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R.47. Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present, and Future of Feminism

Interview R-0882
Holly Kearl
December 16, 2015

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ABSTRACT – Holly Kearl

Interviewee: Holly Kearl
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman
Interview Date: December 16, 2015
Location: Kearl's home in Reston, Virginia
Length: Approximately 1 hour 44 minutes

Holly Kearl founded Stop Street Harassment, and is a globally recognized expert on the subject. She is an author and a consultant with organizations including the United Nations. In this interview Kearl discusses her childhood and the impact on her and her family of Mormonism, repeated moves due to her father's career, and the death of a disabled sister with whom she was very close. She reflects on the impact of sexual violence on families across generations, and her experience with a family member's escape from domestic violence. She recounts her growing disaffection and eventual break with Mormonism, which her mother also renounced. September 11th happened when she was at Santa Clara University and had an impact on her political and social engagement and her turn toward activism. She discusses her decision to write a master's thesis on street harassment and the increasing media attention to her work and her growing recognition as an expert on the topic. She describes her work at AAUW, the organization's culture and resistance to new media like blogs. She describes her work as consultant to the United Nations and other organizations, and advances she has seen in policies surrounding street harassment. This interview was conducted as part of Rachel F. Seidman's research for her book *Speaking of Feminism: Today's Activists on the Past, Present and Future of the U.S. Women's Movement*.

FIELD NOTES – Holly Kearl

(compiled December 16, 2015)

Interviewee: Holly Kearl

Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman

Interview Date: December 16, 2015

Location: Interviewee's home in Reston, Virginia

THE INTERVIEWEE. Holly Kearl is an author and expert on street harassment and the founder of Stop Street Harassment.

THE INTERVIEWER. Rachel F. Seidman is an historian and associate director of the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in the finished basement of Kearl's townhouse in Reston, Virginia, which was furnished with a sectional couch, large screen tv and exercise equipment. We were joined by her two excited dogs, who can at times be heard on the recording. Kearl was open and shared her story easily. She got very emotional at times, especially when discussing the death of her older sister, Heidi, with whom she had been extremely close.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded on a digital zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT—HOLLY KEARL

Interviewee: Holly Kearl
Interviewer: Rachel Seidman
Interview Date: December 16, 2015
Location: Reston, VA
Length: 1 CD; approximately 1 hour, 44 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Rachel Seidman: This is Rachel Seidman, and I'm here in Reston, Virginia, with Holly Kearl. Today is December 16, 2015, and we are doing an oral history interview as part of a research project that is currently called, "#Feminism: Speaking Up and Talking Back in the Digital Age." So Holly, I'm going to start by asking you to tell me about your grandparents, what they did for a living, where they came from, and describe for me a little bit your relationship with them.

Holly Kearl: OK. Two of my grandparents are still living, my mom's parents, and their names are Gerald Weinheimer and Janice Weinheimer, and they're in Utah. My grandpa is from Canada, and his family moved to Canada from Germany right before he was born, and he came down to the United States as an adult and met my grandma. My grandma was born and raised in Utah, and all four of my grandparents are Mormon. I was raised Mormon, but I'm no longer Mormon at all. I actually just submitted my formal resignation for membership a few weeks ago. So anyway, they're all Mormon. That's why there's--Utah will come up a lot. They had, in rapid fashion, my grandma had nine kids. And this is the unusual part: she had my mom, then she had a set of twins, a set of twins, a set of triplets--.

RS: [Laughter] Oh, my goodness.

HK: And then my last aunt. So by the time my mom was eight years old, there were eight kids. So that heavily shaped [Laughter] all of their life to have that many kids in such a short amount of time and the duplicates, the triplets. My grandpa worked on government jobs, and my grandma worked before my mom was born, and I think in a different time period--she really loves working. She works now.

RS: As what?

HK: She's sort of like a counselor-ish person. She does a lot of online teaching in classes and she used to work at a Jewish synagogue, and anyway I think that if she—my relatives, all my aunts and uncles and my mom talk about her not really being a warm mother. She just was robotic, like she had to have all these kids. That was just how she was raised, and I think that if it had been a different time period, she would have had a great career instead, or with fewer kids. [Laughter] She's a primary person in one sense for my activism because she was abused as a child by her father, incest, and then she was raped by multiple other people before she was in her late teens, and she repressed it, and that may be also part of her robotic mothering.

But when I was a little kid, she had this like emotional mental breakdown and was really sick for a year, and it all sort of came out and resurfaced. She's been trying to heal from that for twenty-five, thirty years, and it's really hard. She kind of latches on to cults and different--I don't know, just things to give her hope, anything that can try to help her feel better and I just--I see her, and I just get so angry thinking about gender-based violence and the people who perpetrate it because they can go on and live their lives, and my grandma is affected for the rest of her life by it. Then, there's a ripple effect on my

relatives, my aunts and uncles not really having a warm household. It just has a ripple effect and I wish that that was clearer to people, just the long-term impact.

On my dad's side of the family, he was the youngest of five kids, and my grandpa grew up on a farm in Idaho and he became an engineer. He worked for General Electric, and my grandma grew up in a couple places. I think, I'm trying to remember, she was born in Oklahoma, and her family moved to Utah, I think, when she was a teenager. My grandpa served in World War II, and my grandma was part of the home front war effort and worked in San Francisco, and then she didn't work again once she got married, once they got married and had kids. My dad was--so it was interesting because my mom's parents had nine kids but eleven years apart and then on my dad's side, they're also eleven years apart but five kids. So my parents are the same age, but my grandparents are--my dad's parents are much older because of the--where they--my parents fall.

My grandma on my dad's side wasn't raised Mormon, though she converted, and my grandpa was very much a liberal, freethinking, questioning everything, so my dad was raised in a very different environment where he was raised to be more questioning and thinking outside of the Mormon bubble, compared to my mom. My mom was very obedient and followed everything she was supposed to do and didn't really think outside of it. So I think my dad was raised with a lot more options and opportunities. And as the youngest kid, too, he had a couple of his teenage years [where] it was just him at home, so he got a lot of attention and resources and financial help with things compared to my mom.

But I guess I was in a lot of ways closer to my dad's parents even though they didn't live as long. They were very warm and very comforting, supportive. My grandma made me a blanket when I was born that--for reasons I'll probably get into later--I carried with me everywhere. I was like Linus from Charlie Brown with my blanket and even slept with it until college. So that was one of the greatest gifts she gave me, and my grandpa just was so proud and always believed in anything that I did. I started running races when I was eight years old, and he would call them my "marathons," like he didn't understand [Laughter] exactly what it was. He would photograph everything and document everything, and I feel like I--and my dad and I both get that from him, we're documentarians. We take photos. We're like the photographers in the family. Also with my activism, I'm trying to document what's happening with the street harassment movement and globally, and I think that I credit that to him instilling that.

I always remember when I was doing a class in elementary school on adventures, and he had a patent from--he had invented various aspects of the refrigerator, actually, at GE, and he gave me this paperweight that he got for recognition of that. He gave it to me with this nice letter of, like, "I can't wait to see what you'll invent." I feel like I'm not inventing anything but I feel like my activism is along those lines and I wish he could've lived to see me. I think he'd be really proud. He'd always go up to people and just start talking about his grandkids, and I could just see him starting to talk to people. Anyway, so I feel like maybe my mom's mom shaped me as far as being more aware of gender violence, but I think my dad's parents shaped me more in other ways in personality. I don't know. Is that enough? [Laughter]

RS: Oh, yeah. So how did your--how would you describe the household that you grew up in, that your mom and your dad made together?

HK: My parents are so supportive of everything that me and my sisters did and have done.

RS: How many sisters do you have?

HK: Yeah, so this--I'll try not to cry, but this is very personal for me. My older sister was born with disabilities, and she died when I was ten, and she really shaped our family more than anything else did. And my parents, from the start--I mean, I was sort of the designated helper, so she was a big part of my life because she was one of my first words. I would crawl to help get things for my mom. I think my mom maybe would have worked outside the home except Heidi needed so much time and attention, and so my mom took on that role and that responsibility. And then I had a younger sister--we had a younger sister Mary, who's still living, and she's three and a half years younger than me. So there were the three of us, and if they hadn't had Heidi, they probably would've had more kids just because of the Mormon culture. So, in a sense too, I think Heidi saved me and my sister from having so many kids that we would get lost in the shuffle. We got a lot of attention even with her and her needs. My parents were strict on a lot of things, especially around Mormonism and the rules that we had to follow, but generally they were so supportive. My mom always came up with fun crafts and activities for us to do. They read to us. They took us places. We traveled so much and saw our family and historic sites. I think of so many men today who aren't involved in their kids' lives, or they're always watching sports or going out with friends. My dad worked long hours, but when he was home, he was 100% home for us. He helped me with homework. I mean,

to this day, he's the only one who's read--he copy-edited both of my books. He's not like an editor by trade, but he just has a good eye for it, and he's just that motivated and dedicated to us. Anything we need, they will drop everything to help.

Just a couple years ago, my partner had to travel over my birthday, and it was like a--something happened. I was going to go out with friends, and it got postponed, and my parents were in New York at the time. They drove down to surprise me, just spent three hours with me and drove back home. [Laughter] They do stuff like that all the time, and they help other people. We've had various relatives living with us throughout our lives, and they continue to have cousins come stay with them. They're so generous in our church, too, they would give things to people, give clothes we didn't need or things we didn't need. One time, they gave a car. They were going to get a new car, and they just gave a car to a family that needed it. They're very, very generous people.

RS: It sounds like you took on a lot of responsibility for Heidi as a young person. How would you describe yourself as a child? There must've been quite a turning point when Heidi died.

HK: Yeah.

RS: How would you describe yourself?

HK: I mean, I was shy, and in some senses I still am. I realize now I'm an introvert. Well, actually, something that I haven't mentioned that also shaped our household and me a lot was that we moved a lot for my dad's job. So my dad--I was born when he was in graduate school at Purdue, and then he got a job with Procter & Gamble right out of graduate school, and they just kept transferring him different places. So I was born in Indiana, we lived in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Iowa, Kentucky. Then, when I

was eight years old, for nine months he was transferred to California, and then we came back to Kentucky. When I was almost eleven, we moved to California again for--he changed companies. He had a new job and we were there until I was sixteen and then we moved to Virginia.

Moving was really, really hard for me, and we would often move in the middle of school years, and I just felt like--. There were some times that we would move multiple times in a year, even just different houses within the same city, and it was really, really hard. And I think that's why I had my green blanket, and my dad's parents were so important to me because they would come stay with us and help us. They built a cabin in northern Utah around the time that I was born, and we would go there every summer, so that was like my safe, continual place to go, and so that was really an important place. I don't remember this, but my mom talked about--I was really attached to things, and I think I still am to some degree, and my mom talked about me crying when we had to get rid of a washing machine, or a car. We were changing cars, and I would cry because these were the things I could still grasp onto.

So that definitely shaped me a lot. My parents have always described me as conscientious, which may be in part from having Heidi around, more empathetic. From moving and from Heidi, I think I'm more open to new people. So, like, if there was a new kid at my school, the teacher would have me help them. Or someone who--I remember one time in Kentucky, a foreign exchange student from France was there for the summer, and no one really knew how to interact or talk with her, and I started teaching myself a couple French phrases to try to talk to her and include her. I think moving, my experience of being the new person and then knowing that there are people

who are different from you and that's OK, from Heidi. I think those helped me to be more a fully caring person, open person. And then my dad was really--had a lot of--. He has a lot of high expectations, and I was motivated by the praise and positive reinforcement. And so I was very conscientious about school, and I remember crying in like third grade because I got a B or a B- on a test, and I was like, "I don't want to show dad. He's going to be so disappointed." And he never--my parents never hit us or yelled at us. We'd get time-outs, but just his disappointment was enough to--I really wanted to make him proud of me always, and still do. So I was highly motivated to do well in school and just succeed.

RS: And when you got to--well, I don't know how much you want to talk about when Heidi died and the sort of impact on your family. That must've been devastating for everybody.

HK: Yeah.

RS: What sticks out in your mind as, maybe reflecting back, the kind of--rather than the pain of the moment, but sort of reflecting back what the impact was?

HK: Well, one impact was that it broke my mom really heavily to the point where we moved to California because she couldn't stand to be in the same house where she had died at home. And I resented that because I was uprooted from my really good friends. I really liked the class I was in at school that year, and I had to be transported to a new place mid-school year yet again. She and I have talked a lot about it now that I'm an adult, but it was a very hard couple of years because she was struggling so much that she couldn't be there for me and my sister.

And just coincidentally with--the timing was terrible, but they had been trying to adopt a boy for a while, and he ended up coming less than a year after Heidi died from Vietnam. He was supposed to be two or three years old, but he was older than my sister, Mary. And in Vietnamese culture, younger girls are not treated with as much respect by boys, and so he was mean to her. I loved him, and I was so grateful to have him, and then after six months, my mom decided it wasn't working, and he went to live with another family. So that was really hard and caused a lot of conflict in the family because it was almost like my dad and me against my mom and my sister, Mary. And you know, I'm in a new place; I was starting middle school. It was just a lot of chaos.

And then also my mom's youngest sister started coming to the area, and she was fleeing domestic violence, and her young son is the cousin I'm closest to. I used to babysit him in California. She ended up moving in with another abuser who hit her and my cousin. It's just like a lot was happening. My grandpa that I was really close to died when I was thirteen. So it was just a hard time period anyway with all of that happening.

But for me, long-term, the loss of Heidi, I mean, at twenty-two years later, I still sometimes feel like I can't cope. Every day, it's hard, I feel like she was such a big part of me. I don't have a twin, but I can imagine it would be similar, just that we were so interconnected, and how I would take care of her, and she was there for me. I feel like I'm always trying to find a way to fill that gap, and so I think sometimes activism is that way because I feel like I'm helping someone. I find a lot of meaning [in activism]. If I feel like I'm useful, I find meaning in my life, and I was always useful for Heidi. And then when she was gone, I can look back and see that I was sort of floundering, like,

“How am I useful now? What can I do?” So I think activism has become a way to feel useful.

RS: So how would you describe yourself in high school as academics and stuff becomes more central to people’s lives and--?

HK: Yeah. So moving [Laughter] is another part of this. I had a new high school for ninth grade. I went to a humanities magnet. I was the new kid again, but I had run--I had been on a cross-country and track team in middle school and run really well. I ran my first marathon when I was fourteen right before high school, and I was actually recruited [Laughter] for running teams, so running was really a central part for my high school years. So whatever school I was at, I immediately had friends through my teammates, so that was really helpful. And for my first two and a half years, I was still Mormon, so I also would have--the youth at my church, sort of, would generally welcome people. So that made it easier for moving.

I was very motivated with grades still. In middle school, across the three years, I had only gotten one B in one class but otherwise almost graduated with a perfect score. In ninth grade at my humanities magnet, I had a 4.0, and then the summer before tenth grade was sort of this other really hard time in my life because my dad lost his job, and he thought he was going to get another job in Orange County. We were living in Pacific Palisades, it’s about an hour south in California. And so we moved down there so my sister and I could start school at the new school we thought we’d be at, and then he [Laughter] didn’t get the job. We were at this new place, and Orange County is tough. Like, it’s so rich, and high school kids were driving to school in their own Hummers, and I just couldn’t fit in and relate to anyone in the short time that I was there. After two

months, I just was losing it there. I felt so isolated and just the uncertainty of like, “Well, when are we going to move again? Why am I even trying to make the effort? I’m just going to leave these people.” So I ended up quitting school and doing homeschool for the rest of the semester, which was better, but it was also hard [Laughter] because that was like--. My dad was depressed because he’s also very motivated by work and doing well. So he was home, and my mom was home, and it [Laughter] was like the three of us depressed. And they don’t give you a lot--I could get through the schoolwork so quickly that I was--. Anyway, that was a tough time, [Laughter] and then by the time the new semester was starting in January, my parents are like, “You’ve got to get to a school.” So they sent me to a different school, Irvine, [Laughter] and I was there for three weeks, and my dad got a job in Virginia, and I was like, “Ah!” And we left. [laughter]

The positive outcome of that was that I was so ready to have friends and be at school that I was more of an extrovert when I moved to Virginia, and I made so many good friends. My partner, we didn’t start dating until college, but he was there. Two of my best friends that I’m still in touch with, I met there. And so I was ready to make this work. [Laughter] I did my last just over two years and a couple months of high school in Virginia. Because of all this uncertainty and moving and also with the Mormon religion, you have to--in high school, you have to go to class before school starts. So I had to go do a-- it was called “seminary” at 6:30 am every morning, and then I had cross-country. In hindsight, it’s sort of like this period where I feel like I wasn’t doing anything activism-y or community service. It was church, running, and school, and then friends. I feel like maybe part of me was floundering a little bit by not having that grounding and

feeling useful in that way, but those were sort of the things [Laughter] I was focused on to get through it all. But yeah, I mean, I guess that's all.

RS: So you said that earlier, that for the first--I think you said for the first two years of high school, you were connected to the church, but then something happened. So can you tell me about that?

HK: Yeah. My junior year, I left Mormonism. I was in Virginia, and I guess probably also partly during that year where our life was so uncertain, we sort of stopped going to church because we're like, "This isn't even our--. How long are we going to be here? We don't know anyone." It was the first time that we were out of that routine of "We have to go all the time. We have to do all these things." My parents were a little more lax about things, and that was one little nudge open. Also in middle school, boys and girls in Mormonism are kind of raised similarly until age twelve and then boys get a lot more responsibility and honors, and you just start to go different ways. I was like, "What is going on?" Because my parents very much had raised--. Even though I think my mom had in a sense raised me to be like her and she taught me sewing, and cooking, and a lot of the home crafts, and there wasn't really a lot of talk about a career. It was just sort of assumed I was going to get married and have kids, but it wasn't off the table that I would have a career. And at school when they're like, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I had things I wanted to be, and I don't remember that ever being discouraged. So I did have some sense of gender equality and of thinking women can do things. So when there started to be this difference, I started questioning that too. I guess my first kind of pushback on the Mormon Church was like, "Why can't I do this too? I'm perfectly capable."

RS: Did you say that just in your head or did you ask people?

HK: No, some things I did push back on. I mean, it was actually, some of it was really stupid in that the boys got to do scouting because--there's been so much controversy with the Mormons and scouting--and that's what boys do. And so they got to go on campouts and learn, you know--I felt like--these life skills, and they could go fishing, and they got to play basketball, which I liked to play. And the girls, sometimes we did crafts that I liked, but a lot of times, it was like, "Sit down and envision your wedding and who's the man you're going to marry, and here's how to cook food," and all these very "Susie Homemaker" things [Laughter] that I just was like, "Why can't I go fishing?"

I actually--I remember the fishing, and I made a big deal about it, and my dad got fishing poles, and we went fishing. And as soon as we were done with our lesson, I would go and play basketball with the boys. So I did small things, but I didn't openly--I was twelve or thirteen years old--I didn't say like, "Why isn't there gender equality?" [Laughter] or anything as plain as that. But my junior year I took a philosophy class, and that completely changed my worldview, and I realized that I was atheist by the end of the semester. [Laughter] That was the most influential class of my life. It completely changed how I thought, and that gave me the freedom to question some of the stuff that had bothered me in Mormonism. I started reading feminist literature, and I started to pay more attention to LGBTQ issues because, around then it was the first time the California Mormons were lobbying against a same-sex marriage bill--I can't remember, one of the Prop[osition]s. And my mom actually started to question everything, that was really her moment, too, because we had gay people we knew, and she was like, "What is this?"

And so we were sort of having similar doubts but mostly for different reasons, because she still believes in God and everything, but I just was very much like, “No. [Laughter] I don’t believe in anything now,” and I still feel that way. It was very, very hard. We had conflict in the house, and, in the end, my mom told my dad, “It’s me or the church,” because as she started down the path, she started to think about the feminist issues, too, and she actually went through a process and got her last name changed back to her birth last name. So there were a [Laughter] lot of things happening. She started going to graduate school.

RS: What year would this have been?

HK: This was 2000.

RS: So she had her own--.

HK: 1999 to 2000, yeah.

RS: OK, so she had her own sort of parallel feminist awakening. And at this point, you were in high school.

HK: Yeah. I was a junior in high school, sixteen years old.

RS: Do you think her--were you influencing each other, or was she getting it all from external sources and questioned it?

HK: Yeah, I can’t remember how much we were really influencing each other. I think once I made my decision, it was easier to say it because she was already--. She stopped going to church before I did because she was already upset about different things, and so I guess, in some ways, she had more of a feminist awakening before I did. But if you look back at middle school, I was already starting to question things, and she wasn’t yet. So I don’t know. It’s hard to say what was happening. And our relationship

wasn't super great right then, so I don't--it's not like we were talking that much [Laughter] about these issues, either. I just would, like, go for a lot of long drives and runs and journal and just try to sort out what I was thinking and feeling. It was fortunate that most of my good friends weren't Mormon because it's--I mean, it's this--a very bad thing to leave the church, like you're going to hell.

So it was a hard break, and it was hard with my relatives, a lot of relatives didn't talk to us for a long time, which was hard because they had been--. I said we would go every summer to Utah and my relatives, some of my cousins--. I always had cousins my age [Laughter] on both sides because we're so many cousins. I have over fifty cousins, and it was hard to lose that closeness and those relationships, but I don't regret it. It's one of the best decisions I made, was to walk away from all of that because I felt a lot of pressure. There's a lot of perfectionism focus in the Mormon Church, and so I always felt pressure to be nice and to--. I mean, everyone should be nice, anyway, but I just--I was always thinking about it and beating myself up if I did anything, and it takes so much time and energy. You have to read your scriptures every day and pray multiple times a day, and you have to go to church multiple times a week, and Sundays were off limits. I couldn't do homework or go out with friends, or exercise. I just had to be at home or at church, so there were a lot of things that I--. It was such a relief to let it go. [Laughter] Yeah, and it gave me more space to explore feminism because feminists are not welcome in the church. You can get excommunicated if you speak out. Women have been excommunicated for saying that we should--. Mormons believe in a Heavenly Father; that's what they call God. And to say, "Oh, can't we pray to a Heavenly Mother?" Women who've advocated for that have been excommunicated, so it's very anti--it's anti-

intellectualism, anti-feminist, anti--I mean, they're racists. [Laughter] They're against gays. So I have a lot of shame as an adult. I almost never tell anyone [Laughter] that I was raised Mormon because it feels so shameful and against what I believe now.

[Laughter]

RS: And you--but you recently wrote publicly about leaving the church.

HK: I did. I didn't share it on my social--. I've Tweeted it but I didn't post it on my Facebook page because I still worried about my friends and family that I have stayed connected with and hurting them, but my mom really wanted to write something and my partner Mark was just--he's supportive of a lot of things--and he was like, "It's probably time for you to publicly take a stand too." And so that was--it was a small thing, but yeah I did put it out there. So if someone Googles me, they can see that I was Mormon.

RS: OK, so then in college, you went to University of--.

HK: Santa Clara University in California.

RS: Santa Clara University. Did activism start to become [an] issue for you there?

HK: Yeah. Oh, I should say that Virginia, where I was in high school, was very conservative, and I had a bumper sticker on my car. I wasn't even thinking about it in reproductive rights terms, but it just said, "Choice, what a beautiful right," and I just was thinking generally. Isn't it wonderful to have options in life? One of my dad's phrases, he always had these phrases he would say to us, and one was, "Options are the key to life." He never wanted us to feel boxed in to anything and to just think there's always a way out if you need to make a different decision. And so I was thinking along

those lines, and I started getting all these anti-choice pamphlets [Laughter] on my car windshield--and there were other things that aren't popping to mind that I was just kind of like, "Whoa. I need to get out of this area." And so I really wanted to--like northern Virginia--sorry, northern California was the place that I wanted to go. I was like, "It's so liberal," and I really needed to get away from my family at that point, too; I just needed some space.

So that was one of my thinkings, but something else, I did have good grades even with all the changing, and it turned out that my guidance counselor submitted the wrong GPA for me in my transcripts, a 3.4 instead of a 3.8. And because I was getting waitlisted at all these schools, and we didn't find out until I graduated, because at the end of the year at graduation, they have everyone with a 3.8 and higher stand up, and they didn't call my name. I was like, "Did I fail a class? What happened?" and then it all sort of started to come out. So Santa Clara isn't the prestigious university I had hoped to go to, but I think it turned out well anyway. I did join the cross-country team, so I went out early for cross-country practice.

It was on the quarter system, and September 11th actually comes into play here. I was starting college, and my college hadn't started yet, but I was already in California for cross-country camp, and we were actually in Santa Cruz with no--I guess I did have a cell phone at that point, but, like, no cell reception, and we were just basically running and hanging out, and that was it. And one morning, September 11th, we were driving, and we just happened to be driving to a park that morning instead of running nearby, and someone else had the radio on in their car and told us when we got out, and we were just stunned. I was the only one from the east coast. My next-door neighbor worked in the

Pentagon in Virginia. One of my uncles works for NSA. And I had other connections; I had family and friends in New York City, and I was immediately--for that reason, like, "What?" And no one else had that, and they were just kind of, I don't know, oblivious. It really soured me to cross-country right away. Only three or four of us cared at all and were trying to get radio reception.

I was walking to use pay phones to call home and find out what's happening because there were no TVs, nothing, and it was very upsetting and I was like, "Did Bush cause all of--?" Like, "Is this a conspiracy?" There were a lot of things running through my head without a lot of information, and, yeah, I just was appalled that most of the teammates didn't care at all. One of our teammates, his roommate's girlfriend was on the flight that was going to San Francisco, and I thought, "What if I hadn't come to cross-country practice?" It's probably not that true that I could've been on the flight, but there is the possibility. I could've been on that flight coming from D.C. to California, so that--. I had that thought.

I guess what the outcome was was two things: One was that that started me down a path where I was kind of sour to the team, and some other things happened. Our coach was new, and he would pit us against each other before races instead of telling us to look for other people on the other [Laughter] teams. He was like, "Beat so-and-so," your own teammate. There was just a lot of things that he didn't do well, and it was a bad environment, and it took up a lot of my time. I say this because my decision to leave the cross-country team at the end of the season let me have time to do activism, which I did begin to do.

But I think September 11th also kind of shook me out of this complacency about not reading the news, not caring about what was happening, not paying attention to anything about politics. Outside my dorm, they had *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and, I think, *San Jose Mercury*--whatever that paper's called--and so I began reading newspapers every day for the first time, and I started looking at *BBC News* just to get the world perspective. So it really did shift me to start to become more of a global citizen, I hope, and to just be paying attention to politics and things. Because before, I took a government class my senior year of high school, and I still, by the end of it, didn't really understand the political system or much of the difference between Republican and [Laughter] Democrat. So it was, in that sense, it woke me up [Laughter] and got me more active.

Santa Clara's a very social-justice-focused university, and they have a volunteer organization called "Santa Clara Community Action Program." SCCAP was the acronym. I began volunteering as soon as I finished the cross-country season. I did a training to become a volunteer at a domestic violence shelter. Oh, I should say my senior year of high school, I began being a domestic violence volunteer.

RS: How?

HK: My aunt that I mentioned before and my cousin who were in a domestic violence situation were still kind of in that for several years after we left, and it felt very hard and disempowering to not be able to help them, and so my mom suggested that I could volunteer in our town as something active I could do. So she went through the forty-hour training with me, and, in the end, she decided not to volunteer, but I--because my age, I was seventeen, I could just sort of babysit kids while their moms were in

counseling sessions, but that's what I did once a week for most of my senior year of high school. So I knew, once I had some more free time, that I wanted to do more of that. So that's basically what I did, playing with kids at this new shelter while their moms were getting help. It was called "Home Safe." I volunteered there. There are so many homeless shelters in San Francisco and the San Jose area. At one point, I think I was volunteering at four shelters a week. I just sort of got into me, like, "I just need to do more and more and more," like, "What am I doing?" Santa Clara's full of very wealthy people, too, and I just felt like I have so much privilege. I became more aware of my privilege, I think, for the first time, and just the opportunities I had and that I needed to do something more. I became friends with a lot of activists. I started going to more sort of social justice events and speak-outs and rallies, and when the Iraq War was being considered, I was going to all these protests in San Francisco and I missed a class. One of the only classes I missed all of college was to go protest when George Bush was coming [Laughter] to a defense plant a couple miles from campus.

I became very much more engaged, and sophomore year I actually became the lead coordinator for "Home Safe" so I recruited people and helped them do the trainings to volunteer at the shelter, and it was a paid position with the university. I was part of a staff, and we had staff retreats, and so I was with this community of other activists who were very social-justice-minded and could talk about these issues and learn from them and these issues. I'm so grateful to Santa Clara for giving me those opportunities. One of my favorite activisms was I would go downtown in San Francisco on Fridays, and we would deliver hot meals to people in the Tenderloin district, mostly who have AIDS or other terminal--sometimes terminal diseases. I mean, what a contrast, because it was so

impoverished, and there was so much that the people there were coping with and dealing with. So that was--it felt meaningful to do something small there, and then it was hard to then go back to our nice campus. We talked about it a lot as volunteers, like, these wealthy students coming and doing this and then leaving, and, I don't know, but is it worse to not do it at all? So, you know, those were the sort of debates we had a lot, and that was really, I think, influential and helped shape me.

RS: So you were very involved in a kind of social justice and activism and some political activism around Bush and this domestic violence shelter volunteering. Was there--were you developing more of a feminist identity approach?

HK: Oh, yeah.

RS: Were there classes or teachers that were influential in that?

HK: Yes. So I knew since eighth grade that I wanted to study history, and I think that's thanks to my dad and to my grandpa. I took a women's history-- I can't remember if it was my first quarter or second quarter. I took a women's history course, and I was like, "Here's where the women are!" [Laughter] So Santa Clara now has a women and gender studies major; they only had a minor at the time, and I designed a second major. I double majored in that. Yeah, [Laughter] so that was a big, big part of shaping me, was taking all those classes. I studied abroad my whole junior year in the UK, I went to Lancaster University, which has the oldest women's studies program in that country and one of the oldest in the world. I mostly did women's history--or I mean women's studies courses while I was there, which was really interesting to do a literature class and government and laws, and so different things. I also took a US history class, which was interesting to see the perspective that way.

One thing that I should mention, too, is that my sophomore year, I was just talking with a friend, and I can't remember what prompted our conversation, but we were talking about sexual violence on campus. I went to a "Take Back the Night" rally, and I remember being turned off because we actually got harassed by men on campus as we were marching by, and it was--. I don't know. I can't really remember too much else about it, but in the speak-out, I was horrified by the stories, and it was really hard to hear them, and I don't remember going to any more "Take Back the Night" sessions. But anyway, so my friend and I were talking about sexual violence, and we're like, "What we would do if something happened to us or one of our friends?" So we began looking to find information, and we went to the health center, the counseling center. We went on the website, the school website. Where else? I can't remember. We looked a couple other places, and there was nothing. Finally, we pulled out our campus handbook that we got as first-year students, and there was one paragraph about it hidden in this book. And we're like, "OK, you're in crisis mode. How are you going to sit there and remember that in this handbook that maybe you don't have anymore, there's this one paragraph that tells you what your rights are and what to do?" And so we--that was our hypothesis, that this was ineffective [Laughter] and no one knew what to do. We ended up surveying one-tenth of the student body. Just, you know, we wrote up a survey and went dorm room to dorm room. In some cases, we had a table in the cafeteria area where groups would table for different things. So we would table there, and a bunch of my activist friends helped out. We would do shifts, and we ended up getting about a tenth of the student body, a pretty close number for each grade, and it did turn out that [Laughter] almost no one knew what to do. We asked on campus or off-campus. No one knew what

to do, or few people knew what to do, and it was alarming that by senior year, most people knew someone who had been sexually assaulted, or they had been. The education level did not increase our awareness of what to do, did not increase by grade at all. So we worked with a sociology professor to analyze the data, and we took it to the Dean of Student Life, and we had some suggestions.

During spring break and winter break, I had visited some of my high school friends at their universities and Virginia Tech had more resources than Santa Clara did. They had a magnet and pamphlets. Anyway, so we made some suggestions, and it was the end of our sophomore--my sophomore year, my friend's junior year, and they agreed to do everything. They were grateful to us and said, "Wow, we're so impressed by students here who are taking initiative." I studied abroad the next year, so I didn't get to really appreciate or see these things, but my senior year, I came back. Every bathroom stall on campus had pamphlets. Every bathroom had an informational thing as soon as you walked in. Every student got a magnet with--. It wasn't just sexual violence but also alcohol poisoning and some other things, but they were all listed there. They got the magnet. The counseling center and the health center [Laughter] now had information about that, which you would've thought they would have already. I think a lot of the department heads had information too.

And now looking back, I'm like, "Wow, I should've really focused on prevention efforts," but I think the movement wasn't there in 2002 or 2003, but I felt really good about that. Doing that survey, getting that research, and getting the results has really influenced my activism and trying to do my own surveys on different things and document things and just be like, "Here's the data." So that was influential for me.

RS: Yeah, that's a pretty amazing story. So then you graduated, and did you go straight to George Washington? You got an MA at George Washington?

HK: I did.

RS: And what were you thinking? What was the MA in, and what were you planning for?

HK: So during my summer breaks, I mostly had to just work in jobs to get paid [Laughter] that weren't in my field, but one summer I did have an internship two days a week, and I worked the other five, including on weekends. The two days a week, I was at the D.C. Superior Courthouse working with an organization that's no longer around anymore, WEAV, which is basically Women Empowered Against Violence, and I was an intake counselor for people getting protective orders on domestic violence. I basically had to write down what had happened to them and ask different questions and just help them get processed. It was hard because I was twenty years old and sometimes people would be like, "Really? I have to talk to her?" They thought I was too young and inexperienced, but it did give me--. I think I could use my empathy and a lot of things that I had learned from growing up with Heidi or just other situations working in domestic violence shelters already, and I think I was able to put people more at ease, and I was respectful, and I think I was good at it, but it was so hard. I came home and cried so many days. I was having nightmares. To hear about the horrors that they had--you know, just story after story after story, it was so hard. So I realized that I needed to probably do a form of activism that was not direct service, that I just couldn't turn it off and that it would probably break me [Laughter] if I tried to do a job like that. So that was a good learning experience that summer.

Then the summer before my senior year of college, I got an internship--a paid internship this time--with the National Women's History Museum, which didn't have a museum site, still doesn't. I was studying abroad, and I was Googling to find something for my summer job, and I was like, "What? History and women?" It was a perfect combination, so I worked there for the summer and helped them with this big "Women and World War II" exhibit that they had up at the Women's Memorial at Arlington Cemetery. They did temporary exhibits. Then I helped do online exhibits. It was the Summer Olympics 2004, and so I did a whole online exhibit.

I sort of taught myself how to do [Laughter] some stuff for the web at that point and did an online exhibit about women Olympians and notable things that were--since women had started being part of the Olympics. I really enjoyed that, and so my whole senior year I just had this major conflict. I took the GRE. I knew I wanted to go to graduate school, but did I want to go history or sort of women's issues, activism? Because part of me had always had this vision of me just--I lose track of time and just love researching and writing. I had to do a senior thesis, and it was like the happiest I've been, just being in the library for twelve hours and then writing, and I just completely get engrossed in it. So I was like, "What if I could have a job where that was what I did? Or if I worked in a historic home or a museum?" So I had these interests, and even all these years later I sometimes think, "Oh, maybe I should have gone that route. [Laughter] Maybe I wouldn't be so emotionally drained as I am sometimes now."

But in the end, well, I went to different universities over winter break, and I was turned off by how many history programs were geared toward becoming a professor and teaching because I knew that's not what I wanted to do. I should've looked further into

museum studies, but I didn't, so maybe that would've been a better fit or taken me down that track, but I went to GW, and met with someone there about the women's studies program they had, and they have combined ones with different other fields, so mine was in public policy. So that's what I ended up doing. So, yeah, I went to GW. I ended up--I had a summer job as a receptionist, and then, for most of graduate school, I was still working for the National Women's History Museum. Then, when I finished graduate school, within the same month I got a job at AAUW, American Association of University Women. Kate [Farrar] came within a year after me, and I was there for almost six years doing feminist activism.

RS: And what was your role there?

HK: Well, it was interesting. I started off doing web design because it was-- this was 2007. It was a hard job market. Not as bad as it was going to get, but it was harder, and I was only getting responses for jobs that I applied to doing web stuff. So I decided that AAUW was a big enough organization. They had a public policy department. I would go in, try to get in in this web job, and then move. I ended up doing that within six months. I mean, I was sort of upfront about it when I came in, and my boss was really supportive, and she's still a friend of mine now. I didn't end up going to the public policy department though. It was a little higher pressure and probably not a leadership style that I would've thrived under there, which was a good thing that I didn't go straight there. In the web department, I had to work people in all departments, so I got a feel for that. I was like, "All right. I don't know that I would thrive there."

So the Legal Advocacy Fund department ended up needing a manager, and I got that job. It was basically me in that department. They went through a lot of

restructuring, and they were almost going to get rid of the department after I moved into it, [Laughter] which was stressful. There were a few weeks where I was just going to work and sitting in my office with nothing to do, but, in the end, I was able to do some work. The core of it was that we would give financial support to people in sex discrimination lawsuits, and we turned towards strategic lawsuits, ones that we felt like could have a bigger impact. So that's what I was managing, and we did grants around campus activism on these issues, Title IX issues, sexual harassment--which is part of Title IX--pregnancy discrimination, pay discrimination. So those were all the issues I was working on. I did have some flexibility. They ended up giving me some work under Kate in her department because I didn't have enough work to do.

I was doing student leadership work with Kate Farrar, and then I ended up-- because of the stuff I started doing on street harassment in my free time, I got a book deal and had my book come out, I ended up being able to do research, which is what I really, really wanted to do and was happy about doing. I got to help co-author a national study on sexual harassment in schools, so that was my highlight of my time at AAUW, was getting to just work on that from beginning to end: to really think about who's on our advisory group, how do we craft the questions, who are we targeting, the whole process. And then I got to do all the interviews, to do the case studies about what are promising practices, and then my co-author doesn't really like doing media interviews, and I did media training, so I ended up doing most of the media interviews and traveling and speaking, and I really loved all of that. It worked well with my street harassment activism.

But I think, because I had a lot of down time that first year, I was looking to fill my time, and after I did my master's thesis on street harassment at GW, reporters started finding research that I put on my website, and one of them was for CNN. That was a shift for me, because I hadn't intended to keep doing street harassment activism. I had this full-time job. I was already doing feminist activism; I was good. I was covered. [Laughter] Once it was in CNN and people started emailing me and it just blew up online, and I was like, "Oh, maybe there's more need for conversation and dialogue" and my partner suggested I started my own website because of what I had studied for my thesis--.

My thesis focused on how people were using websites in lieu of social recognition of the problem to sort of cope and find resources and share ideas. So two of those sites were gone, I realized, once the CNN article came out and I sort of kind of got back into the world of street harassment activism. So I did start my own site. My parents suggested I write a book because I had so much knowledge just from my thesis and I do such thorough research. I thought about it for a few months and then ended up starting to do research on that. I had a lot of free time at AAUW [Laughter] where I could kind of overlap and do street harassment activism there.

RS: So I want to come back to the street harassment stuff very soon, but I want to ask you--because I was talking with Kate [Farrar] about this a little bit yesterday. You know, when we talk about feminist activism, these big organizations like AAUW are not usually the ones that pop into people's heads. They've been around for, what, like a hundred--.

HK: Since the 18--oh, I should know this-- but, like, 1880s. [Laughter]

RS: Right. I think lots of people who are on campuses have heard of them. They're sort of there, but people often don't know what exactly they do.

HK: Yeah.

RS: And yet, it's interesting that I've talked to two people now, at least two-- and I think maybe there was someone else--who've either had jobs there or been connected to AAUW.

HK: Oh, Noorjahan [Akbar] did some speaking through them. Yeah.

RS: Right. So what--how do you think about those big kind of national organizations and their role and what they can and can't do and their kind of connection to feminist activism?

HK: Yeah. [Laughter] Well, I'm a little outside that world. I would've had a lot more opinions, I think, when I was still thinking about that a lot, but one thing that jumps to my mind was--was it 2009? We were at this Femme 2.0 conference, and it was about trying to get women's issues online more, essentially, and there was so much pushback from sort of the established women's organizations compared to activists and journalists who were just sort of, like, their free will, can do their own thing. It was [Laughter] an interesting point of conflict. Oh, and I should say I was the one who got AAUW to start a blog and to start getting on social media, and it was hard. It was hard for some of that to--.

RS: What was their resistance?

HK: Just not understanding why it was useful, I think. I did a lot of research to see what other organizations were doing and so--I can't remember, maybe like the National Women's Law Center, the Ms Foundation, or Feminist Majority. You know, if

they blogged, it was like once a month, and it was from--it was like a letter from the president. I'm like, "That's not a blog," so trying to explain what a blog is and why it's useful and has purpose, was hard. And now AAUW's blog has won awards, and it's really read by a lot of people, and so it was just hard to get them to recognize that. I think that part of the issue is it's a lot of older women who are leaders, a lot of older white women in leadership positions who maybe aren't always open to new ideas. And then, also, there can be conflict with younger people who don't recognize the importance of having an established organization who can have sway in Congress, who gets invited to the White House, who gets invited to the Department of Ed to talk about Title IX issues in a way that maybe regular activists don't have that access.

So I came away from the Femme 2.0 conference just really appreciating both sides and how important they are, to have these established organizations with a reputation, specifically thinking in D.C., they're known, and they are respected there; maybe not too much outside D.C. do they have recognition, but there they have their place, and they can try to make progress happen. But I also saw so much bureaucracy, even--AAUW's not that big. It, I think, at most, had seventy people when I was there, but there's the boards, and then there's all the members, and you have to plan things, like, a year in advance to make sure it can fit in your budget, and it was hard to be responsive. Even with the blog, everything had to go through about three or four layers of approval. So it was really hard to be responsive on a blog. I'm like, "A blog, you're supposed to respond right away! You can't be a week, one or two weeks later." I saw that as sort of this barrier for a big organization like AAUW, all of the layers of approval, which for

some things are very needed, and that's a way to protect them and keep their reputation intact, but it can also limit.

RS: OK, so this CNN reporter finds you because of your master's thesis, and then you start your own website.

HK: Yeah, in 2008.

RS: And your first book comes out--?

HK: 2010.

RS: 2010. Which was published by whom?

HK: Praeger.

RS: OK. So at what point do you start to feel like--for a while, you're doing this kind of on the side, on top of your regular job. At what point does it start to feel like your main calling or your main work?

HK: I mean, it pretty much still is my part--you know, on top of paid work. So it's never been my full-time job, but you're right. As far as thinking of it as a full-time calling, I do find a lot of meaning and usefulness through my street harassment activism compared to other work that I do, and I think it's at the point where I realize that no one else is doing it, and this is--I'm needed. So like the website, or the book, or Anti-Street Harassment Week, just whatever I'm doing along those lines, I feel useful and needed there. It's beyond--there are other small things that I've--not small things. There are a few other things that I have found a lot of meaning in, such as the sexual harassment in schools research and everything that came from that. The White House called it the gold standard for setting the topic and schools dealing with these issues started using it, and so that's very fulfilling to know that. Or what I did around rape on campus, and that there

were concrete outcomes that hopefully helped some people in their life. So I guess it's more those things that I find meaning in, so whenever street harassment ends up--my street harassment activism ends up having that as an outcome, then I find a lot of fulfillment in it. So I guess I started feeling fulfillment. My blog didn't [Laughter] have much on it for a while, so maybe, I don't know, after a year? I started to get more of an audience and people reaching out to me asking for help or saying, "Your website is helping me."

RS: So I'm curious--you know I've talked to Emily May at Hollaback!, and I think when I--I'm forty-nine, so I'm ten or fifteen years older than you. I don't think my cohort would have ever--it would never have crossed our minds to take on street harassment, right? It just seemed like this sort of yucky thing that you had to deal with, and your work and Emily's work--I'm trying to think about dates. They're pretty much co--they happened--.

HK: Her site started in 2005.

RS: OK, so a little bit earlier.

HK: So I'm thirty-two, and she's, I think, thirty-five. So we almost started around our same ages that we each were.

RS: Right. Right. And I'm curious about what was changing around that time that made people think that you could take this on, that this was something--.

HK: Yeah. Well, this issue has been taken on, and that's actually a project that I'm working on with Rochelle [Keyhan] from Feminist Public Works in Philadelphia is "Street Harassment in History."

RS: Right.

HK: I mean, there's so much coming forward, and just even when I was down at Duke University I found out that the term "street harassment" had been used by activists in 1971. Until then, I thought the earliest use was 1981. And in D.C. here, Marty Langelan led city-wide efforts in the early to mid-1980s around street harassment, and they had marches and speak-outs and passed out pamphlets, and there was a proclamation by the mayor, and there's been so much--so many other little pockets of activism since then, and what my thesis looked at in part was the Street Harassment Project website. Since 2000, they had been collecting women's stories online and in sharing resources. When they stopped functioning, that was one of the sites that I was like, "Oh, they're not working anymore."

Like I-- you know, that was such a useful site to me. I had experienced so much street harassment, especially in college, and I didn't know the term. Clearly, I was very involved [Laughter] in activism, feminism, women's studies major in college, and I didn't know the term. I didn't know how to deal with it. I didn't know what to do. I changed my life because of it—I was grabbed, followed, just had so many bad experiences, and it wasn't until I had to think of a thesis for my master's and was researching and came across the Street Harassment Project and Hollaback!, and I was like, "There's a name for it! There's something I can do. I don't have to be alone." And I really had to, yeah, think about that a lot. My mom had always told me it was a compliment, it was because I was pretty, and so I had to do this whole reeducation of her, and, like, now she stands up to harassers. My dad had no idea it was happening to me. My partner didn't. So I was educating them, and now they're huge allies and supporters. But I think I had the courage to do what I was doing because other people had already

done it. I mean, I generally don't have new ideas. I'm just--you know, because of my focus on history and what has come before, I know that it's very hard to invent new ideas. You're just recreating or improving or adapting [Laughter] what has been done before, generally, and so that's what I often do is, especially, I look globally. What are other people doing? What's working? I think it's better to learn from that than to start from scratch.

RS: So it does seem though that the--I guess the rise of social media allows a different approach and maybe more a broader light shined than those folks were able to do in the seventies and eighties.

HK: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Social media has been huge and Twitter, in particular, has been a huge resource for me as far as finding people to connect with. And, I think, for awareness around this issue, it's helped a lot because anyone who's on Twitter can share their story when it happens, any day. We have Tweet--I'm often organizing our part of TweetChats with people all over the world, and so that has really helped put the issue out there more and connect us.

RS: Can you talk--just because who knows when people are reading these transcripts or listening to these interviews if they will know what a TweetChat was. Can you talk about what that is and why it's effective?

HK: I can't remember when I was part of my first TweetChat, but, basically, TweetChats usually last about an hour, and, if it's a well-organized one, usually there's someone who's in charge of it. They've called this TweetChat, and they will ask set questions. How people know to participate in the chat is they advertise it, but they have created a keyword with a hash tag or a pound sign, and everyone is supposed to use that

keyword at the end of their Tweets so that when you do a search for that Tweet, you see the whole conversation that's happening. So people will do this at conferences too, like a conference will have a TweetChat or will have a hash tag and anyone who's Tweeting about what's happening at the conference can use that hash tag and can see what's happening at other sessions they're missing, or they can connect with people or see what people are thinking about the same session they're in. But so, for a TweetChat, I mean, anyone can accidentally join or purposely join [Laughter] if they just see it happening. Usually there's one person sort of asking questions and guiding it along, and then anyone can chime in. So a lot of the TweetChats that I'm part of, you have six questions, and you ask them about every ten minutes. And then there's a program called Storify.com where you can basically record and save different Tweets and make a record of it, so I usually do that after the TweetChats I'm part of.

RS: And what have you seen as in this anti-street harassment activism as the most promising development? What's giving you the most sense of either success or hope?

HK: Well, I guess one indicator just from how I really got going on the activism is the change in how media portrays the issue. So that CNN article that I was interviewed for in 2008, the headline was "Catcalls: Creepy or a Compliment?" That's how the issue was framed, like, that maybe it's a compliment, and there have--was it *The New York Post*?--I think did an offensive headline similar to that last year, but they're kind of an outlier. Generally, outlets are not going to do that framing anymore. It's more recognized that this is a serious issue. So I think that's been an important shift, and just

the awareness of governments has been really big. There are so many more that are taking this issue seriously, passing laws, policies. There are so many transit campaigns. Here, in D.C., we've seen a shift. I was a board member of Collective Action for Safe Spaces, which does street harassment activism only in D.C., and we were trying to work with Metro on addressing harassment and couldn't get a response. Nothing was happening, and one of our board members was like, "Oh, we could fill in the public slots for their annual hearing that they have to do before the city council talking about how they did that year, and there's a section open to the public." So we recruited people to share their stories about harassment. I was an expert witness. A couple of the Collective Action for Safe Spaces staff testified, and going into it, reporters found out about it because we were trying to recruit people to share their stories on listservs, and *The Washington Post* did an article right before it happened, and [Laughter] this was Metro's party line, "One person's harassment is another person's flirting; it's not a problem in our system."

RS: Wow.

HK: Which was repeated by the leaders at the hearing, because we got to go first. We testified. Council member Muriel Bowser, who's now the mayor of D.C., was chairing it, and after the men--all four men--gave their, "Ra, ra, ra. Here's how Metro's doing," she said, "Well, do you have anything to say about what the members of the public brought up?" And they gave the same party line, and I was so proud of her and so happy. She said, "As a woman, I feel differently, and you need to do something about this issue." And within three weeks, Metro had completely changed. They had a sexual harassment task force. They created an online reporting form.

I told them Boston already had a campaign. They had a good relationship with Boston. They were able to adapt their campaign for the first wave. You may have seen the second wave of ads right now with the hand that say, "If it's unwanted, it's harassment." They've been working to train all of their frontline employees on this issue so they know how to respond appropriately. They're now tracking incidences of harassment. Before, it was only, basically, sexual assault that they were even keeping records of, and that happened fast. It was amazing because we got--I mean, we had a lot of positive media attention on our side after we testified. A lot of people submitted to stories to WMATA saying, "We agree with what these people were saying." So, yeah. We just had a meeting, Collective Action for Safe Spaces, and I, for Stop Street Harassment, had a meeting earlier this month with WMATA, and they've committed to a second round of ads next year--or sorry, a third wave of ads next year, and they are--. We're working with them.

Just yesterday, we had a phone call about this. We're working with them to survey the transit riders, a representative sample of transit riders, about the experiences of harassment, also their familiarity with--have they seen the ads, what do they think, are they helping, and that'll help inform us for the next round. Almost no transit systems have had surveys, so this is going to be big, and they're going to do it next month. They're completely on board. They've been completely respectful and thoughtful in the process, in the questions, and, at this point, basically anything that we ask of them to do, they will do. [Laughter] So that was a huge shift since we testified in February 2012. So that's one example of a huge government shift.

RS: Yeah. How is the survey going to happen?

HK: They're working with a survey firm and they have a way. They regularly survey passengers about other topics, so they have a way to do that, and it'll be online because we know with this issue, people tend to be more honest and comfortable if it's online. So that'll be a thousand people.

RS: That's great.

HK: Yeah.

RS: What keeps you up at night? Well, I hope nothing [laughter] but if--.

HK: Yeah, I was trying to keep up with a to-do list. I feel like a lot of my motivation and my anger, my frustrations, still comes from stories that I have submitted to my blog. I usually get a couple a week, and, when I do speaking engagements, people--there will be people who always come up and share their stories with me, or I'll just have people sort of randomly email me sharing their stories and asking how they can get involved, or just for whatever reason. I mean, the stories are--they're hard. A lot of them are really hard to have to read over and over, and it takes a lot out of me to do [it]. I love doing speaking engagements; I feel like I can make a difference. I used to be terrified of public speaking, but I've gotten over it for the cause, [Laughter] for that reason. But I have to be so emotionally present. A lot of people are sharing their story for the first time, and it matters how I respond. It matters that I'm 100% listening and empathetic and there for them and acknowledging, and that can be really draining to do. I've been at this for years now, and I try to bring the same energy and empathy to every email I send, to everything that I do, the Tweets, and sometimes that means that I don't respond to everyone if I don't feel like I can do that, if I just don't have time, or I'm overwhelmed, and then I have a lot of guilt about that, the people that I'm not able to respond to, the

people I'm not able to help. I guess I am motivated and kept up at night because of the stories that I do hear and I do respond to and also the ones that I just don't have the time or energy to respond to, and I feel bad about it.

RS: You said earlier that you've learned when you were that intern and doing that intake that you shouldn't do that kind of direct service, but actually you're doing in this way a very similar--.

HK: But mostly, it's not face-to-face, which I think was the hardest for me. It's not as long. You know, some people only send a couple sentences, but it's more the accumulation effect, too, in part. It's just story after story, and it's not just the stories that are sent to me; it's the news stories too and the sexual violence and just all the indicators in our culture, too, where sexual violence is minimized and a joke, and it's seen as OK. You know, things like Steubenville or just even, the UVA story last year, all these issues with it, but just like that. I actually physically threw up after reading that graphic story. You know, it's just the accumulation; I feel like I'm surrounded by it. I'm connected to so many activists working on these issues that my social media feeds are full of these stories. I can't get away from it unless I just disconnect. If I disconnect, then I get behind on everything, so I have a hard time disconnecting [Laughter] and filtering through a lot of that. And I want to stay on top of things. I want to know when issues are happening, but it's--. [sighs] This issue is hard.

RS: I was talking to Andrea Pino this morning, and she was talking about the high personal cost of having to be immersed in this and give and give and give and give and give.

HK: Yeah. I know. I worry about her and Annie [Clark] because, I mean, I'm not a survivor of rape myself, but I can only imagine how hard it is to deal with your own trauma over and over while you're trying to help everyone else and everyone wants your attention, and bless them.

RS: So how do you--? I know that this idea of self-care is one that feminists, activists, talk more about, I think, now maybe. It's a concept that comes up. What role does that play in your own life, and then how do you see it playing out in the lives of other activists that you see, and how's it shaping what people do or don't do?

HK: I'm not sure for more broadly. I mean, I agree. I see a lot more stuff like, "Oh, remember self-care; take care of yourself," but it's--yeah. I don't always know what that looks like for other people or what they're doing. For me, I run almost every day. I walk my dogs several times a day, and they're like my puppy therapy. Some days, I have them [Laughter] on either side. I'm, like, petting them when I'm dealing with something hard on the computer. My partner is really wonderful and supportive, and we have the same taste in movies and TV, so we can watch things together and laugh and relax. I like to go hiking. I just, I get outside a lot, and I feel so lucky. And I mean, it's intentional that I'm in Reston, but I do feel lucky that I was able to move to Reston because there are fifty-five miles of paved trails. We have five lakes. I'm right by a nature center. There's farmer's markets, two farmer's markets. It's a very walking-centric community in the sense that there are all these paths. There's always people outside. I feel very safe here. We moved here with the hope that I would get harassed less, because I used to get harassed so much when I was running, and sometimes it would be ten times during an hour run, which was--running is my place to

get away from things. So, in Reston itself, I've been harassed a handful of times. Oddly enough, within the last month, I was harassed twice on one run, and that's never happened, that it's happened twice on the same run. Now, when I travel or I go to D.C., I still face harassment sometimes, but in Reston almost never. So I feel like it's almost this oasis for me, and I'm so grateful to have it because I don't know [Laughter] that I would be able to do as much as I am doing without having this space that is quiet and full of nature, and I can get outside safely.

RS: Are there other pieces to your story, to your activism, to the work you're doing that we haven't talked about that you want to talk about?

HK: [pause] Sometimes, with online activism, I can connect with people all over the world, and, almost wherever I travel, I can find someone that I know or I've met online, and I can connect with them, and I love it, but I also sometimes feel--especially working remotely mostly--I can feel really isolated too, and that my only interactions are online or by phone. And so then that also keeps me more glued to social media, which then can be draining because of the [Laughter] sexual violence stuff that comes up all the time there or racist stuff or stuff about racism, I mean. So, yeah, sometimes, I wish I could have more human interactions. I did this trip to Boston to do a focus group on street harassment with Asian American women to add on to this national study that I commissioned last year that had the first nationally representative survey, and then I did ten focus groups--I self-financed it--with under-represented groups. And after that came out, an Asian American woman was like, "You didn't do anything with Asian Americans." I was like, "You're right, I didn't. I ran out of time and resources, but this can be a living document. I'll add it on."

So it took a year and a half, but I was able to get up to Boston and do this focus group with nine women whose stories were horrific and not heard, and I was so glad that I did it. I went to New York and had two speaking engagements, and then I went to Philadelphia. And each of those places, I met with activist friends, and I just was like, "I wish that I could see you more often than once a year, two times a year, because we're doing such similar work and we can relate to each other." I also feel like I generally-- since I see them so little, it's like we have to just do our activism. We're meeting about activism, and it's like, "I would like to just go and hang--have a leisurely lunch and talk about other things or do an activity together." So sometimes I wish that that was more of a possibility.

RS: That does seem like one potential downside of a place like Reston compared to living in the city where you might find--.

HK: Yeah, and I do go downtown still. I'm going to have lunch with Kate on Monday, and I'm going to see Noorjahan [Akbar] in a couple of days. So I do try to get to D.C. at least once a week, and I travel so much that sometimes I just [Laughter] do need a week at home where I'm not seeing anyone.

RS: Right.

HK: I just was in Turkey last week for a UN conference, for example.

RS: Right. So tell me about that. What was--what do you do at these UN--?

HK: I left AAUW more than two and a half years ago, and, at one point, I thought, "Oh, I'll see if I can make Stop Street Harassment my full-time job." I just hated fundraising. It was taking up all my time, and I decided I'd rather find flexible, meaningful, well-paying work if I could that could give me the flexibility to still do my

street harassment work, largely on a volunteer basis. I get paid for some speaking engagements, but largely I'm unpaid. So that's what I've ended up doing, and it's worked well. I get to not get burned out, hopefully, by street harassment activism because I just do a few hours a day instead of full-time, and it helps me make other connections. So one of my consulting jobs is with the UN, and this is the one consulting job that is actually in line with street harassment activism. The others are not, but it's with the UN's global Safe Cities Initiative, which launched in 2010 in five cities and is now in twenty-three cities. And speaking of one shift, that's huge that the UN has this whole program basically on street harassment. They don't use that term. They say "sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces," [Laughter] but it's street harassment. So the main project that I did with them was funded by Microsoft, and Microsoft said, "Apps are big. Let's work together on a women's safety app," and UN Women thankfully said, "We don't even know if these are effective. There's no research on this. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

I became the coordinator of research on this, and we worked with people in the Safe Cities sites in impoverished communities in Delhi, India; Marrakesh, Morocco; and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and talked to them about issues through focus groups and interviews. You know, what sort of access do they have to mobiles, because we had a suspicion that women don't have as much as access as men, and indeed they don't. For example, while most women actually did have some form of access--with India, some women in India had no access, but mostly women did, but usually to a shared or borrowed phone, whereas men had their own phone. Or this was common everywhere and even globally. I did a global analysis, too, on these issues. Globally, usually, men

buy women their phones or pay for the phones because of the pay gap, and all these things that prevent women from having the income to be able to do this. So we realized that women were not having privacy to be able to use their phones to call for help or do whatever and maybe were being harassed or tracked.

Anyway, so we also asked them like, “Have you ever used your phone to deal with harassment in public spaces?” Unsurprisingly, based on other work that I’ve done, women didn’t really know what sexual harassment was, and, in public spaces, they saw it as normal even though they didn’t like it. They understood domestic violence. They understood rape, but not anything in between. So they had not used their phones. Anyway, so there was more to it than that, but that’s sort of, essentially, what the research was about, and so, this year, I went to India in June and then to Turkey to present on the findings at global conferences.

The one in June was just for the Safe Cities sites primarily, so this was the first time in a couple years that people from all of the cities could come together and talk about what they’re doing, their processes, because they’re all doing baseline research. They’re all working with policymakers to try to make concrete changes around women’s safety issues in public spaces, so this was a time for them to share ideas. There were likeminded organizations there, like ActionAid, Women in Cities International, the Huairou Commission, also sharing ideas. Then, the conference in Turkey was focused on ending violence against women more generally, and the panel I was on was the only one focused on street harassment on Safe Cities. The rest were mostly focused on violence against women generally or domestic violence or rape. This was a high-level conference in that there were all these ministers or deputy ministers from countries. There were

people from seventy countries, period, there among three hundred attendees and it was really to look at what has changed in the twenty years since the Beijing conference on women's issues, and what do we need to do going forward for the Sustainable Development Goals. The summary was most countries now have laws against domestic violence and rape that they didn't necessarily have before 1995, but the rates are the same. We need to now address culture and engaging boys and men, which I was so grateful to hear [Laughter] because it's true.

RS: So how are we going to do that?

HK: Address culture? [Laughter] I know, right? That's the hard thing. There were--some of the panels had promising practice-type things around prevention efforts, and I think there were, rightfully so, discussions about getting more women in leadership positions in politics, more women as media makers, because those all help shift--help inform culture, right? The people who can pass the laws or the people who create the media we consume. So I hope that that's true, that if we had more women in those positions, there might be a cultural shift naturally from that.

They talked a lot about education in schools because there is a lack of awareness around a lot of the "more mild" forms of sexual violence or gender violence. So more education there, and I don't know. It was a little depressing because I think about--. I actually was sort of drafting an op-ed this morning during my run, and I haven't had time to write it down, but just thinking about how in the US, a lot of people are eager to talk about how oppressed women are [Laughter] in other cultures, how the cultural norms are bad in other places. But I mean, our cultural norms are so toxic and harmful in a lot of ways here. So I think it's shortsighted not to recognize that, and it does make me so

angry. In all the speaking that I do, it makes me angry how few men are ever present. It's just women who mostly show up for things unless men are forced to be there, like it's a class, and they have to go, or a fraternity that needs extra--it's like they can get points for whatever their service project thing, and so some of them show up. It's really disheartening, and I'm sure this came up with other women, just that the harassment you get, the pushback you get--. When the CNN article came out, I actually had a lot of concern about moving forward with these issues because there were no photos of me online at that point, and I did have a website where I was just teaching myself web design, and it was-- there was a page called photos, and it was of photos I had taken. And that--the page views for that were through the roof. People were trying to see what I look like, to judge me about this issue, or I don't know. I've had memes made about me. There's just been a lot of harassment over the years, and I think that's horrible, that I'm speaking out on gender violence? Like who's--why are you arguing with me about rape? [Laughter] Why are you arguing with me about feeling unsafe in public spaces? That is a harmful indicator of our culture, that people feel comfortable openly criticizing someone and harassing them. I mean, Soraya [Chemaly] can't have her address known. All of the women that you've talked to--I don't know about Kate--but the other women you've talked to all have had threats made to them for the work that we do. That is harmful in [and] of itself [Laughter] in our culture.

RS: Do you see a connection between street harassment and online harassment?

HK: Yes. It's a public space, in a sense, because as access to online communities has grown, anyone can go to a library and get online even if they don't

access at their house, as long as they're literate. So yeah, it's a public forum, and it's where so many ideas are shared and spread, and so much is happening there. Yeah, if you feel unsafe to share your views, certain views are going to be dominant and can help inform culture. [Laughter] You know, if everyone else is silenced or if you feel too afraid to speak out. That's one reason why I do a lot of work with the Op-Ed Project and the Aspen Institute, to help people who are knowledgeable on issues that are important get their voice out in the opinion pages as pieces of commentary because that helps shape public opinion and public policy. It's important that we aren't hearing from one small segment of the population, which, right now, is generally white, rich, educated men who are Western, and also who are unfortunately sometimes the ones who could be harassing everyone else because they want to keep that place of prominence. [Laughter]

RS: [pause] I'm debating whether to ask you more about the Op-Ed Project, but you have to go pretty soon.

HK: Yeah, well I just--. Yeah, because we're leaving at 6:00. My partner's coming back. That's probably--I'm [calling?] at 6:00, and I just have to walk the dogs and stuff before I go and take you.

RS: Right.

HK: So I don't know, maybe fifteen more minutes?

RS: OK. So this issue of getting people's voices out there, [pause] can you talk more about the role specifically of these kind of commentary pieces and why you feel like those are really an important thing to get people to do?

HK: I know from personal experience, I went through a one-day seminar with the Op-Ed Project in early 2010, just about six months before my book came out, and I

had never written for anything except academic writing for school and then blogs on my own blog or AAUW. That was all the writing that I had done publicly, and so I didn't even know that you could write opinion articles, and I sort of got obsessed with it and wrote my own, and that really springboarded me and helped me have a platform on this issue. Since I did that training, I've published seventy articles and done 250, maybe closer to 300, media interviews now and close to 150 speaking engagements. In part, it was because my book was coming out around then too, but it really helped me be able to articulate my issue in a way that was digestible for the public because op-eds are typically six to eight hundred words.

So you have to get good about making a compelling argument in a short amount of time and really being persuasive and being timely and showing why does this matter. The Op-Ed Project training is not just how to write an op-ed; it's really trying to change the conversation around public thought leadership and--. Oh, I forgot you talked to Katie [Orenstein]. Yeah. And for me, it was a game that you play during the day which helps you realize that your voice matters, what you know matters, and that you can make a difference by sharing it. For me, that's key to what motivates me, is trying to make a difference and be useful. So with that framing, I felt more confident to be able to speak out, even though it scared me. I had had, at that point, no media training, and here I am doing media interviews. I started to do public speaking and it was like--almost started crying during my first talk. [Laughter] It was hard, but it helped me realize that it could be a powerful tool.

So that's something that I'd like to pay forward, and you can see this transformation and people mentally, first of all, just realizing how to be part of the public

conversation and how to articulate what they know, especially when I work with academics who are so embedded in their expert--their field and their niche topic--and they've written journal articles that ten people will have read, based on studies [Laughter] on this, for them to realize that their subject matter connects to the issues of the day and that it matters, and they can make a difference is huge. So, for example, last year I co-lead a fellowship at Northwestern University with twenty faculty, there's two of us who co-lead these fellowships so we each work with ten, and we swap halfway. So we end up working with all twenty across the nine months, and the minimum is that everyone has to write two op-eds, and so forty from the year. We had almost a hundred op-eds, and people got policies changed because of their op-eds. One woman got a book deal. People got radio show interview requests, speaking engagements. One woman went on CNN. The outcomes can be really big.

One of the op-eds that I wrote on up-skirt photos, where it's men taking photos up women's skirts without their permission, has led to legislators in six or seven states contacting me saying, "How can we strengthen our up-skirt laws?" just because of that one op-ed that I wrote. So op-eds can have a lot of influence, and I think for me, in part, it's been the accumulation of writing them. Not every op-ed that I have written has led to something, but just continuing to have a voice and being relevant has helped. One example of that, after the fifteen hours of walking in New York City as a woman--oh my gosh, ten hours.

RS: I don't remember.

HK: Oh my gosh, I used to know that. [Laughter]

RS: I think it's ten.

HK: Ten, yeah. Fifteen's wrong. Ten hours of walking in New York City as a woman video came out, and the media latched onto it, I was invited to write for "Room for Debate" on *New York Times*, and I did interviews for *The Today Show* and *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* and *PBS NewsHour* and so many outlets because I was established as a reputable person who knew about these issues, had spoken on them, had written about that. And so that's an example of sort of the accumulation effect of having a public voice. I think it's so crucial that we have that public dialogue.

We are upfront with our fellows about the possibility of online harassment, about the strategy of probably not reading the comments, maybe having someone else read them for you and filtering them for you, and just what to expect because that is the reality. It is a public space, and there's going to be people who only read the headline and start lashing out at you, or they do read the whole piece and they start lashing out at you. [Laughter] And then, there are people who are thoughtful and have meaningful back-and-forths, but that is something that we are real with them about, and we have strategies. We do this game called "Mattering," and we talk about, "What are your considerations? What are the things holding you back?" Whether it's that you feel like you don't know enough to be speaking out, you're worried people are going to laugh at you, or think you're bragging, or you're worried about online harassment, and then we talk about what could happen, the negatives, and then what are the positives and really weighing those and thinking, "What will the world miss out on if your voice isn't out there, if your knowledge isn't out there?" And then just letting them decide for themselves.

RS: One thing that I've talked with a couple people about is there's the online harassment of the--by the misogynists and the wackos, and then there's also fear people feel about getting attacked by people they generally are on the same side with.

HK: Allies?

RS: And there's been a lot of concern expressed by some people about the internal--it's not even debates. It's just attacks. Has that been an issue you've had to deal with? I mean, one of the things I've noticed about the work that you do is there's a real focus on intersectionality and you're not always just talking about women. You're talking about people who are gay or trans people, or--. But it's a hard issue, and I remember when that video came out, and there was a lot of talk about how they only showed--.

HK: Edited out the white men, yeah.

RS: Right. What's your sense of that issue, and what kind of impact it does or doesn't have?

HK: Yeah, that is a reality, and I think, in part, though, it's good. It does make--at least for me, it does make me think more about who might be upset by what I am saying or who am I excluding so that I try not to exclude them. I have had a lot of education along the way. When I started off, I was very focused only on women, and that's still at the core, that's who I mostly focus on, but, yeah, I don't anymore just focus on that, and I am posting things about the backlash of Muslim-looking people in public spaces right now, for example, or the Black Lives Matter movement, with police brutality and harassment. So I am trying to broaden those issues, and I think it's--I've been strengthened, and I'm appreciative of people who point those things out, but it can be

hard when people don't do it [Laughter] in a nurturing or loving or understanding way. I mean, it's not everyone's job. It's not, for example, a black woman's job to be like, "Oh, Holly, I think maybe you should do this." I understand if they're angry or upset. They've faced so much discrimination and marginalization. So I think it's--I've hopefully gotten a little bit over myself in a way in knowing that if someone lashes out, it's not necessarily personal to me, but it's because of the systems of oppression that they face and that I am part of that, whether I want to be or not. And I need to acknowledge that and try to deal with it and be a good ally in whatever way I can, but I do hear what--I understand that it can also be paralyzing to think about all the different people who may be upset.

When the CNN article came out, I was actually the most hurt by what someone wrote on Feministing. So the journalist in the CNN article had misquoted me a little bit, and that's what the Feministing person sort of jumped on. I was able to kind of stand up for myself and be like, "That's not--I know that's blah, blah, blah." Whatever, I can't even remember exactly what it was, but I was like, "Oh, my gosh," because I loved Feministing. I was reading it every day at that point, and I was like, "I'm on Feministing, but not in a good way. They're criticizing me and what I said." And so that was really devastating. Things like that have happened a few times, and it often is just a misunderstanding. I think a lot of it stems from the online aspect of the interactions in that you're more anonymous, or you don't know them, or you can't hear the tone of voice, or you don't have the visual cues. So I don't--I haven't--I've never encountered hostility or those sort of things in person, at conferences or events, so I think a lot of that

unfortunately just stems from the online space where misunderstandings can happen or people are in a hurry or it just comes across the wrong way.

RS: Well thank you very much. That's really great.

HK: Yeah. [Laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW