

Interview with Patsy Clarke  
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Interview by Robert Ferguson  
Transcript

START OF SIDE A

Patsy Clarke: (begins in middle of conversation about tape recorder) ...that's wonderful.

Rob Ferguson: In fact, if somebody is mowing the yard it will pick up that too.

PC: Or if the dog barks.

RF: Right.

PC: Okay.

RF: My name is Rob Ferguson. It is February 19<sup>th</sup>.

PC: That's right.

RF: Okay, just making sure.

PC: Two thousand and seven.

RF: Two thousand and seven, that's right. And I'm sitting here with Patsy Clarke at her home in Raleigh to interview her about her involvement in MAJIC. So, to begin with, Ms. Clarke, I'd like to ask you about where you were born, where you grew up, and how you came to North Carolina.

PC: Okay, very quickly. I was born at Miami Beach. My father was in theater. In 1929 I was born, a long time ago. Theater was kind of precarious financially at that time. The Depression was on its way and we moved to New England when I was three months old. And daddy had a theater, in New England. Several theaters in New England. So, I spent my first, oh, maybe fifteen years in the New England area. And then, my mother being a southern belle, and I reaching the age of going out with boys, my mother said, "We will get her back to the South where she will meet a nice southern boy." And we moved to Asheville, North Carolina when I was fifteen. And in truth I met a very nice southern boy (laughter), A South Carolinian when I was 20 years old. We knew each other for six weeks and ran off and got married and it lasted for thirty seven and a half years until he died in a plane crash. Do you want my educational background?

RF: Sure, that'd be fine.

PC: Well, I have a degree in theater and literature and had the great good fortune of teaching at theater departments at UNCA in Asheville. I also have had the opportunity of teaching in a law school in California, San Diego, with using my theater training to teach lawyers how to be dramatic. Perhaps influence the judges and the juries. That really about does it, doesn't it?

RF: I think so. Where did you go to school? Where did you get your degrees from?

PC: From UNC. I got my degree there. I went to Greensboro College when I was the age to go to college. But then I met my husband for my senior year and I said, "Whoop, away with that." And off we went to get married. Me in the middle of my senior year. My mother and father were understandably distraught. But I went back to college, to UNC in Asheville when I was forty-one, forty-two. And it was a wonderful experience. People should go to college when they're old. I wanted to grab people on the streets and say, "Let me tell you about the middle ages." I mean, it was so exciting. And I graduated number one in my class. And I'm very proud of that. That's a real thing of pride for me. And my mother and father finally forgave me for running off my senior year. So that's really my educational background.

RF: Do you mind if I ask you how old you were when you did graduate number one in you class?

PC: No. Let's see, how old would I be? I was forty-two when I graduated.

RF: Okay.

PC: I went back when I was thirty-nine or forty. I was forty-two when I graduated. And life just began to open up.

RF: And so you lived in Asheville.

PC: For many years.

RF: And that's where you were when your husband died?

PC: Yes. He died in a plan crash. Very, uh, of course unexpectedly, plane crashes are, and sadly. Because we had a good marriage and I was counting on a lot of years with him. But that's what happened. And then seven years to the day, after that, our son Mark died with AIDS. It always felt like there was something strangely meant to be about the day of March 9<sup>th</sup>, which was the day his plane went down and the day that Mark left this world. And I left Asheville after that. Mostly because, I'd been very, very happy there. But after Harry was gone, Harry my husband, and Mark was gone, it just seemed like a needed a new door. You know, they are always saying a new door opens if you're willing to see it. So, my oldest son, Bruce, married with three grandchildren, was living, is living in Raleigh, and I thought, "You know, let's circle the wagons in Raleigh

and see what kind of a life I can have there." And I've never regretted it. It's been wonderful. I've made it a different life. But the theater community here has been very good to me. My family is good to me. And I'm interested in the world. So, I'm not complaining.

RF: In the book that you wrote, *Keep Singing*, you were very candid about your political leanings before you were involved in MAJIC.

PC: Yes, yes.

RF: Do you mind talking a little bit about that?

PC: Not at all because I think the fact that I was raised in and married into a very conservative family has a great bearing on my transformation or conversion, however you want to call it. I had always thought, "Well, I'm a conservative Republican." I'd always voted Republican. And my husband was a friend of Jesse Helms. And so we always voted for Jesse Helms. I took it as a matter of course, actually. I never thought much about it. I was thinking about the theater and about the four children we were raising and my husband was doing the politics. In fact, he ran for a few offices. I thought, "Hmm, why would anyone want to mess with this silliness." Because that's the way it appeared to me. Then, after I made the move to Raleigh, and after Mark died, I met a woman who had experienced a similar circumstance, only she was a liberal Democrat. We almost two sides of the coin, because I was extremely conservative, I thought. And she was extremely liberal, I knew. Our friendship... she had lost a son named Mark to AIDS. Both of our sons were gay. That was alright. It didn't disturb us. It disturbed us that they died. And it disturbed us that people had such a narrow view, bigoted view, of the gay community and of AIDS as being a disgrace rather than a tragedy that it really was and is. So, our friendship ran along for about a year and I was still thinking that I was conservative. One time she sat me down on her sun porch and she says, "Alright, I want to give you a litmus test." Let's see if I can remember them all. She asked me these questions, best I can remember. "How do you feel about prayer in the schools?" And I said, "Well, I never knew anyone who could make me pray, or stop me from praying, so there. I don't think we need anything said legislatively about it." "Well, how do you feel about the death penalty?" I said, "Well, I'm against that. I'm not in favor of state sponsored homicide." "What do you think about gay rights?" And I said, "Well, you know what I think about that." Right now I can't think of any of the others. The regular things that we all disagree upon and so on. And she looked at me when we'd had that little conversation and she said, "Patsy, you're a liberal and don't know it." And I went home and worried about that. Was I really a liberal and didn't know it? I rolled it around inside for awhile. And shortly after that I met my friend Eloise, with whom I co-wrote this book, for lunch. And she said, "Well, did you read the editorial in the *News & Observer* today? And I said, "No, I didn't read it. What does it say?" She said, "It quoted Jesse as saying he believed that people who died of AIDS deserved what they got." I was agape. Really, I'm not easily speechless, as you can probably tell (laughter). But I was speechless. And I said, "There has to be a mistake. Jesse Helms is a good man, a fine man, an honorable man, my husband said so, and I

voted for him." And she said, "Well, go back and read it yourself." And I did. And I thought, "Well, he just doesn't understand." Oh, the naiveté of my thinking. "I will write him a letter and I will explain it to him." So I did. More fool I. I don't regret it though. I wrote the letter on yellow legal-sized lined paper, blotched with tears all over it. And I can't type, not really well, so I had to get someone to type it for me. They did, they typed it at the Age Service Agency for me. And I mailed it off to Jesse Helms. About two weeks after that I got a reply. I still have it. I guess it's off historical interest now. That letter that I wrote him has appeared in several anthologies, and more publications that I remember right now. And along... some of them included his letter. His letter to me said he was sorry for what... He called me, he said, "Dear Patsy." And told me very nicely, "I don't feel like calling you 'Mrs. Clarke' because of how well I knew Harry, and your letter was poignant." Or words to that affect. He said, "I'm sorry for your loss." And then he went on to talk primarily in the letter about the gay community and his feeling about them. Well, that wasn't what I wrote about. What I said in my letter was, "Please don't judge people as deserving what they get if they die of AIDS. I can't ask you to accept the gay orientation because that's up to you. But I can ask you not to judge people like my son and his partner. They were honorable people with high standards. And I'd like for you to reconsider your statements." One of the statements that he said in his letter was, "I'm sorry that Mark chose to play Russian roulette with his sexuality. Well, Mark didn't choose to play Russian roulette with his sexuality. He was a gay man. I don't hear anybody talking about Russian roulette with heterosexual activity. Well, the letter was very upsetting to me. He ended his letter this way, "I'm sorry for you and Mark, but it doesn't change the reality of what is. Sincerely, Jesse Helms." Well, it changed my reality dramatically. My life changed. I walked the floor of this room for two weeks and cried. And I am not prone to be inactive long. So, I thought, "This is ridiculous. I'm not accomplishing anything by crying. There must be a better way." Well, there was a better way. I knew then, as I know now that I'm not a sole mother who has lost a son to AIDS. Every gay person has had a mother and if they're lucky they still have one. And I thought, "There must be a mighty army out there that is willing to stand up for their sons like I want to stand up for mine; mother bears out there wanting to protect their cubs." Well, I already knew Eloise and she knew more people than I did because she'd been in Raleigh a long time. So, we gathered together a group of mothers in this living room. And everyone of us told our stories. The carpet was practically soaked with tears. It was a very... it was a hard day. But we knew we all had to do it. And then we finished, and I said, "Well, I'd like to do something about this. And Eloise and I have been talking and we'd like to get together and stand up against Jesse Helms. Are you willing?" I can almost see those faces right around there. And they looked at Eloise and me, she sat there, I sat here. And they said, well, what can we do? I said, "I don't know, but I'm gonna find out." And they said, "Well, go to it and we'll come back together shortly." And we did. We set up another meeting. And in the meantime Eloise and I began to look about for what can we do. And we talked, I talked about it to my daughter Candy. And she said, "Why don't you call yourselves 'Mothers Against Jesse in Congress' and that's MAJIC?" Well, the "j" we kind of substituted for the "g." I can't spell magic anymore except with a "j" (laughter). And we came back to the mothers with that and they giggled and laughed and said, "Well, okay. We want to have bumper stickers and we want to have cards." I had very small expectations for what

we would do. We didn't have any money. So, I got a pickle jar, a clean one out of my cupboard, and everybody put in maybe five dollars, I think somebody put in ten. We got enough to buy some bumper stickers and we planned to meet. And that was the beginning of MAJIC. And there's no way I can tell you how it steamrolled. But in the end, I hate to say it was an end, but it was. In the end we had had support from almost every state in the Union, except North Dakota and Montana. And it... well, they're very, very conservative states. We had had support and money from Germany, from Holland. And we had raised, from the start of that little pickle jar, we raised sixty-five thousand dollars. Now, that may not sound like very much by today's standards when they're talking millions. But for ten mothers who simply came to stand for their sons and put in five and ten dollars to begin with, we ended up pretty successful. And let me tell you why I think it was successful. Now I know we lost. Jesse Helms won again. I know that. But we didn't lose because we, along with so many people found out that there is a tremendous grassroots upsurge of people who are willing to say, "Yes, my son's gay. So?" Or, "Yes, my son died of AIDS. Isn't that sad?" I came to understand how my... how bigoted I must have seemed and been before I had this transformation. I didn't mean to be. I'm not a bad person. I didn't want to hurt anybody. I just didn't think. And MAJIC made me and lots of other people think and be aware. People don't tell gay jokes in front of me anymore. And I'm glad, because I wouldn't want to hurt their feelings. But I would have to say, "No. That's not for my presence. It just isn't funny to me." I think I'm running down. You might need to ask me something now.

RF: Okay. Would you like a break or a glass of water?

PC: No.

RF: Okay. You were talking about the grassroots, really, base of MAJIC. Is that how the funding came about too? Did you send out mailers? Was it all word of mouth?

PC: Well, we almost immediately found a group of people who wanted to help us. And we almost immediately had a wonderful woman running the campaign. It was all of a sudden a real campaign. And she knew where to order the buttons and the t-shirts. I never thought we'd be in the t-shirt business (laughter), but we were. And the bumper stickers and all the things that go with it. And we had a young man that we hired and he ran about taking us to the speeches. All of a sudden, people wanted us to speak. Now primarily it was the gay community, it started out. And we were happy to go speak to the gay community. I never thought, I mean, I'm not much of one for going to bars, look at my age, but here I was speaking and advertising t-shirts in a gay nightclub. And it was fine. I learned also this; I really didn't know too much about the gay community. I knew my son and his partner. And I was raised in the theater and I knew a lot of gay people. But I didn't know, um, well I didn't know this; at one meeting in Greensboro, a very ordinary looking woman, ordinary by my standards, bounced up to me and she was a lawyer and she was a lesbian. And I thought, "Oh my word, she looks just like me." There's really not a sign on her that says, "I'm a lesbian." And there were men in business suits who were bankers and lawyers and I met doctors too who looked just like everybody else. Like my husband. Like my other son who is straight as an arrow. And I

learned that I was really accepting the judgment of a societal culture that had existed through the efforts of people like Senator Helms. And I all of a sudden was free. My son's tragedy, and that loss of that wonderful fellow, opened my eyes. My son always said since the time he was a little boy, he said, "I don't think I'll live to be an old man. I think I'll die young." I said, "Oh, Mark don't talk like that." But he said it right along. I don't know that he... I don't know, that's kind of speculating on the esoteric and the arcane. But, he did die a young man, thirty-one, but he has been a symbol for so many other people. His life, if I may be so bold, has been a beacon for mine and for more people than I can count. And for books. Right over there is one of them. And there is another one up in there. There. Your turn.

RF: That actually raises some other questions. Um, I want to ask about Mark.

PC: Okay, ask about him. I love to talk about him.

RF: Okay.

PC: He was six feet seven inches tall. Very handsome and very vain. He was smart. He was lazy. You know, one of my daughters said, "Don't say that Mark was lazy." And I said, "Well, he was. You know it and I know it." Didn't mean that I didn't love him or that he wasn't utterly charming. He was. He really had more charm than was good for him because he could get away with a lot of laziness through his charm. I'll tell you this; he did not want to tell me that he was gay. And I think I mentioned I was teaching at law school at the time. And he decided that he wanted to go to law school. And I thought, "Oh, praise Heaven, he's going to do something real. A lawyer. I understand that." At one time he told me he wanted to be an Episcopal priest. And I said, "Don't you think you should go to church occasionally before you go to theology school?" And he said, "Oh, I like the robes." And I said, "Well, you're not going on my pocket book, buddy." And that was part of Mark. But he did go to the law school where I was teaching and admittedly I think that had a lot to do with it. But he was smart, he got in. And I was out there for my stint with the trial practice class at the time, and one day I walked into the lobby of the law school and there stood Mark above everybody because he was so tall. And people were all standing around him slapping him on the back and saying, "Good for you, Mark." And I went up and I said, "What's this about?" And one of the guys said, "Mark's got the courage to quit this damn place. The rest of us would like to, but we don't have the nerve." I said, "What!" I couldn't believe that he was dropping out of law school. And I looked at him and he saw me and he said, "We'll talk later." I said, "I guess we will," and I walked away. And we talked. But he said, "Mom, I just can't hack it. You know how I am. I never stick to anything." And I said, "Okay, Mark. You're a grownup. He said, "I'm going back to Mace." Mace was, we called him "his roommate." I know he wasn't his roommate. He was his partner. He said, "I'm going back to Mace. And maybe I'll open an antique store. I'll get a job. Gonna get my things sent back across the country to Florida." I said, "I am not paying to move those things back. I paid to get 'em out here." I was really angry, Rob. He'd let me down, I'd thought, again. Well, it was a year, I guess, before we had a phone call. Finally I said to Mark, because of a lot of things, he was seeing a doctor for this and a

doctor for that, and I finally said, "Why are you always going to the doctor? You're a young man. Are you turning into a hypochondriac?" He said, "Well no, I just want to take care of myself." And I said, "Mark...", because Rob, I'm not stupid. "Rob... I mean, Mark, are you HIV positive?" And Mark said, "Mom, what a question!" (Tape is momentarily paused when telephone rings and Patsy Clarke answers. Tape is paused no more than thirty seconds.)

RF: Alright.

PC: So, I asked him again, "Mark are you HIV positive?" And again he said, "Mom, I can't believe you asked me that." Then I said, "Mark, I'm going to ask you one more time. Yes or no. Are you HIV positive?" Long pause. And then he said, "Yes." And then I said, "Are you gay?" Another long pause. And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, that's out of the way, let's see what we can do to get you better and to help you." He told me afterwards it's as if it was a great weight had gone from his shoulders that I knew and that I still loved him. Can you imagine? He was afraid that I might not love him. That's the thing that I'm still sorry about. I still regret that it was that way. And yet I think it was a result of these mores of our time. Why would he think it would be any different? Everybody stood away from people with AIDS and made fun of gay people. Why would he think that I was any different? But I was. And I am. And after that phone call I cried really hard a really long time because I didn't know what I was going to do. Because then, that was I think in 1992. And things were, when you were diagnosed with AIDS then it was a terminal and fatal disease and that's what you could expect. You simply had to prepare for it. And so we began to prepare. And we got him the best medical care that we could find. Tried all the things that were new then, but they didn't work. They didn't work. You know Rob, for some reason right now this has popped into my head because you really came to talk about MAJIC and the political thing. And here I am talking about my son. It's because of Mark of course that MAJIC came into being. I was thinking today, when I knew you were coming over here, why do people come involved in political movements? The world is filled with politicians or would-be politicians, wanna-bes. And why do they want to do that? And there are three things that came into my mind. Two are closely connected. Power and money. It's hard to separate those things. I don't understand those motivations. The other motivation I do understand because it was mine. And that was change. I wanted to have a part in implementing a huge, big change. Not just in my house, or in my cul-de-sac, or in my town, or in my state; but in my country. And if possible, eventually in the world. That's a pretty big desire, isn't it? But that's what motivated this grassroots effort called MAJIC. That's all in the world we wanted. We did not want money. We did not want power. We wanted to erase as much as we could of bigotry as we saw it exemplified in the spewings of people like Jesse Helms.

RF: I know that you encountered some pretty nasty letters and emails probably, when you were a member of MAJIC.

PC: We did.

RF: Did you ever actually come across Jesse Helms or anybody from his staff after that?

PC: You know, it's so interesting because they never came near us. They never contacted us, except for Jesse's letter which I've already spoken about. We did get some hate mail. But in all honesty, ninety-five percent of it was supportive and saying, "Go get him! We're for you!" And many communications were thanking us. That was what was so heart rending to us that people would call and say, "Thank you for doing this. Maybe my mother will stand up now." One of the worst things that I remember getting, and sometimes it's good to hear the worst so that you can value the best, was an email from Chapel Hill. Chapel Hill, considered the liberal bastion, and this came from Chapel Hill, unsigned of course. The nasty ones were always unsigned. But it berated us with some obscenities which I'm not going to say here. But the last line was, "I'm glad your sons are dead." Isn't that hard to imagine?

RF: Yes.

PC: Saying that anybody, that you're glad that anyone is dead. At one point in the campaign, because it wasn't all easy. It really wasn't. There was some hard times, but I don't need to go into all those. But one time I had reached the point where I thought, "I don't know, this may be more struggle than its worth." And, you know, I'm paraphrasing the Bible, "wherever two or three are gathered together there will be dissension." And there was dissension. Whether we should do it this way or that way and all and so forth. And one day the mail came to me and I had gone to pick it up. I was sitting on the bed opening the mail, and I was thinking, "I just want to quit this, I don't want to go through with this anymore. I'm a nice old lady that can be in the theater and not worry with things like this, I want to quit." And I opened the letter at that time and a flier advertising pizzas fell out and there was a check with it. And on the pizza flier, scratched out was, "Thank you for what you're doing. I've lost so many friends to AIDS, I want to help." And the check was for five dollars. And I thought, "Oh, alright, I can't quit, can I?" And we didn't. And I don't guess that guy... you know what, I hadn't thought about this, but the signature was Rob.

RF: Really?

PC: Uh-huh. And I remember saying out loud, "Okay, Rob, if it matters, means that much to you, surely I can pick up my moans and groans and get along with this. And I did. I don't mean to make myself sound like I'm a martyr, because I'm not. I have no desire to be a martyr because I could have quit, and I think some of the others would. We were really low. And you know what, another thing that happened. It was a very low time. There was a lot of dissension. And all of a sudden *People Magazine* wanted to make a page on us. Well, that turned it around because a lot of people who were really angry about some things wanted that publicity. I wanted it if it made a change. I was willing to do anything I could that was legal, moral, and ethical to evoke a change. So, we did. We got some wonderful publicity. And we finally had enough money to make a commercial. And we had professional people volunteer to make it for free because they

were so into the cause that we were working for. And it was a wonderful commercial. Did you ever see it?

RF: I have not seen it?

PC: Well, it's in that new documentary and I have a tape of it. It was wonderful, it was just a wonderful commercial. And we had enough money to buy the time. So off we pranced to buy the time. Would you believe that, now CNN ran it because they were too big to be cowed by the powers that be. And I think one, I think WRAL, one of them locally ran it once or twice. But that was it. We could not buy the time. And the station where, from Asheville, where I had spent most of my life, and they had called me, asked for an interview, and we had done a good interview. And they said, "Well, this is a great interview." Never ran it. And they wouldn't sell us the time. And the word came, always scuttlebutt so I couldn't pin it, but the word came that those places were told that there would be trouble if they ran that add. And then I learned what it was like to play with the big boys. I'm nobody. Nobody! And that was the political machine of the latter part of the twentieth century. And we stood up and they tried to knock us down. They didn't knock us down, but they did prevent us from a lot.

RF: You mentioned a couple of times that things got hard within MAJIC. Was most of the difficulties coming from within the group or from without? You know, getting, not getting your commercial on TV, your interviews on TV. What do you think was the most difficult thing about...?

PC: I think the most difficult... that's a hard one. Probably within because we really came close to breaking apart. And over silly things. Over turf. You know what I'm saying? "No, I'm supposed to do that." Or, "No, I write the newsletter." Or little things that happen within any human endeavor. But people get their feelings hurt. I think mostly within. Although there was, there was opposition, external opposition too. Which was hard to deal with, but... And it would've been easier in one respect to say, "Okay, I give this up." But something inside said, "You got to look at yourself in the mirror. And I am, I have to confess, a believer in Karma. And I believe that if I turn my back on the challenges that are really put right in front of my face, then I may have to learn in another incarnation the same lesson and I don't want to. So, maybe that was selfish that I felt that I had to go on for my own soul's sake. Funny to say that, isn't it? I've never said that on any of the interviews. But there it is for history.

RF: There it is. Um, let's see. You and Ms. Vaughn seemed to spearhead a lot of the activities and everything.

PC: We were the spokespersons.

RF: Right. Did the other mothers, or the other women in the group have a lot of experience organizing before? Or what type of roles did they play?

PC: What they did that was absolutely invaluable was to be there for us. I remember one time, and Eloise couldn't go for some reason, so I was there alone, at a concert. Concerts to me are symphony concerts. But this was a concert where lots of young people picnicking and smoking marijuana, I'm not used that, I didn't know. But I saw all these smoke things going up. And here I am a little old lady with some of my little old lady mothers standing right in back of me in front of a huge group of people, all very young, me with a microphone in front of me talking about my son and their sons and about what had happened to us, and we wanted to the support of these people to help us to fight the bigotry represented by Jesse Helms. Well, it may have been another world to me, but boy were they responsive. They were wonderful to us. It's a kind of life that I don't know. It was out of my generation. But they were supportive and kind and wonderful and donated. And they other mothers were there. They we were in our flowered skirts, some with ponytails and our little pocketbooks that we carried and pantsuits. We were just little old ladies that looked like we could have come from a circle meeting or a back sale. And I think probably that was part of our appeal because we were so ordinary and so plain. Or plainness was unusual. You know what I mean?

RF: I do. Do you remember the concert?

PC: No, it was in Durham.

RF: It was in Durham.

PC: It was at one of those big places.

RF: An outdoor concert?

PC: Outdoor. Absolutely. And we went, if you remember in the book, Eloise went to the Democratic Convention. Well, boy that was a blast. You know, here I was on a platform with Ted Kennedy and I'd been raised to think that that was absolutely disgraceful.

RF: Right.

PC: And I also believed the fact that I had been a conservative Republican and turned completely had more of affect than if I'd always been a liberal Democrat against Jesse Helms. So, I think it was good that I could make the change. Although, boy, one of the first places that we went to speak, I stood up and said that I had been a conservative Republican, it was a gay group, and that I had voted for Jesse Helms. Well the boos, "Boo, boo." This was in the beginning. And I said, "Well, wait a minute. Give me a chance. And they got calm because they were gentlemen and ladies and they listened. And I had taken a copy of the letter that I had written Jesse Helms. I was passing it out like crazy and passing out the letter that he had sent me back. And at the end of the talk it was hugs and acceptance. And it was alright. But it mattered more that I had been and was now something else.

RF: With MAJIC, what were your organizational meetings like?

PC: Well, we would talk about the various things that were happening to us and what people were saying to us, and we had our big buttons that said, "MAJIC," and we wore them like a flower corsage all the time. And that brought forth a lot of reaction. And the mothers would tell us what was said. And sometimes we would have potluck dinners, you know, women can't resist that. And we would sit there and eat goodies and talk about how we were trying to work it. And they, we would read things that we were writing. I remember one time, I wanted to start, I knew we were going to write a book. I knew this would end up in a book and I remember readings something that I written about it. I'm not sure which part it was, but we used it eventually. But I asked them to listen, they were so good, and so supportive. And we didn't meet monthly, but mostly just to tell them what Eloise and I were doing. It really was Eloise and... it was the two of us that out. These mothers would not speak in public, but they supported it. And they stood there and said, "Yes, I'm a member of MAJIC." There was the wife of a Baptists minister in our group. Now that was not easy for her to stand up like that. You know that old saying, "I am but one, but I am one." And they did it and they spread their strength and their courage wherever they stood.

RF: Was it something that the group talked about that they would not speak in public? That it would mainly be you and Ms. Vaughn?

PC: It wasn't that they didn't approve of speaking in public, they were scared. Public speaking is a terrifying thing for a lot of people. I actually like it as you probably can tell. But that was my business. I taught speech. I taught communications and theater and I like to speak to people. What is interesting to me, Eloise used to say, "Why are you making me do this?" But it needed both of us. And she got pretty good at it, but she never liked it. And she would say, "Patsy, do I have to go?" And I would say, "Yes, we both have to go." One time we spoke at the Ellipse in Washington. It was coming out... (telephone rings, tape is stopped while Mrs. Clarke answers phone, tape is stopped for no more than thirty seconds). I still have my memory. And it was coming out day in October. We also, the quilt, the names quilt, you know what that is?

RF: Uh-huh.

PC: Had been displayed in Washington. And Eloise and I both, and some of the other mothers, because they went too, had panels in the quilt. So we'd been there for that. Well after it grew dark and it was cold, Eloise and I wandered over to where the coming out group was. And we knew a lot of the people who were there and the woman who was running said, "If I'd known you too were going to be here, I would've put you on the speaking agenda." And I said, "Well, is it too late?" Always eager to get the word if I could. And she said, "Well, stay close and we'll see if we can get you on." Eloise said, "What are we going to say?" And I said, "Don't worry about it. We'll say something that's right when we get up there." Because I have great faith that if you believe in what you're saying, that it will come out right. So, we waited around, we were freezing. And to make a very long story short, they were having the featured guest of

noted celebrity, Cher. People now a days really know who Cher is, a great singer, a tiny little woman, very, very well known, an actress and so forth. And she was coming. Well, she didn't get there. Well, she didn't get there and they would come and say, "Can you be ready to speak any minute?" And we'd say, "Yes, yes we'll be ready." And they'd say, "Oh, no. Cher is almost here." And it went back and forth like that for, oh, maybe fifteen minutes which seemed like an hour. And Cher finally came. She marched in with her white leather, black leather, whatever it was and these bodyguards that were big as refrigerators. She got up there and Cher has a lesbian daughter. And so that's why she was there to speak. And she spoke briefly, saying that she was proud of her daughter and that it was hard for her to get used to it but she had and she was, as she put it, "fine with it now." And she was gone. And the woman again who was in charge said, "There are two mothers who have been waiting to speak. And stay just a little longer and give them your attention." And up Eloise and I bounced. And this was a huge group. A couple thousand people, I guess, or more. And we spoke and I truly don't remember what we said but whatever it was must have been okay because the response was wonderful. We spoke about our sons and why we were in Washington and what we were hoping to do with the election. And then we walked off the stage and a man came up to us and said, "Could you come over here? There's a man who would like to speak with you." We said, "Sure." We went over to a chain link fence and it wasn't just a man, it was more people than we could count. It was like a sea of faces...

END OF SIDE A

START OF SIDE B

RF: Okay.

PC: Hands full of money just pushing at us. We didn't understand what was going on or how to react. And there were tears streaming down the faces of these people. And finally we realized, because they told us, that these were the mothers and fathers of the gay people who had come out, the sisters and the brothers and the gay people themselves. This was a microcosm of what our world is without any covering over it or any hiding. And they wanted to touch our hands. And we held as many as we could. And finally we said, "Well, what do we do with this money?" We couldn't hold it. Somebody gave us a container of some sort and we put it all in that. And finally the crowd diminished and it was over. And Eloise and I, one of the men was gonna take us back to the hotel because it was dark and Washington, as you know, is not the safest place for little old ladies to be in the dark and cold. And we got in the car and I turned to Eloise and this was after... Eloise and I never had any dissension, it was others. But we both worried about it. And I turned to her and I said, "Well, if we ever had any doubt about what we're doing as to whether it's right or not, it's gone now." That was all the proof we could possibly need even if we lose. People used to ask us, "If you knew you were going to lose, what would you do?" And the motivation came up: change. We are still going to affect change. So we'd go right on. We would run the race anyway. And I don't think we lost. I really refuse to accept that we lost. And I have actually, truly sorrow for Jesse Helms, because to live with those thoughts must be awful. It wasn't just

about gay people. He was very, very harsh about civil rights as you well know. And then it became not popular to be a racist even though I think he still remained one. And then it was put us, the last acceptable prejudice was homosexuality. And our effort was to make it a not acceptable prejudice.

RF: Well, speaking about MAJIC's legacy and Jesse Helms for that matter, and Jesse Helms legacy, I don't know if you've read his memoir?

PC: No.

RF: Yea, it came out last year. I read it in preparation for this.

PC: I'm sure you did and that's good.

RF: And it's split into really short chapters, five to ten pages apiece. And there is one chapter in there about his role in sending aid to Africa to fight AIDS.

PC: Oh, my goodness! Yes.

RF: He starts that chapter by saying something to the effect of, when he was in Congress in the nineties; he fought AIDS, research for AIDS...

PC: Appropriations. Yes.

RF: Ryan White research. And because he was under the impression that AIDS was spread by irresponsibility with sexual behavior and with dirty needle users. And the next line is, "I was wrong."

PC: Yes. May I speak to that?

RF: Absolutely. I would love for you to.

PC: When that was first announced in the paper, I thought, "I never thought I would live to see the day." And then my sensibility kicked in and I thought, "Now wait a minute. Let's see how this plays out." And of course by the next day, he was making a correction and explanation that he was not being, changing his attitude towards homosexuality. And he was going for appropriations or money to Africa. Now that's fine. I'm glad to help Africa in any way we can. I think we need to start at home first, and help those who are related to us and we've raised and loved. He was not in favor of that. I do not believe he was in favor of that. I know a great many people thought, "Oh my, he changed, he saw the light." People called me from across the country and said, "Hey isn't this wonderful." And I said, "Wait a minute. Please, just wait a little while." My stock broker called me and said, "Isn't this great? Aren't you proud?" But no, we did not accomplish a change within Jesse Helms. I do not believe that. I do believe that we have facilitated change in other areas and with other groups. Not Jesse. Not Jesse. I think his change will have to come later.

RF: Yes ma'am. A part of my job is, after the interview, is to put MAJIC in context, I guess.

PC: In what context?

RF: Well, good question. Well, the second half of that question is, or that statement is; did, at the time, or now in retrospect, did you see MAJIC as an extension of any other kind of movement? You know, the gay rights movement, or civil rights movement, or anything like that? A political or social movement?

PC: No, not really because we had a cause that we were, it had a termination and that was fighting Jesse Helms. Now, Eloise and I both still feel that the extension of MAJIC was the writing of Keep Singing. And Keep Singing is in its second printing. So we feel that, we know that it's reached a lot of people. So that's an extension. But, come on let's face it, I'm seventy-eight years old and my days of stumping around in a political way are pretty limited. I'm doing well to still be playing around on stage some. But it had, oh I can't think of the right word. We saw an end in sight with MAJIC. There were many times that people said, "Are you gonna keep on with it?" Well, no. Most people don't realize, for a couple of women and their helpers, like ten of us, to get involved with the Federal Election Commission is very intimidated because I hate forms of any kind and we had to fill out forms that the federal government would approve of. Well, we got people to help us, of course. We got an accountant and we got a lawyer to take care of it. But it was scary there for awhile because I was afraid, "What if we did something wrong?" And here we were muddled up with one of the most powerful political giants in the United States of America and we could just stumble one time and ruin what we were trying to do. In fact, when we went down to register our little PAC, because we were a PAC, we went down to the election, uh, wherever it was downtown in Raleigh, said we wanted to register. And the lady said, "Alright, this is what you do and this is what you fill out." And I said something about MAJIC meaning mothers against Jesse in Congress. And she looked up from her work with a very strong, frightened expression and said, "What are you talking about?" And I said, "Well, we're fighting Jesse Helms. This is a PAC that is against Jesse Helms. We're not for someone. We're against someone. And she said, "That's an entirely different matter." Closed her books and said, "You will have to deal with the Federal Election Commission for that. We cannot do that here." So there we were. We didn't even know what she was talking about. Remember; bake sales, PTA, quilts, knitting (laughter). So, we went home and said, "Well, what do we do?" And our mothers wanted us to do something but they didn't know what. Well, Eloise came from a political family and it didn't take long for Eloise to find out what we should do. If it had been left to me, I don't know what I would've done. But she found the right people for us to go through the right channels and do the right thing. I slept, literally, with the booklet. Not a very interesting booklet, about that thick, put out by the Federal Election Commission. I slept with that by my bed for weeks until we got someone to take care of that part of it. And I don't know whether I should tell you this. Oh, I guess it's alright. I have not told this before, but I used to call the FEC regularly and say, "Is it alright if we do...", and "I'm doing this. Is this the way it's supposed to

be?" And they would give me conflicting answers. And I'd hang up 'cause I'd get one, one time and another the other time. And because I was a Dudley Doright, I could never get it straight. And finally we had a volunteer lawyer out of state, and I don't even remember her name so I'm not going to have to tell it. But I told her my problem. Well, she said, "Patsy, do not call the FEC. They haven't a clue. Call me." (laughter) And from there on in, I did. And we were legal. It was just another example of the bureaucracy and little old ladies trying to do an insurmountable thing. I wonder now at our temerity. How did we think we were?

RF: You were changing the world.

PC: Maybe in a little way, I hope.

RF: Yep.

PC: In a little way.

RF: So, after the '96 election?

PC: Yes, it was '96.

RF: You didn't renew you PAC status?

PC: No, we let it run out and did all the necessary things to close it out and whatever the financial thing was all tidied up.

RF: Um, so was there a time, as a group, you decided, "We won't do it again for the next..."

PC: Well, it just finished with the election. We met again and said, "We fought the good fight but that's it. And we're closing it out, ladies. Is that alright with you?" "Yes, of course." And they went on with their lives. My life and Eloise's life, they were changed irrevocably. And we began to work on the book. And Eloise is one of the most tenacious, wonderful people I've ever know. And I would have given up trying to find a publisher. I was tired. But she kept saying, "No. No. We're gonna find somebody. We'll find somebody." And she is a great net worker. And we were at one of those parties, or meetings, and she found somebody who said, "Write to..." and she gave the name. I think Allison Publishing Company. It's a gay publishing company. And they picked us up. And they published us and did a good job with us. And we had a great time with them. They were very cooperative. And when the contract ran out, they were not going to renew..., even though they sold out, they're a small company and they couldn't afford to reprint because the book didn't cost much and they couldn't make a whole lot on it. So Eloise and I reprinted it ourselves at our own cost. And we still have some of those, but they're almost gone. So that was... and when we first started out, they said, "Well, maybe we'll print a hundred and fifty." Well, that's nothing. And then maybe a thousand. And then finally, I think the first printing was seventy-five hundred

or eight thousand. And that did sell out. Which is not a lot, I know. But, it is a lot. It's in libraries and people... it's still available. We reprinted twenty-five hundred. So I would say, all total, there's probably ten thousand copies out there.

RF: Okay. It's at UNC's library. That's where I got it.

PC: Is it?

RF: Uh-huh. Yep.

PC: I'm glad.

RF: And the check-out card has lots of punches, so that's good.

PC: Good. That makes me very glad. Thank you for telling me that.

RF: Uh, let's see. I'm consulting my list of questions here that we've covered most of them. About all of them

PC: Good.

RF: How doing on time?

PC: Well, have another...

RF: You have something.

PC: Something I have to... but it's not until five. And I will have to return this call.

RF: Okay. Let me just make sure.

PC: I have to let the dog out too.

RF: Well, let me just ask you this while I'm looking at my list. Is there anything you think that I haven't asked that you want to include in this particular interview?

PC: I can't think of anything. I'm perfectly willing to answer anything you want.

RF: I did think of one thing. Was MAJIC every directly involved with any other gay rights groups like PFLAG, or anything like that?

PC: Well, they printed some of our announcements in the PFLAG newsletter and we went and spoke to PFLAG. I am a contributor to PLFAG. But I don't want to join anything else. We didn't... it's just too much involved. Let's see, we were closely supported by, I don't whether to say affiliated, they recognized us and were always

pushing us forward and wanted to help us as much as they could, the Human Rights Campaign. Do you know what that is?

RF: Yes ma'am.

PC: Okay. And they gave us the equality award at their banquet, the year after the election. They gave a lovely little thing to Eloise and to me, saying, for our work with MAJIC. And that sense we were, yes, involved there. Let's see, you know we had support from so many areas. When we had our book reading, we went on a little tour which was very interesting. But of course we had a reading at Quail Ridge here in Raleigh. And we had no idea who would come. But Nicole Brodeur, who was the writer who helped us to put it together, wonderful woman, smart women. She came from Seattle to be with us and brought her family. And Eloise has family here and I have family here and some others came, and we thought, "Well, maybe we'll have seventy people there that can hold." It was absolutely... there wasn't a space left. They were everywhere. And that was proof to me. They were not all just family and friends, they were people who seriously, sincerely cared about what this book was saying and about what MAJIC had tried to do. They were wonderful. C-SPAN came and recorded. We were so excited we didn't know what to do. And it's played on C-SPAN, over several time in that book SPAN thing that they do.

RF: Right.

PC: And so I guess that's available. We really ran into so much good, Rob, that I should never complain about the few things that were hard. You know, how do you know what's good if you don't have some things bad. So the principle of contrast was there and mostly it was all good. That was a wonderful night. I shall always remember that night we got to read from the book and got to tell some stories and I love doing that. And they were very, very responsive. And we stayed and signed books and sold books and it was just a lovely evening. A nice memory.

RF: Well, the book and you have inspired a lot of people.

PC: Thank you.

RF: I think that's all I have for you, unless you have something else for me?

PC: It's been a pleasure.

RF: Yes, it has. Thank you very much.

PC: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW