

**TRANSCRIPT—JOANNE ABEL**  
(Compiled April 16, 2007)

Interviewee: JOANNE ABEL  
Interviewer: Molly Chadbourne  
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Location: Durham, NC  
Length: One CD; approximately 76 minutes

**I have transcribed several sections from my interview with Joanne Abel. Joanne's stories give an abundance of information and only a few parts of the interview are given below although there were others equally as rich in detail and importance.**

**[20 minutes, 10 seconds]**

Joanne Abel: ...The Methodist minister told me about this place called Koinonia in Georgia, where you know, it sounded interesting. So we did a field trip there, and I knew I was gonna move there, if I could get a job, that I would stay, and Laurie was there. Laurie was already—actually Laurie was in Mexico when I got there, with Finnsboro College. So I moved there not knowing a person and I thought the—a lot of them were vegetarians and it was just—I was the only white southern Georgian there.

Molly Chadbourne: About how many people were living there when you moved there?

JA: Oh goodness, there were probably thirty permanent residents and there were lots of people—Mennonites and Quakers doing their Conscientious—CO stuff. So in the summers we would serve 120 people, so it was probably 70 people lived on the thing permanently if you include all the kids and everything.

MC: And do you remember around what year that was?

JA: It was—I graduated in '71.

MC: So you moved to Koinonia in '71.

JA: Mm hmm—right after I graduated from college, and amazing—actually there were more men there than women our age and I've never actually figured that out—maybe because there were more job things. But the women were really close—and I think I told you—a black gay guy who had escaped his very poor, very traditional family, was literally living at Koinonia because he'd been kicked out, was gay, and got *Ms. Magazine*, so we began to get some of this feminist stuff through *Ms*—the first *Ms. Magazine*, I think. And Otis later went to Antioch, through Koinonia.

MC: So he was openly gay at Koinonia?

JA: No, he just—I mean, we didn't—he was—I think he was a high school senior. He just knew he didn't fit in.

MC: And was that your first time, did he self identity as gay?

JA: No—he just got *Ms. Magazine*. We loved Otis and he's one of our buddies.

MC: So now, in retrospect—

JA: Well, now he came out, I stayed with him at one of the first marches in DC which was a trip but...

MC: Was it obvious at the time that he was at Koinonia that he didn't fit in but that was okay?

JA: Oh yeah, yeah. There were two lesbians there, who were pretty out; I just was sort of like blind to it. I didn't want to deal with it, didn't want to talk about it—I mean, I didn't know it existed. I think I told you that one of our—the single folks lived in—well we created a living unit actually—intentionally—an intentional community within an intentional community of men and women, because originally when I came women lived with women and men lived with men, and we self selected a group of people and lived

together. One of the women was a Mennonite who is in a wheelchair and she said she was bisexual, and about two weeks later after she said that at one of our group things I asked Laurie what that meant and she told me and I said, 'Okay, that's fine.' And we didn't talk about that since. But we were—we did a lot of bible studies. We had a study of psalms by a World War I draft person who had been in prison for being in World War I, there were women who had been in the SDS—I mean it was just an amazing mix of people.

MC: All different ages also...

JA: Yep, all different ages, and that was wonderful. I really—it was a wonderful experience. Laurie ran the hand crafts booth and I taught in the public schools. I had 30 kids, 20 boys, ten girls. They were third graders and only two were reading on grade level my last year. These were really poor, poor systems. The public schools had been gutted, buildings had been sold for a dollar for private schools, it was astounding.

MC: And were these schools still relatively segregated?

JA: Totally segregated.

MC: So were you teaching black students?

JA: I was teaching all black students. The whites had all—like I said—the school board, half of them, all of them had their kids in private schools—two of them taught in private schools and one of them was on the board. Actually, Koinonia, and Plains, where Jimmy Carter was from the white people stayed in the school and so some people from Plains and Koinonia sued the school board because they didn't represent the public schools—they literally sold two of the buildings for a dollar to two different private schools.

MC: My god.

JA: Yeah, you know, it was outrageous—we had no books, I mean, it was—I was a title one federal teacher, which was the only way I could have gotten a job because the school board would not have hired someone that lived at Koinonia. They had been bombed and boycotted in the seventies—during the—in the height of the civil rights...

MC: At Koinonia?

JA: Yeah, a lot of people from SNCC stayed there because it was safe space, the SNCC newsletter for the southwest Georgia project was printed there—it's an amazing place, if you ever get a chance to go there, it's still amazing. I had a teacher's aide, and if I hadn't had her I would not have understood the kids because they spoke such a different dialect—a black southwest Georgia dialect that I had never heard before even though I taught—I had taught in Savannah at a black school. It was a great experience. My last year of teaching I had everybody but one student reading on grade level and doing math. Pretty much, pretty much that was all we did. We read, we had fun, we played games, we dug arrowheads out of the parking lot and I parked in front of an outhouse and the school was called the Ideal Modern School and it was built in 1955. **[25 minutes, 55 seconds]**  
**[27 minutes, 33 seconds]**

JA: So I came to Duke and there was a sister community to Koinonia called Suruban here, there was a sister community in Atlanta and Suruban was here.

MC: In Durham?

JA: In Durham. So I knew people here. We would travel up the east coast, you know, you would stop in Atlanta you would stop in Durham. I decided to go to Duke, [laughs] they did have one woman on faculty. That's how I got to Durham.

MC: And what year was that?

JA: '74. And Laurie moved in '75 I think—didn't I say that--yeah. Laurie was at Koinonia a year before me and year after me.

MC: So did she move to Durham because you were here?

JA: Yes and because of Suruban—and mainly, you know, because I was here, but—you'll have to ask her that—it will be interesting.

MC: Were the two of you already involved in a romantic relationship at this point?

JA: No. I would go down and visit her—I was with one of our other real good friends—the one, when I came to Koinonia she was in Mexico with this guy—and I was involved with him, we were sexual friends, we were not lovers, and we were—Oh! When I came to Durham I got in a feminist theory group—this will be good. It was at the Y, so it was sponsored by the Y. There were three straight women, three celibate women, and three lesbians.

MC: That's quite a mix.

JA: Quite a mix, and I have never done anything with as much intention as I did that. I mean, these people were *serious*. We read books, we studied them, and the celibate women were celibate because they felt like if you were involved with men or women you gave up too much energy to not be for the cause. So, eventually, I was kicked out—the straight women were kicked out of the theory group.

MC: All three of them?

JA: All three of them. And it made me furious cause I said, you cannot do that, this is a Y sponsored group; you can go start your own group.

MC: Were they kicked out by the group?

JA: Yes by the whole group together—

MC: Except for you I guess...

JA: Except for the three of us straight women, right. **[29 minutes, 34 seconds]**

**[32 minutes, 44 seconds]**

JA: We both had our boyfriends—Laurie had lots of boyfriends—[laughs] Laurie was ragingly not monogamous, and I was very monogamous, which when we got together people were like, 'Joanne you are monogamous and Laurie is not, this is not gonna work!' But, we would sleep with our boyfriends but it was unspoken that we would always go back and wake up—we had a beautiful brass bed, I don't know where it came from, double bed, and we would come back and wake up with each other. She would be—I would get up and go to school and she would work late at night so we wouldn't always *see* each other but—at one point—yeah, she sometimes made my lunch for school—that was nice. **[33 minutes, 26 seconds]**

**[36 minutes, 45 seconds]**

JA: The theory group was really good but they were really rigid. They were sort of like the prototype lesbian separatists of Durham. TALF—I started going to TALF right away—and there was a real rigid dress code.

MC: What was the dress code?

JA: It was *not* skirts and it was short hair. And I had long hair, and Laurie and I—she thinks that we went to our first concert that we both had on our Mexican wedding skirts and long hair and we held hands which was three really bad things to do. It was like—I was so excited, you know, I am finally a lesbian, and you can't wear skirts, you can't hold hands, and you can't have long hair. And—the hell I can't [laughs]. **[37 minutes, 44 seconds]**

**[45 minutes, 3 seconds]**

MC: Was it your sense that a lot of women got pulled into the community through their interest in feminism?

JA: Yes. The original, well the TALF community, I would say, they were very clear that they were lesbian-feminists.

MC: So was it this sort of, feminism is the politics, lesbianism is the lifestyle type of thing?

JA: Yes, exactly. I mean, I think there were more than three celibates at one time, but most of the celibates came out to be lesbians. There was really a thing that you should give everything to the movement because the movement was so important—smashing patriarchy was so important—that diversion by emotions was not good no matter what. But a lot of them, you know—there was a big thing for non-monogamy, and that took up—you know, that made things really hard because that takes up a lot of energy, so that was the other sort of flavor going. There was a lot of interesting layers you know, like non-monogamy is good, not possessive, I mean, Teresa Trull came and sang in the maybe nineties, I mean, maybe the late eighties, it could have been in the nineties, and she had on these high heels that she—and she had been part of TALF back in the old days—and she said, ‘I just want to tell everybody, that if anybody says I can get raped in these heels I am a black belt in karate and these are a weapon.’ She even thought from the stage she had to say something like that, so there really was a rigid dress code. And I didn’t cut my hair probably for years because of that stereotype that I just hated. We were trying to be free women, than free women! You know, don’t tell them what to wear, what to do.

MC: But a lot of the women did look the same?

JA: Yeah, yeah they did. I mean, it was definitely—you had to have real ovaries to wear a dress to events, even dances.

MC: So, can you sort of talk to me a little bit about this sense of separatism or a separatist community when you sort of first heard about that...

JA: Well I heard about it from the theory group. I certainly understand the need for women's space, I think that women only space is important but I don't think that all space should be women only. And I felt that it was the separatists felt like—they wanted literally a utopia of women with no men, which to me was just impractical.

MC: And so by the time you joined the discussion group this was sort of an existing community in Durham?

JA: Yes, and I think it was fairly small. I think a lot of people came to TALF for social reasons and were not anywhere as dogmatic as the people that call themselves leaders, or perceived themselves as the leaders, the theoretical, the theoreticians. I remember Donna Lieb once did a thing on secretaries at TALF, I mean, you could do a program on anything you wanted. And she basically said, you know, you all talk terrible about secretaries, and I dress like a secretary because that's my job and you know, it really was a forum even though there was this core of rigidity. And yet, there were also a whole lot of playful people and some people would bring fun things for potluck. I remember one 60 year old woman came and showed herself lifting weights, you know, naked from the waist up—this slideshow of her. It wasn't—the people who I think I was particularly involved with because of my experience with the theory group, that I was more impacted—I felt like the separatists were a larger part of the community than they were. I feel like they really were not that big of a part in the total lesbian community even though

they were maybe more the visible part. And like I said, the Greensboro Massacre in 1979—that, for many people, including myself, was like, you know, this is ridiculous, we are all in this together—and I think that was sort of the end of it, if it hadn't already ended before, that was the coffin nail in the thing. [...] I know there were a lot of lesbians that were involved in the events around the Greensboro Massacre. We did a "Save our Democracy," an SOS conference that was held at Hayti, the black church—actually, it was held at St. Joe's AME church. I don't know if we, Ladyslipper, was there, I was there with some lesbian group having a table at the broader table with all the progressive groups, and I think because of that is why the lesbian community in Durham was less separatist, because we were so involved with the progressive community from that point, because we realized that the people who are shooting don't really make distinctions between lesbians and progressives and radicals and communists and blacks. They don't care. I think that's why that first march after the man was killed at Little River who was presumed to be gay was very much—[leaves to get a personal scrapbook]. **[51 minutes]**  
**[58 minutes, 40 seconds]**

JA: I think that Durham had a less—I think because of the events at Little River—where the guy was killed, he wasn't even gay, he was sunbathing at a gay beach, and the Greensboro Massacre, that my experience of Durham was that it was way more open and a lot more, I mean, PA had gay—People's Alliance—you know our local—they had gay officers early early on. It wasn't this; I think part of it, because Durham was smaller than Atlanta and the other big cities even though we had the big population, that we had this unity. Mab Segrest is who wrote this and got Gulley to sign. We kept telling our library director, the mayor's gonna sign a proclamation, it's okay!

MC: So in your experience, for a little while, you knew people who were part of a separatist community...

JA: Right, I would say from 70—I don't when it started, I think the group that formed TALF started in '73.

MC: And that's what you would call the separatists?

JA: Yeah, not all women at TALF were separatists...

MC: But separatist women started TALF? But then it was supposed to be for all lesbians in the community...

JA: Right, right. So I would say from '74 to '79 there was a fairly strong separatist flavor in parts of the lesbian community. Now the sports community was never involved and the bar community was never involved, and then there's a whole working class—see this is what I was going to do my paper on—there was this whole working class bar, women that worked in tobacco, places that I had never seen but I'd heard tales of, and they weren't involved.

MC: Many intersecting communities that make up the one lesbian community....

JA: Yeah, and a lot of them came together at dances. Mandy [Carter] did a lot of dances.

MC: And were these the dances hosted by TALF at the YWCA?

JA: Yeah, you know, some were hosted by the Y and some were hosted by TALF, and I don't remember—Mandy would probably remember which. And some were just, I don't know, Mandy even had a production company, I don't know if they sponsored dances. Ladyslipper didn't do dances, Ladyslipper did concerts. And we did a lot of concerts. And even when we were doing the women only concerts we always had gay men do childcare—from the beginning. It was really important to have childcare and we didn't

want any of the women to miss the thing—and so we had men do childcare and then we would usually have a male bouncer to explain to other men why they couldn't come in.

**[1 hour, 1 minute, 20 seconds]**