ways, like newsletters and things, ways that you can find groups that meet. So, since then, I think there's been more and less activity. I think in the 80's there was a lot less activity, I think in the early 90's there was more, and now there's less, kind of comes and goes, and when there's less activity, it can be hard to find a lesbian community, even though. You know, I hear from my friends in St. Louis now that still live there, that most of them feel pretty isolated, most of them feel like they're aren't a lot of people like them, or there aren't a lot of activities going on that they feel like there support for what they're doing. But, I feel like that here. I feel like, in Seattle, there's not a lot going on politically in the lesbian community, and it kind of comes in waves, and this is not a good one. I mean, people tend to respond to attack, so there's been a lot of right wing stuff going on to take away gay rights. So people have responded to that, in St. Louis and here, so, in terms of like anything other than responding to bad things, I don't think that there's been a whole lot going on. I mean, I shouldn't talk about St. Louis so much, because I haven't lived there in so long. But, it's just, that's what I've heard

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from people that used to live there. That they feel pretty isolated. But, I haven't lived there and done anything more than visited to see friends for years, so I don't really know a lot. But, all the things are going on, because even in Seattle, I see, there's like maybe a lot of activities some times with younger lesbians, people I don't, I'd love to know where they are and what they're doing, but you know, you don't always know what each other's doing, necessarily. Unless people, like there is in both cities like lesbian newsletters and stuff, so there are ways to communicate and find people. Here, there's a whole lesbian center, and stuff, so.

Q: Now, the newsletter that you put out, that was at the Marxist house, right? I'm trying to keep everything straight.

A: Well, there was one at the Marxist house called On the Line, and then there was a lesbian newsletter, called Moon Storm. So, they were different. On the Line, I only worked on for like a year, or a year and a half or something, Moon Storm I must have worked on for five or six years.

Q: Do you know how long Basta Ya lasted?

A: Yeah, I don't think that Basta Ya lasted a whole lot longer, maybe six months longer or something, after I moved out. Cause, a couple of the other women moved out.

Q: Was it because they also found it kind of oppressive for women?

A: Yeah, it really was. But, one of the women in the house was a lesbian, and she was just out of high school, and I think it's amazing that she survived in that house at all. Cause, at that time she was the only lesbian, and I don't think that she got a lot of respect for who she was or what she knew, but she lasted longer than, I think she left at the same time I did, and then another woman left a little while later. It was only, let's see how many of us were there, eight of us. So, actually, I don't know exactly know how it happened. I'm not sure all the reasons it ended, but I don't think it lasted much longer than six months or so, it probably wasn't the only reason that it ended, but...

Q: That contributed?

A: That definitely contributed, yeah.

Q: And what about the UFW house? Did that keep going?

A: That kept going, and that was a house where there were maybe three people who worked for the United Farm Workers, and then there were two or three other people who always lived there, and they kept going for quite awhile. I don't remember how long that lasted, that was there for years.

Q: Did you ever visit like any of the Back to the Land Communes like in Missouri, or anywhere, not just in Missouri?

A: I was at a lesbian back to the land.

Q: Did you go to DW in Missouri?

A: Yeah, I went to DW.

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Q: And Sassafras, was that another one?

A: Sassafras, was in Arkansas, I never went, I went to one place in Arkansas called...

Q: Oh, Iko Iris, or something like that?

A: Yeah, and it was women of color had that land, and I visited there once. I remember, that was a trip. Did you go there?

Q: No, I don't even know if it's still going? I just saw reference to it, but was unable track it down.

A: yeah, that was something. Because, this is what I understood, this is like second hand probably and not totally reliable, but there was a rich woman who owned all this land, and then they divided it up and gave the women of color this really inaccessible, I remember it was like, you had to have four-wheel drive to get up there, it was like a real rip-off what happened there, I mean, I guess they needed to separate, but the way that they separated was that the women of color had this really difficult hill, it was on a hill, it was, you couldn't get there, but they stayed there for years and did a lot with the place. I remember that, but I'm not sure how that, I know some women in this area that spent some time there. How long are you going to be around?

Q: Actually, I'm leaving tomorrow morning.

A: That's too bad, yeah I don't know how many.

Q: Yeah, I'm really interested in learning more about lesbian life communities, because I haven't gotten much information, and I know there's a lot out there.

A: Yeah, there's a lot, there's a lot.

Q: Because, Tim and I got this book, it was called like Lesbian Land, Joyce Chaney, I think.

A: Is that who wrote it? I've seen the book.

Q: Yeah, there's lots of interesting information in there.

A: Yeah, there's been a lot, I visited a place in Oregon called Who Farm, and a place, I've been quite a few places actually.

Q: Yeah, I know there's a bunch in Oregon and Northern California, over in Grant's Pass or something.

A: Yeah, there's one in Grant's Pass called Woman's Share. I've been there.

Q: Is that where Billy Meric...

A: Yeah, Billy, there's some people from Woman's Share that live in Missouri.

Q: Oh really? They have like a separate piece of land there?

A: No, just somebody that used to live there that now lives in Missouri, on some rural land in Missouri. I think I remember hearing that. But anyway, yeah, there have been a lot of rural, there's a book that this woman, that used to live here, who was one of the founder's of Woman's Share, they wrote a book about themselves, about how they started and how they did it, and so, I have to try to remember the

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name of that book, it's interesting you might want to look at that, it has a lot of information in it, about what they did.

Q: I was said I didn't get to visit DW, I didn't have a name or anything like that, but I did visit some of the people that lived there when it was a mixed community. I met Crispen Dragonwagon.

A: I know the name, I didn't really get acquainted with it until it was already a lesbian,

Q: Oh gosh, I hope that didn't burn.

A: I put it on low heat, so everything's fine.

Q: Well, I'm curious what you thought about places like DW and Woman's Share, and...or if you can remember.

A: Well, let's see, I remember DW let's see, I knew women at DW I liked to go there and visit. It was pretty nice, I wasn't, I didn't want to be that isolated from the city, so I wouldn't myself think about living there. I had enough trouble living in Rentsville, which was forty miles outside of St. Louis, we had a lot of trouble, actually, with the police and stuff.

Q: Really, that they hassled you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Just because you were lesbians? [tape ends] Did a lot of people who went on the Vince Ramos Brigade have that happen?

A: Yeah, they did.

Q: So, you have an FBI file?

A: I have a very big file, actually, I have the file, because my brother is a lawyer and he did a lawsuit, it was against the FBI, the CIA, and the Chicago Police Department, for the illegal ways that they invade people's privacy or whatever, and part of it, was that when we crossed the border, somehow the Chicago newspaper got my name and published my name and my address off of my passport, which was my parents' address, and they published it in the Chicago paper, and they said this stuff about how we were in Cuba learning how to do guerilla warfare. Like it was fact, they printed all of this stuff, and so, when I came back from Cuba, my parents were quite upset, they had gotten threatening phone calls, but anyway, my brother ended up suing, I was one of the many plaintiffs in this suit, because I was on it because somehow that information got from the border to the Chicago Police Department, anyway, what was the question?

Q: I was just asking about your FBI file I guess.

A: Right, so it did turn out that he got 140 pages of it, I wrote for it, and I got like.....

Q: 140 pages???

A: Yeah, can you believe it? It was interesting. They had done things, I could tell from reading it that they had been to certain, like after I came back from Cuba, I did some speaking about the Brigade, and

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trying to get another one going. Because no one had ever gone from Missouri, well one person had gone from Missouri. When I went, I had been living in Washington D.C. So when I came back, I went to Missouri, so when I came back they did things like they were at all of these speaking engagements, as informers or something. Because they would tell what I had said at these meetings. They, that first collective, the collective house where the thirteen lesbians lived, when we all moved, they went through the whole house and through the garbage, and collected every paper they could find, and they started files on every name of anybody they could find in the house. And this I found from reading my file, they were mentioning things that they found in the garbage at that house. It was like Oh, Brother!! And then, when I moved out to the land, they came there, and then they went to the local police and said that they should watch us, because I was like, bad.

Q: At the time, did you realize any of this was going on?

A: Well, they came to my house, I didn't know they had gone to the local police.

Q: But, did you know that it was the FBI?

A: Yeah, they identified themselves. Well see, I had done something really stupid, the first time they came to see me was right after I got back from Cuba, and I let them in my house, which later I learned was really not the thing to do, you just immediately say, I refuse to talk to you, good-bye. But, they woke me up, I remember I was asleep, it was like 8 o'clock in the morning, they woke me up, they showed me their cards and said that they wanted to come in and ask me some questions, so they came in, they showed me some pictures, while I was in Cuba, there was an Arazi building, at the Washington University that was fire bombed, in St. Louis, I wasn't even there, I wasn't even there for six months before that, I had been living in Washington D.C. Anyway, that's what their pretense was to ask me about all that stuff, so they showed me pictures, and they wanted me to identify people, and I wouldn't give them any information, but, once they had, once I had been willing to let them in my house, then it was worth it to them to keep coming back to where I live, I guess. Because other people, they would say, I refuse to talk to you, and then you wouldn't really keep seeing them every time you moved, at your new house, you know. And, they went to my family, and they went to all the neighbors around my parents and talked to them about our family. This is all in my file, too, all the information they collected about me, and another thing was, my brother went on the brigade after I went. So it was kind of like, then they were following him, so then they, that's probably, part of why they did so much investigation of our family. So, since they had gone to the local police, it ended up, it wasn't just that, there were other things that happened, at one point, when we were in jail in Mississippi, they went, somebody went in our house, see what happened when we were arrested in Mississippi, they called our local police in Missouri to see if we had a record, which we did, well we didn't really have a record, but they had, they knew about us. So they, somebody went to our house while we were down in Mississippi and they took out all the, I was really into pictures, taking pictures, I had tons of pictures, they took out all the pictures, and they took out all the books that they could find on lesbian stuff, and they took out all the journals that they could find in the house, they like, went through everything. They took it all, they went through it all, and then they dumped it back on the porch in a big box, and they had little things attached to things, like they had my journal that I'd kept in Cuba, and they had written in a piece of paper that they had stuck in there, that said "Janice attests to be pro-communist Revolution". They had weird things,

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they had a friend's dog whose name was Emma, they had the name Emma attached to some other picture, and then we had a friend who was like a local police person, where we lived, and that's a whole nother story, but they had her picture, that I had taken of her at our house, and then they had a picture stapled to it of her uniform, and had all the information about her on there. And anyway, they were just trying to shake us up I think, they just dumped it al to let us know that they had gone through it.

Q: Oh how awful, that would really upset me.

A: Yeah, that was bad, yeah, that was really upsetting, actually we moved after that.

Q: I don't blame you, is that when you moved out here?

A: No, that's when I moved back in the city, in St. Louis. It wasn't too long before I moved out here. I think that was the last, was that the last I hear form the FBI? No, something happened years later, that was just weird too, but I haven't heard from them in a long time though. So, but I really did feel, by the time we left Rentsville, I felt like I had been driven out of there, and it made me really wary of rural living. Partly being a lesbian, partly being a jew, I just didn't feel very safe, because I felt like, the stuff that went on where they went through our house and everything, and even, we got busted one time, I don't know that you need to record all of this, but I'll tell you this other little story. While we were living in this lesbian house, the four of us in that house in Rentsville, there was a misunderstanding, let's just say that. And, the police came to our house looking for some stolen property that we knew nothing about, and I really believe that's why they came, I mean, they knew we were lesbians at the time, but I don't think they came just to harass us, there was something else going on and they came, so they came and said, we're looking for this stolen property, and we said, we don't know what you're talking about, and they said, okay, well we're going to search your house, and we said, okay where's your search warrant? And they said, we don't need a search warrant. They pulled their guns on us, and they said, then they arrested us, they said we'll just arrest you, take you to the station, and then we'll search your house, which is what they did. SO, they took us down to the station, they mug shot us, they fingerprinted us, they locked us up, and then they searched the house. So, anyway, eventually, they gave us our phone calls. We called friends in the city who harassed them until they let us go, kind of basically, so we already had that record out there, so it was kind of like. I felt like, they do what they want out there, I didn't feel safe at all.

Q: Yeah, I can understand.

A: Yeah, it was a drag.

Q: But, throughout all of this, was it a help to have been in a collective and feel like you have the support of other women?

A: Oh yeah, definitely, I liked living that way, I always liked living that way, and even though, I feel like now I don't share money with anybody, I just have my own money, and I make my own decisions about it, but I still feel like in a lot of ways that I'm still dependent on community and my friends. It's really important to me, and the fact that I'm still friends with a lot of these same people that I went through all of these things with is still important to me. I kind of, especially being a lesbian, I feel like I depend, also, part of why especially being a lesbian, my family, well a lot of my family is dead now, but while they

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were still alive they were not particularly supportive of me being a lesbian. And so I feel like I've created another family and I really depend on it a lot and it's really important to me. It's always been a lot of support.

Q: Would you do it again?

A: Well, you know, I'm sure I would, I mean then, I mean how do you answer that? I mean like, I'm not doing all the same things right now, so, I'm glad I did it, I don't regret anything I've ever done, I've decided to do different things at this point, you know, so, but it's based partly on what I've learned from doing that, the way I did it, and as much as I loved, I got a lot of support, it was very time consuming. It's become less of a priority to spend my time that way, but, I'm really glad I did what I did. I got a lot out of it. I've got these sisters, these friends for life, or whatever from it all, that I feel like the ties we made, but the ties I made from that period in my life, I just know they're going to stick with me my whole life, and part of it is how much we shared, I'm sure, the good and the bad. We all know each other pretty well.

Q: One of the things that I didn't ask you about that I'm curious about is work sharing. In the various houses that you lived in, did you have systems for like dividing up chores, like cooking, and things like that?

A: In the houses? Oh, I've done everything. Even in the same household we would try everything, because everybody had different standards, and [unintelligible]. So we'd try something else.

Q: Was there anything, like one system that worked the best?

A: I don't think so, I think it depends on the people and their needs, and their standards, I have very low, I don't know if low is the right word, but I've never been like, since I live alone, whenever I lived alone I've gotten very neat and orderly, and you know. But, when I'm living in a group of people, my attitude is just like, I just give it up, I just don't care a lot, you know, I can't take too much clutter, I can say that. So, but generally, so a lot of times, things didn't bother me a lot. I think sometimes some people probably got walked on, the people with the highest standards of wanting the most kind of order or cleanliness in the house probably didn't get what they wanted a lot more than I didn't get what I wanted. But, I think people who felt strongly that way, didn't live like that, because you can't. And, I don't, I'm trying to remember how much that was like a big source of tension, but I think, there's no system that I've found that is the way to go. Even in, before I lived out here, I lived with three people, and one of them was somebody that was one of those six people that I shared with, and the other is Tina who I live with now, we're lovers. Anyway, we tried everything, we tried just doing nothing, because we had different standards, you know, so I think, we tried having definite weeks, switching things around, always doing the same thing, this, that. We lived together for five years, we did it pretty well. It just made me think that, there's not really a system that works so much to me, it's like how much you communicate, how much compromise you can make, what people are willing or not willing to put up with, and how you deal with it, I think the communication thing is the big thing.

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Q: In the Basta Ya house, did you guys share all of your meals and stuff like that? So would each person take a turn cooking?

A: Yeah, there were people there who couldn't cook at all, I was probably not far away from that myself. But, that's where we really, had tuna noodle casseroles every night. Eating just was not important, I felt like, and I think everyone felt like, we were on the brink of changing things somehow, and we were just like 24 hour a day revolutionary lifestyle, that's how we saw ourselves, really. Somehow things were going to change quickly, and we were a part of it and that's what counted. So the things about living together, they're just vague in my mind, it's like, you hardly paid any attention to it.

Q: Because the politics were so much more important. Did you do anti-war activities?

A: I did anti-war activities before that.

Q: Okay, I guess I don't have the dates quite right in my mind. Okay.

A: Yeah, I lived in D.C., before I ended up St. Louis, so that like in '69, '68, and '67, I was going to demonstrations and doing that kind of thing. We did a big, well that wasn't really anti-war, we did a big sit in at our college. Took over the administration building, but that was more about student politics.

Q: Where did you go to school?

A: Washington University in St. Louis. But, and when I lived in D.C., was when there were those mass, really big demonstrations.

Q: Like when they tried to shut down the ... were you a part of that too?

A: Well, yeah in my own little way. I worked at the American Chemical Society as a computer programmer, then. It was right after I got out of college, and I was like trying out just being a regular person, and getting a good job, and just seeing how it went. So, I was trying, so I tried to get them to shut down, which was like a ridiculous idea. I don't know, I guess I was very naive. I know I went and talked to the President of the company, I put leaflets on everybody's desk all the building, but they were like, what are you talking about? And I was like, this company makes chemicals, contributes to chemical biological warfare, we ave to like stop!! But, anyway, they just thought that I was ridiculous, I didn't last there very long. For a lot of reasons, when it was time for a raise, I was told I had a bad attitude, or something like that. SO, but, other than that, I just went to the mass demonstrations. I didn't do any civil disobedience or anything like that.

Q: In any of these houses that you were a part of, was there much of a drug scene, like psychedelics or anything like that?

A: Yeah, I would say, not the Basta Ya House, a little bit.

Q: Those people were too into politics to get involved with drugs.

A: Yeah, though, some of us, I got into, I started doing acid when I was in that house, and a few of us were doing it. But, not like as a group, it was more like you did it on the side kind of. And then, when I was in the house that turned into thirteen lesbians, started out six and turned into thirteen, that house, then, I did a lot of acid, and some people did a lot of acid there. And mushrooms and such, the things

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that go with it. And some people did none at all, that was the house full of different lifestyles, I'd say. There were people there who worked 40 hour a week jobs, there was one woman there who was in the symphony. The city symphony, there were other people there who were like tripping out all day, some people, I worked part time, and tripped part time, that was kind of my life. So, it was a source of tension, because it was hard for people who were working 40 hours a week to come home and walk into this like crazed state. So, yeah, that's, but, it wasn't like the house did it, but that house was so. Everything happened in that house, there were just so many lives going on in there. You know, it was not that big of a house, and so it was like every room had lots of things happening.

Q: Would you ever have identified yourself as being like a hippie or counter culture or flower child, or any of those things?

A: Well, I didn't call myself a hippie, some people told me that they thought I was a hippie, and I think it was related a lot to doing drugs that people, back in the Basta Ya House, it was a bad word to be a hippie in that house, it wasn't a good thing. Then some more friends of mine, I would sort of joke, I sort of felt sympathetic to hippies or something, but I felt different. I felt like the hippies were kind of before then, for one thing. Cause I remember meeting hippies in high school, you know, or in college, I was in college. In the mid and late 60's and this is sort of going on in the early 70's. But there still are hippies, so it's not like it was over or anything. But, I felt different than a hippie, I felt like, I was thinking about that today too, that came to my mind, I mean, I felt more serious than a hippie or something like that, I guess. Not necessarily like better than, or something, but just sort of like, it was a different trip to be doing all this sort of political work, of course, that house I lived in, when I first came out as a lesbian, and I was doing all that acid, I was living more like a hippie then, that's when we did a coffee house. We did some things like that, that were more community oriented stuff, but I was doing a lot of drugs.

Q: Looking back over your experiences, what was the best of living collectively, for you?

A: I think the sense, the connection with people I live with, just that sense of community. There was, always this way that I felt whenever collectives ended, and I was sort of more on my own, there was something always hard about it. Like all of a sudden I had to do all these things by myself, figure out all of these things by myself. I mean, now I kind of, at that point in my life I had never lived alone, I had hardly ever been alone, really. Since then, I think I've learned to appreciate being alone a lot more, and I actually love being alone, and living alone. Not like I want to do it all the time, but it's more integrated into who I am. But, I still really value that sense of connection I got from all that, being a part of something.

Q: How about the flip side, what was the worst part?

A: I think it was connected to being a part of something, with all these people, kind of connected to same thing, but it's more the stuff like all the processing, and all the kind of like how hard it is to really meet everybody's needs, and figure out how to do it. It was just hard, it was hard work, and at some level, impossible, I think.

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Q: One of the questions that we always ask people, it's sort of a simplistic question, it's hard to ask you since you were involved in a lot of different groups, but it's: Was the group you were a part of a success or a failure? And, I don't know how you would answer that, because of your different experiences.

A: I don't feel like anything was a failure. I would give them different levels of success maybe. But, generally, I feel like, they were really positive experiences. All of it was really positive for me, even though some of it was pretty hard. You know, getting busted in a city, I always saw myself as really, like a good kid, and I mean, to be in jail in Mississippi was like, pretty shocking, and to have these people come through for me, including somebody I didn't even know, to get me out of that situation, was like, a lot. I met women in that prison who didn't have support and were only there because they didn't have support. I felt, it led me to do a lot of prison work after that, I'll tell you that, because I felt like I was one step away from being where they were, well, maybe a few, because I was white, and some of the women in there that had it worse were definitely women of color, and having support from these collectives, you know I felt like I had helped create. But, that kept me out of a lot of trouble, it really made a big difference in my life. I do feel like we all created, I feel proud of us of us or something, that we could create these situations that met our needs at the time, creatively. I've done a lot of things in my life that don't fit into categories, exactly, or haven't been done by a lot of people. I went back to my high school reunion, my twenty-fifth high school reunion, I was just telling everybody who I was, and what I did, and by the end of it, I felt like, I have gone a different way, I went to high school with thousands of people, two thousand people in my high school class, not that that many people were at the reunion, but a lot of people, and I went away thinking, well, I have made some really different decisions in my life, but I have made the ones that have been right for me, and that felt really good, and I kind of feel like that about these collectives, too. They were good for me.

Q: Are there things that you've learned in your time living collectively that you've brought forward into your life today?

A: Well, I think, processing, and compromising, and stuff like that are always useful skills, and tools, to have anywhere. And, sharing, and I think, it's a challenge, I think that when I was in a collective, I felt like, well there were rules, the rules were that you just shared everything. And, when I'm on my own and I just have to decide what I'm going to do with what I have, it's just really a challenge to figure out what to do, I'm not going to give everything I have away, I don't feel like that would be wise to do that, because, then what would I do, and whose going to take care of me? It's a whole different way of thinking. So, I think, sometimes, that sense of trusting, that you can give things away, and that you'll be okay, is like a good thing to remember, and not feel like, Oh, I have to protect myself, and take care of myself, and hold onto everything I have. I have to do that to some extent, but I think I have to let go a lot to, and I'll be okay. I think, that was good, I learned that, something like that, from living that.

Q: Did you learn some real practical skills, too? Like, auto mechanics, and printing, and stuff like that?

A: I learned printing. I learned auto mechanics, but not so well, but I learned printing, I'd say. Yeah, so when I left St. Louis, I moved here, I got jobs printing. It was great because I didn't do well in school, because I hate school, so I had like, gotten a new skill, and that was good. I didn't do it for long, though. It was much better to do in a collective situation, to be a printer, than to do it in a print shop. It's really, first of all, it's hard to just stand on your feet for forty hours a week, when we lived in a collective

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situation, we could rotate what we did, it would be really much easier to deal with the job, and also, the male attitudes, about women in the printing industry when I was doing it, were not the greatest, so it was a lot harder to do it just as a straight job. But, I find straight jobs hard to do no matter what they are, so...anyway.

Q: As a final question I guess, do you think that there are some key ingredients that communal living situations should have in order to work?

A: Well, to me, communal living it's all these different levels of things, it's like, if you're just talking about living in a home with, or a household, with like more than two or three people, it's one thing, and if you're talking about, you know, what level sharing determines, I think, what you're going to do as a commune or communally determines what you'd need, or to like have in common for that situation for it to work. If you're just going to live with people, then you just have to have common attitudes about how you want to live, and how you want the house to be, and how you feel about people coming in and out, or whatever, the things that have to do with living together. If you're going to do more than that, like share money, or share, then I think you need a lot more in common, you need to have a lot more understanding of money and what you spend it on, what you don't, how you get it. Your values, you have to talk out a lot more stuff the more you share. Is that an answer to that question?

Q: Sure, yeah. Well, I think that's all I had to ask, unless you have any more stories.

A: I have a ton of stories, but I don't know if you want to hear them all.

Q: Well, thank you so much, Janice.