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

Interview R-0876

Dana Edell

July 6, 2015

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## **ABSTRACT – Dana Edell**

Interviewee: Dana Edell

Interviewer: Rachel Seidman

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Date: July 6, 2015

Length: 02:33:00

Dana Edell is a theater director, activist organizer, and the current executive director of the SPARK Movement, a group empowering girls to become activists for anti-racist gender justice. The interview traces Edell's development as an artist, feminist, academic, and professional. Edell describes how her feminism was sparked as a result of her experiences in theater at her arts high school. With only slight encouragement from the interviewer, she progresses through a remarkably cohesive account of her experiences with theater, girls' activism and programs, and feminism as a dynamic and increasingly intersectional belief. She explains how, beginning in college, she and various friends and colleagues throughout the years have found ways to bring theater to underprivileged girls. She walks through her undergraduate effort to work with girls in juvenile detention and how, during her master's program at Columbia, she founded viBe Theater Experience, a theater company made up of low-income girls in New York City, which she ran for ten years and during her PhD at NYU. In 2011, Edell was hired as executive director of SPARK. She analyzes how her career move tracked with her growing feeling that more needed to be done with and for girls than simply allowing them to tell their often traumatic stories; her academic focus had also shifted to combine developmental psychology with educational theater.

The second half of the interview deals largely with her work at SPARK, including continuing some theater work, helping to prioritize girls' ideas and concerns, their first several issue campaigns, the impact of social media and digital organizing, and the team's increasing commitment to anti-racist work in conjunction with feminist issues. Edell also discusses the power of intergenerational collaboration, the social move from third to fourth wave feminism, her and SPARK's inclusion of trans girls and nonbinary young people, her professorial and writing work, and shifting SPARK's model to better serve online and in-person levels of the organization.

This interview was collected 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 – Dana Edell**

(compiled July 6, 2015)

Interviewee: Dana Edell  
Interviewer: Rachel F. Seidman  
Interview Date: July 6, 2015  
Location: Dana Edell's apartment in Brooklyn, NY

THE INTERVIEWEE. Dana Edell is the director of the SPARK Movement.

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

### DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW.

Entering Dana Edell's 2<sup>nd</sup>-story walk-up apartment in Brooklyn, I was immediately struck by the artistry of the space: it was full of bold colors, dramatic patterns, and textured fabrics, a fitting home for a theatrical person. Edell was eager to share her story, and spoke rapidly for long periods with few breaks. At the very beginning of the interview her cat started playing with the cords of the recorder and we had to pause because she almost pulled it off the table. At another point her downstairs neighbor played loud music which may be heard on the recording.

### NOTE ON RECORDING.

Recorded on a digital Zoom recorder.

## **TRANSCRIPT – Dana Edell**

Interviewee: Dana Edell

Interviewer: Rachel Seidman

Interview Date: July 6, 2015

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Length: One audio file, approximately 148 minutes [note: the last fifteen minutes of tape the formal interview is declared over and recorder is declared off but is not actually off. The conversation that follows is not transcribed below].

### **START OF INTERVIEW:**

Rachel Seidman: This is Rachel Seidman. I'm here in Brooklyn, New York with Dana Edell, the executive director of the SPARK Movement and we are having an interview related to a book project called "Speaking Up, Speaking Out, Talking Back: An Oral History of Feminism in the Digital Age." So, Dana—

Dana Edell: Yes.

RS: I would like to have you start talking to me about your family, and we'll go back as far as your grandparents. Did you know your grandparents? What do you know about them?

DE: Yes, I know all four of my grandparents very well. I'll start with my mother's parents, they were first generation in the US, so my great grandparents on my mother's side were from Hungary, Austria, Romania—Jews—and had left Europe, Eastern Europe.

[Laughter over cat, interruption]

RS: We're back, we had to stop for the kitty cat, who wanted to play with the wires.

DE: My mother's grandparents came from Hungary and Romania, her parents came to the U.S. in the early 20th century, that generation. My grandfather, my mother's father, was a pediatrician and my grandmother was a nurse. They moved to New Jersey and my mom was born in New Jersey. My mom grew up in a very traditional Jewish home in Belleville, New Jersey and she had three older brothers. My grandparents, my grandfather was very much a scholar-atheist-communist Jew, I would say. Really amazing man; he spoke a bunch of languages, super smart, very generous and loving. My grandmother, too. I grew up going to their house a lot, and was very close with them. My grandfather died when I was around eight or nine, pretty young. My grandmother moved to Wilmington, Delaware after my grandfather died to be closer to my mom. A lot of my adolescence my grandmother lived down the street, so I saw her a lot when I was growing up. My father's parents, their family is from Russia, also Jewish, and they came to the U.S. similarly in the late 19th century. My father's grandparents came to the U.S. and his parents were born in the Philadelphia area and my father's father was dentist. Really sweet, funny guy. He was also a sculptor so after he retired from being a dentist he started sculpting and made really beautiful Lucite sculptures. They moved to Florida, my father's parents, when I was very young. I remember we would have vacations down in Florida every winter so I saw them at least once a year, we'd spend a couple of weeks hanging out with my grandparents, and were very close with them as well, though they're all gone now. My father's mother passed when I was in high school, and my father's father when I was 28. They all lived into their 90s, all four of my grandparents. You want my parent's stories as well?

RS: Yeah.

DE: My mom grew up in Belleville, New Jersey. She was the youngest of four children, she had three older brothers, so I think she was very much the first girl in a household of boys and was much younger than her brothers. She was a piano player, a beautiful musician and wanted to study piano after high school but her parents wouldn't let her. That wasn't what a nice Jewish girl did. She ended up going to college, then into social work. She's always been very active and volunteering, community service. She was a social worker and she met my dad when she was working as a social worker at a hospital and he was a doctor and he was a resident at the hospital. He's a radiologist, he grew up in New Jersey outside of Philadelphia and he had a younger brother. I think he was a pretty cool guy, he had a motorcycle, or at least my image of him was of a cool, wild guy. He went to medical school, he met my mom. They fell in love at the hospital and they got married in 1971 and they had my older sister. They moved to Florida because my dad got a residency in Florida and I was born in Florida a year after my sister. My older sister and I are a year apart, very close in age. Two years after me they had another girl, my little sister. I have two sisters and we're all within three years of each other, so we grew up almost like triplets. Very close in age, very close. We moved to Delaware when I was three or four; I spent most of my childhood in Greenville, Delaware in a very suburban-rural, middle class Jewish community in Delaware. My mom went back to law school when I was a kid. She graduated from law school when I was in third grade, I remember that, and she worked for a public defender. My dad had a practice in a women's imaging center. He was a radiologist and did mammograms and breast cancer ultra sounds, so his whole practice was women. So there were always just lot of women around. My mom was super awesome, always around even though she was

working part time throughout my childhood, she was very much present in the home and my parents were very supportive of everything my sisters and I were doing, pretty much. We also went a private school and Hebrew Day School, when I was a little kid, and that Jewish education was very important to my parents and in Wilmington there wasn't a very big Jewish community at all. Very WASPy neighborhood, very old money Christian DuPont family. The Jewish community was intimate; we went to a conservative synagogue and I went to Hebrew Day School, which was a tiny school. There were six kids in my whole grade—there were really not a lot of Jews in Wilmington.

RS: Wow

DE: By the time I got to third grade my grade my parents were getting nervous this wasn't the best education because it was such a small school so they pulled us out of the Jewish day school and we went to a private school. I got to the private school and I was the only Jewish girl in the class. It was very sports heavy, very preppy and I didn't fully fit in. It was very academic and sports. I loved sports, I was a big jock at that time but also an artist. From a young age I was always painting and making stuff. I never really felt like there was an arts community in Wilmington, Delaware and I felt a little alienated from that community. I was always making art, I went to an arts summer camp and got really into this camp I went to in Michigan and they had a year-long boarding school and I begged—.

RS: Is this Interlochen?

DE: Interlochen. My mom had gone to summer camp there as a kid. I started going when I was twelve and fell madly in love with being in a community of artists. It was unlike anything I had access to in Delaware. The summer between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade

I was at Interlochen and I saw—. I was there for theater but I also did a lot of visual arts. I saw a sign that said “auditions for the arts academy” and I said “Oh my god, I could stay here? And go to high school?” I couldn’t even comprehend how amazing that would be, so I auditioned for the arts academy.

This was 1991, before email and cellphones or any of that, so I had no way of really getting in touch with my parents. There was a payphone but you never really called home. I remember getting a message in my cabin that was like “Call your mother immediately” [laughter] and I was like “Oh my god, something’s wrong.” So I go to a payphone and call collect and my mom was like “What is going on? We just got a tuition bill for the Interlochen Arts Academy.” I was like “Uh, I really want to go.” She got on a plane and flew out to visit me within a couple days and was like “Let’s talk about this. Why is this important to you?” I explained how I’d never really felt connected to the community in Delaware and really wanted to be around artists. She told me the story of how she’d really wanted to be a piano player when she was younger and her parents wouldn’t let her and she was like, “I promised when I had kids I’d let them follow their dreams and do everything I could to support them.” Which is kind of amazing. I went to boarding school for 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I went to Interlochen. It was fantastic, really magical. There’s no cheesier way to say it, but it was a really magical space, it was all artists.

That’s also where I feel like I started really understanding feminism and being a girl in a way where there weren’t a lot of girls. I did a lot of tech theater and also acting and very much part of the theater department—but I loved the lighting, the set, the building. I was always very visually creative and interested in building stuff and



designing lights. I was one of the only girls doing that kind of work, so even in just underhand ways I very much felt I had to work twice as hard to prove I could use a screw gun, I knew how to climb a ladder, I could hang a light just as well as the boys. It toughened me a little bit. It made me want to do even more. I also had a lot of friends from other countries; it was very much an international high school. It probably came from my mother, but I was always very committed to wanting to help other people and do something outside of my own education and my own art. A friend of mine and I, while we were there, we started a program at Interlochen where a bunch of us in different art forms, musicians and singers and actors, we wanted to go to the local middle school and do what we called ICOP. The International Cultural Outreach Program where we would bring our friends from Interlochen who were a flute player from Japan, a guitarist from Spain and we would go to the local middle school. Traverse City, Michigan was a really low income, very white, very homogenous community where they did not have a lot of access to the arts or to people outside of the US. A lot of these kids had never seen anybody of a different race or from outside of the US so that was an awesome program. We coordinated it ourselves and found ways to get a ride to the school. That was the beginning of, “Oh, I could use the arts. This is so inspiring.” The kids would explode with excitement at seeing musicians that were teenagers. I did a production of—this is so cheesy because I kind of hate the play now—I was in a production of *The Heidi Chronicles*. This was soon after it had been on Broadway; this was in the mid-[19]90s, which is awesome that we did it at Interlochen. Being a part of that show was when I first understood the feminist movement, because it’s very much a play about Heidi going from the [19]50s, ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s of her feminist awakening. That was really important. I

remember I designed the t-shirt for the production and it was a women's symbol made up of all these images of women activists collaged together. I wore it like every day [laughter]. It was the only shirt I wore. It was my feminist t-shirt.

I also remember getting pissed at the male directors at Interlochen that I'd be performing these girl characters, like I performed Juliet, and Helena from *Midsummer [Night's Dream]* and a couple of classic women's roles, that were directed by men. I remember feeling like these male directors were saying, "That's not how a woman would walk," and I was like "Who the fuck are you to tell me how a woman feels?" I was getting "arghh. I don't want to be directed by a man." That happened pretty early in high school. I was really against having these male teachers directing us, so I decided I wanted to direct my own show while I was there. I started getting obsessed with reading Greek mythology and tragedy, which I got interested in as a kid. I'm not sure how, but I've always had this mythology and Greek stuff. I loved the play the *Bacchae*, these ancient Greek plays around passion and reason. In high school I read [Peter Shaffer's] *Equus* and was like "oh my god, this is a contemporary adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*." I was really obsessed with *Equus* and was like "I'm going to direct this at Interlochen." There wasn't really a space for students to direct at all, so we just did it. I got a bunch of friends that I wanted to be in it and I was like "Will you rehearse with me in the dorm at night?" That's what we did for our social life our senior year. We'd rehearse this play and we got it to a point where it was ready to be performed. Because I was doing so much work at the theater, I convinced the tech director, like "Can we just have this theater for one night? I really want to produce this play we've been rehearsing in the dorms." That was really awesome, that was the first time I had made something without any grownups

helping. It was a really powerful production about passion versus reason and psychology, taking the heart and soul out of the tortured artist boy. It was a great show. Then I graduated and I knew I wanted to study ancient Greek. I knew I wanted to be able to translate the plays and I felt like I couldn't direct a Greek tragedy until I had—I had to learn Greek first so I could translate it. I wanted to go to a school where I could do theater, where I could do activist work, and where I could learn ancient Greek.

So I went to Brown for college. I got there and pretty immediately I actually joined the socialists [laughter]. Really because I remember there was a very cute boy who was the big socialist activist who would stand on the green at try and get you to join the International Socialist Organization. I'd always go up to talk to him and then I was like "This is really interesting." I joined the ISO which was kind of a crazy, really radical, leftie political organizers which was made up of Brown students but also a lot of local folks from Providence that were trying to rile up the students. This was anti-war protesting, anti-poverty. I got to Brown in 1994. I don't know what we were protesting actually [laughter]. We were just protesting. We were getting people to sign petitions.

Then I found out about a group on campus that Paula Vogel, who is a playwright teaching at Brown at the time, had started in the 1980s. It was a partnership with the women's prison in Cranston, Rhode Island. She'd train and take Brown undergrad theater students to do theater workshops with women in prison. I was like, "Whoa, theater with women in prison?" I thought it sounded really interesting and it reminded me a little bit about doing the theater projects with kids in high school. I immediately signed up. I was like, I want to do this. This was freshman year and that became a huge part of my life at Brown. I started, when I was a freshman, going to the women's prison and doing poetry

and theater and choreography and dance and all different kinds of arts. I went pretty much every week my whole experience at Brown.

RS: Were you going with a group, or Paula?

DE: Paula wasn't running it. She'd started it and it'd been taken over by a student group which was really cool.

RS: Oh, okay.

DE: It was called SPACE, which stood for Space in Prison for the Arts and Creative Expression. It was led by students and we trained each other. The first year I was trained by older students. We would meet once a week as a group, all of the SPACE artists, then we'd go in in pairs. I became friends with this woman Katie, who is still today one of my best friends in the world. We started going in together, the two of us, freshman or sophomore year. During that time, we'd have a workshop and it'd be women ranging from 18 to 65. I was always felt I was connecting more with the teenagers, the 18- to 25-year-olds, the younger women who still had a lot of energy and hope and knew they were going to get out someday, usually some day soon. Katie and I started to talk about doing something with the local juvenile hall, which was not part of the SPACE program—that was only for the adult correctional institution. We started talking about it our junior year and by the time we got to our senior year we were like, "Let's just do it, let's start, let's expand SPACE into the juvenile hall." We did it. Looking back, I can't believe how naïve and presumptuous we were. This was before internet or anything. We had no idea where this juvenile hall even was. We just showed up. We drove there and walked in and waited at security and said, "We'd like to talk to somebody about doing an arts workshop, we're students at Brown and we'd like to offer free theater programs for

the girls.” There was this guy there who said “Okay.” There wasn’t anything for girls there. The state of Rhode Island, at that time, there were about 300 or 400 incarcerated kids. At any given time of those 300 to 400, there were about 20 to 40 girls. There were less than 40 girls in the whole state of Rhode Island who were in prison. Their facility was a bunch of trailers down the road from the boy’s juvenile hall and it was called the Rhode Island Training School. Of course, they always come up with these bizarre names. The boys had basketball and all this stuff and the girls literally had nothing. They had tutors who came in three times a week and that was it; they’d sit around and watch TV. Katie and I spent the year devising a whole theater program with those girls. And it was incredible. We were seniors and getting ready to graduate and were like, “what are we going to do after we graduate? I don’t know, this is really great. Do you think we could figure out how to do this?” We didn’t want to stay in Providence, but we really wanted to continue working with incarcerated girls doing theater.

RS: So what was so great about it?

DE: I was also directing. During this time as well I was directing a ton of shows at Brown. I was a theater major and a classics major and I studied abroad in Greece my junior year. There was a lot of other stuff happening as well, but I felt that making theater with those girls felt like the deepest art-making I was doing in my life. Every day of their life was melodrama in some way. There was an innate hunger and need to express and be creative and to tell their story and to feel they were being heard in some way. That felt so different, not better or worse, but very different from the theater I was making in the theater department which was very aesthetic, a little more experimental, and the theater I was studying from ancient Greece, which was very political. The history of theater in the

western world—. It was a political art form in ancient Greece. I was very inspired by that. Theater was all very anti-war and connected to politics and government. I felt there was a political texture to theater and that I was finding a way to use that with the girls in prison.

RS: Do you remember any particular stories or pieces that came out of that that felt like they fulfilled your vision, or that were particularly inspiring?

DE: I do remember there was one girl Leah. We'd always start with poetry or writing or storytelling process. I remember from the beginning with her that she would never write anything so I was like, you can draw pictures. I realized after a couple weeks that she couldn't write, that she was completely illiterate. She was 15 or 16 at the time and no one had ever taught her how to write. So I'd bring in a tape recorder and we would sit in the corner and she would tell stories into the tape recorder and I'd go and transcribe them. She would perform them. It was this really amazing experience of working with her, and seeing that even if she couldn't read or write she could use performance to express these stories. She was an incredible dancer, so we would work on these pieces. I was learning a different way of making theater also that wasn't like you have to write it out. No. You can dance it or tell your story in a different way or sing it into a tape recorder. Working with her opened my eyes to the potential of using all these different performance techniques to share stories that aren't being told. Katie and I were very sensitive about—we weren't there to find out "What did you do? What was your crime to get in prison?" at all. But I also remember this girl, I don't remember her name, who was super sweet and younger. She was 13 or 14 and she was this bubbly, happy personality who would come and light up the room. We loved her. Then she wasn't there, which happened all the time, they'd get out and come and go. She wasn't there and we

couldn't figure out where she had gone and then I read in the paper, the Providence newspaper, later that week there was a picture of her and she had been transferred to the adult prison because she had murdered her grandmother with a frying pan. She had beat her grandmother to death. I was just—I was totally—. I couldn't connect those two people, the girl who I was working with and the story I read in the newspaper of this incredibly violent child. She got sentenced at the adult prison. The thought of this 13-, 14-year-old girl now spending the rest of her life in the adult prison—that got me really pissed off about the prison system and the way that girls were treated and the way kids were treated. I'm not in any way condoning a violent crime. I have no idea what actually happened, but I started seeing how unfair the entire system was.

Especially seeing girls coming and going, coming and going without any resources while they were in there. Especially a lot of the girls that, in a sad way, loved being in there because it was the first time that they weren't around an abusive family member and they actually felt safer in the prison than they did at home. They would find ways to come back. That was terrifying as well.

Brown had a really cool system where you could create your own classes. If there were any classes that weren't offered at the university it was called a GISP, a Group Independent Study Project. You could make your own GISP and study whatever you wanted. You needed a faculty advisor but you could create your own syllabus. Katie and I and a couple other women from SPACE decided we wanted to do a GISP on women in the criminal justice system so we could learn about the history of women in the criminal justice system and learn more about the prisons. Katie and I were like, "We want to do this next year, but we don't know anything about the system." We did that. It was really

educational, I was learning through this group study project and reading all of these books and really researching the whole landscape of the country in terms of criminal justice and girls, and the history of women and girls in the criminal justice system. Katie and I said, "Let's figure out how are we going to do this next year. Where are we going to go?" I had no idea. I'd never done anything except be a student since I was four years old. Again, this is so funny, so pre-internet, we would go to the library and they had this whole section of the library called "books for every city."

RS: City directories.

DE: Yeah, city almanacs? You could pull out the book and it was all the demographic information about the city. We went through all of them and we tried to find a city where we wanted to live the next year [laughter]. The two most important things is it needs to have a really big prison population and it needs to have a very vibrant arts community and it needs to be a city we would want to move to. We narrowed it down to three cities: it was between Austin, Texas, New Orleans, and San Francisco. We'd never been to any of those three cities, but those were the ones. Big prison and a very interesting creative community. Spring break our senior year, Katie was like "I am going to San Francisco so I'll check it out and see if we'd like it and when I come back I'll tell you how it was." She went to San Francisco and said "Let's move to San Francisco, it's really cool, you're going to love it." She met with somebody at the youth guidance center which was the juvenile hall there, and she said "It was great, they were interested in a girl's theater program so I think we should move there." I was like "Okay!"

RS: You didn't put affordable housing on your list? [laughter]



DE: We knew nothing. Looking back, I'm thinking San Francisco probably wasn't the best choice. We applied for a grant through Brown. They give a public service fellowship to graduating seniors to create a social justice project the year after you graduate. We won the fellowship. It was \$20,000. I remember thinking, "We can live on that for a year in San Francisco." It was not enough money, but it got us out there. It was enough of a validation that somebody thought it was a good idea besides us. It got us to San Francisco and we created what we called "Inside Out Performing Arts." We never incorporated as a nonprofit, but we operated like a nonprofit where we did theater arts workshops at the youth guidance center, alternatives to juvenile justice centers for girls around San Francisco. We worked at a homeless shelter and worked with girls there, we worked at a group home for girls who were survivors of sexual violence and incest. We found groups of girls that already existed and we did theater projects with them. We started developing and devising a system. I really wanted to do full plays with them, to not just do drop-in, we're going to write and make stuff each week. We started making full-length plays and that was really amazing. I learned a lot. Once it was like we were building toward a production, it suddenly—the energy from the girls, "We're going to be in a play!" was very different from "We're just going to make stuff while you're here."

RS: Did you ever find—I know your mother was a social worker for a while.

DE: Yeah.

RS: Did you ever find yourself pulled toward? Like I was thinking about Leah who couldn't write. Did you find yourself pulled toward finding resources and trying to fix some of the problems, or could you stay focused on, "Our job is theater"?

DE: At that point—. Since then, absolutely. I do remember with some arrogance and naiveté thinking that theater was enough. I didn't need anything else. I was reading a lot so I did another—. I did another group study project at Brown on theater and social change with a bunch of other friends who weren't from the women's work, but who were activist friends and were doing theater and arts stuff. That was pretty cool because our faculty advisor was Oskar Eustis, who is now the artistic director of the Public Theater, but at the time he was running Trinity Rep in Providence and he was teaching at Brown. He was a huge theater activist back in the 1970s and 1980s, worked with Tony Kushner writing *Angels in America*. He was really inspiring during that group project, helping us as a faculty advisor teaching us the history of theater and social justice movements. I read Boal for the first time, *Theater of the Oppressed*. That was really transformative, understanding how other theater artists were activists and using theater art in their activism. I was using those tools more than traditional educational tools or trying to interrupt patterns of illiteracy and violence through other means. It was more "No, I'm an artist and I'm going to do this as an artist." To such a degree that in San Francisco—and I was not making a living doing theater with incarcerated girls—so I got day jobs.

I worked at a women's theater in San Francisco called "Brava" which is the oldest women's theater in the country and I became their technical director. I did a lot of the technical stuff and I ran one of their youth programs which was called "the Running Crew" which was a job training program for teenagers to learn technical theater skills as a job. It was funded through the city job corps. It was all kids who needed jobs and I taught them carpentry and lighting and technology and sound engineering. It was cool to work at a big theater, and I was also working as an electrician because I could make way

more money doing that work, and I had all those skills from high school and college. I had a work-study in college in the tech theater, so I was one of the tech assistants for the theater department so I'd always been hanging lights and doing electrics work and doing lighting work. In San Francisco I had this hodgepodge-y life of lighting design and electrics work and running the Running Crew and then Katie and me doing the work with the girls and I was also directing shows and making crazy experimental theater with friends. We made a bunch of rock operas that we directed and weird, site-specific locations. I adapted *Electra* from Greek tragedy. I was always still really interested in these Greek plays and it was right after Columbine in 1999. I was like "Oh my god, I have to make a play about teenagers and violence," so I adapted *Electra* into this contemporary play about why do teenagers kill, what is revenge? It was a whole opera set to music, so we worked with all these musicians, and Katie played Electra and I directed it. We had this life of making art and working with the girls. Then Katie left to be an artist.

She moved to Berlin to dance at first and then got into music and became an indie rock star for a while and her career took off as a musician. She was gone after a year. She was in San Francisco for about a year and then I was there a year without her. I started feeling like I wanted more arts training. I felt like I wanted to be back in school, I'd been out for two years. I missed it. I'm a super geek at heart and I missed being in school and having that kind of structure. I actually do remember sending out for applications for law school, social work school, and an MFA in theater directing. I had all of those applications and was really struggling and considering what do I want to do? I felt like

my parents, they never pressured me and have always been really supportive, but they would've been happy if I had gone to law school.

RS: I was going to ask you earlier, did you ever talk to your mom about her decision to go to law school, the switch from social work to law school?

DE: She took years off from social work. She was a social worker until she had kids and then she didn't work at all, then she started to doing a lot of community service work in Wilmington. She's very active in the Jewish community, so she was on the board of the synagogue and on the board of the Jewish nursing home. She says she went back to law school actually to do better community service work, to have a law degree and to be able to advocate on behalf of a lot of the people she was working with through her community service work. So it was always connected with, I think, her desire to help people and work with people. But I never asked her why she wasn't a social worker in Wilmington or the difference between doing that work as a lawyer and social worker.

RS: What were your parents' names?

DE: Steven and Miriam.

RS: Edell?

DE: Edell. I didn't apply to law school or social work school. I ended up getting really excited about theater directing. I had read a book about Anne Bogart who is one of the greatest theater directors of the 21<sup>st</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, I think, in the country. She had developed a very specific way of working with actors and designers of a collaboration that was very unique and new and innovative at the time. It was late 1990s, 2000s. I read a book called *The Viewpoints* which was this whole system she developed with a choreographer about how to collaborate. I was like, "I need to learn this collaboration

method, this feels very connected.” It felt very intuitive, the way I’d been working with girls and women already felt pretty connected to Anne’s theories of collaboration. She ran the directing program at Columbia. So I’m was like, “I’m just going to apply to Columbia, I really only want to work with Anne, and if I don’t get in then maybe something else.” I wasn’t like, “I’ll go to any theater directing program,” it was very much to work with her. Amazingly so, I got into the Columbia program and moved to New York. I didn’t want to move to New York at all. I really loved San Francisco. I’d fallen in love, I had a boyfriend in San Francisco, I really felt connected to the Inside Out work but really wanted grad school and thought I would go to Columbia and then go back to San Francisco.

I hated New York. I’d visited it a few times, but I’d never lived in a big city. I thought Providence was a big city when I went to college, “I’m going to a city school!” and really felt a little overwhelmed by Providence as a city which is funny now. I got to Columbia, and really the first couple months I barely left the Upper West Side. I really was not in New York for a while, I was in the bubble of grad school. It was an incredible program. I totally fell—. Anne is a magician. She is a really, really incredible theater teacher and director and very inspiring and I learned exactly what I wanted to from her, but was also frustrated that the program was very pre-professional training. There was no talk about activism or community engagement. It was really about you are here to start your own theater company or be a Broadway director or a regional theater director. It was very much about that kind of theater world. I was like okay, I’m here, I can learn this. I can direct *Miss Julie* and these classic theater projects.

RS: Even Anne Bogart taught that way?

DE: Her work was very experimental, but there was never any conversation about anything except pushing against the art form. It was about pushing against new ways of making theater, but it wasn't political, I would say. It definitely wasn't. My second year, 9/11 happened the first week of school my second year there. That was a real catalyzing moment, I remember feeling—and I was directing *Miss Julie* at the time, which was this 19<sup>th</sup>-century Swedish play about a rich woman who has an affair with the stable boy. I was feeling disconnected making theater and I was like “Why am I making this play right now? Our city is on fire.” I really missed teenagers, hadn't worked with teenagers since I got to New York and was feeling, particularly after 9/11, that I have to do something. All the activist energy in me was frustrated that I was in grad school and not actually serving the city in some way.

RS: Did you see that as personal? Was that just you, or did you think a lot of people in your grad program?

DE: Not in my grad program—a lot of my friends, for sure. A lot of people in my life, after living in New York through that there was this sense of “What the fuck do we do? We can't go back to how we were before. This has really changed us.” I don't even remember how I connected with them, but somehow I found a high school in Harlem not far from Columbia on 137<sup>th</sup> Street. I think I knew somebody who was a high school teacher and I was like “Can I come to your school and work with some kids?” I just showed up. I did—Miss Hicks. I knew an English teacher at the school.

RS: Which school was this?

DE: It was [A.] Philip Randolph, a giant public high school on the top of this hill. It's on the City College campus on 137<sup>th</sup> Street. I remember hearing that on 9/11 the

school was on top of the hill and the students had run up to the roof after the first plane had hit and they actually saw the second plane hit from the rooftop of their school. I got to pitch to this one English class of “I want to do a theater project, are any of you interested?” It wasn’t just girls because it was a co-ed school. It was like “If you’re interested, meet me after school today.” There were 12 students who were really interested so I ended up going to that school a few times a week after school and making a little theater piece with a group of students there. I don’t remember who produced it , but there was a performance—and this was October, it was really soon after, a few weeks after 9/11—and by the end of that semester we’d created this performance piece. There was this mini-festival that somebody had produced that was theater by teenagers in response to 9/11. Then, I started to see “Okay, I can be at Columbia and also do some of this work.”

I met a woman who was an actor in my program, Chandra, and we immediately connected. We did a project together my first year there and then we started talking about working with teenagers. She’d had worked with teenagers before she got to Columbia also. She was the first person I met there who I was like “Oh my god, you want to work with teenagers?!” We feel like we’re so different, we’re in this crazy bubble and everybody else wants to be a professional artist and we actually want to do something slightly different with our training here. We asked—this was the summer between our second and third year—and we decided we were going to do a theater project with a group of girls from the neighborhood around Columbia and we got the administration to give us the theater for free for the summer, which was amazing but nobody used the theater in summer. We had free rehearsal space all summer in the theater up there. We

didn't really know how to find girls, but we were putting fliers up and connecting with anyone we knew.

RS: So what year is this?

DE: This is 2002, the summer of 2002. We got a group. There were three of the girls from the 9/11 theater project I'd done were in it. One of them had a cousin, and they helped recruit. Somehow we got a group of eight girls that summer and we made this play together that was called "Say it How It Is" and it was just amazing. Chandra and I worked really together and we devised this whole play with the girls that they wrote.

RS: What was it about?

DE: That first show was a little more collage-y, with scenes and monologues and stories that came from the girls' lives and experiences. I remember one girl, her parents had recently gotten divorced, her father had cheated on her mother and she wrote this monologue to her father about how angry she was that he had done this to their family. It was that, which I've since come very far away from, but it was those first shows were autobiographical material from the girls. There was a lot of dance, a lot of poetry, and a real sisterhood among the girls. It was a tight group. I knew the show was good, and I wanted people to come and see it, I was very proud of it. I want people at Columbia to know this is part of the work I want to be doing. I invited the artistic director of Here Arts Center, which is a downtown theater in New York who I had met through Columbia networking at some point, her name is Kristin [Marting], I invited her to come and I invited a bunch of theater people in the city.

Kristin came and the show was amazing, and afterwards she was like, "We should talk, this is really incredible work." I met her for lunch the next week and she asked what



I was doing with the project. I was like, “I really want to make theater with girls and devise original work.” She was like, “Do you have a theater?” “No, Columbia gave us the space for free in the summer, but no.” She was like, “Do you need a theater?” And she basically offered her theater, which is this awesome downtown on 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Spring Street. The short version: she was on our board; we produced almost 70 percent of shows there. Chandra and I realized after that first show that something was happening—we need to continue this, let’s do another show. Kristin has given us our theater for free. Maybe this was a fluke, maybe we just had this really charged, incredible group of girls but let’s see what happens again if we do it with different group of girls. We did another show in the fall and we produced it at Here and it was even better than the first one. Kristin got really excited and offered us a residency at Here to produce three shows a year there basically. Then Chandra and I were like, ok, we need money, how do we get money? We very quickly incorporated as a nonprofit within a year of the show.

RS: Does the residency come with any stipend or anything?

ED: No money, just free space. But in New York, the equivalent of \$50,000 dollars, maybe. She was giving us free rehearsal space, free performance space, and free marketing because they would put it in their calendar so it was a really sweet, sweet deal. We needed actual money to do this, but our first year Chandra and I each wrote a personal check for \$500 and we opened a joint bank account and we were like now we have \$1,000 for our first year. We produced three shows on \$1,000 [plus donated space and materials] that first year. We started building momentum, inviting funders, getting support through fundraising efforts through the performances. It was called viBe Theater Experience. I ran that for 10 years. That was a huge part of my life in New York, building

this nonprofit. We produced, in the 10 years that I was there, over 60 shows that were all written and performed by girls. It expanded into music programs, Katie came back from Berlin from her rock star career. She created a music program with the girls, it was all free.

RS: What was her last name?

ED: Eastbern.

RS: So talk to me about the fundraising piece. What networks? Were you connecting to girls empowerment networks, theater, or?

ED: Everything. We were grasping at straws. We got city money through the department of cultural affairs, that was arts funding through city. We got funding from girls' foundations that wanted to fund girls' programs, we got social justice funding, for activist projects. It was a real hodgepodge of different funders. We got Starbucks funding.

RS: Were you writing your own grants?

ED: Yeah, a lot changed in the 10 years but the first four I would say it was really just Chandra and me and we were doing everything. We got to a point where we could hire a development director at year five, maybe. It was never huge. The largest the budget ever was about \$200,000, so it was never a massive organization. But we made it work. We produced a lot. I was still interested in the activism within the girl's theater work so we did a project I called the "Girls' Life Adventure." That was more of an activist project than theater, where we published books with the girls on different issues. It was all about the journey and adventure of being a girl. Each book we called a quest. The first one was about violence, how to address issues of violence in your life, where to go for resources.

We had creative writing by girls who had experienced violence, it had activities to do with girls who were working to process stories of violence, and resources of what to do. It was a book and we did workshops around the book. We produced an anti-violence festival of performances where we invited different youth—it was called “Youth Against Violence” and it was a festival of youth theater projects that all addressed violence. Then we did one on sex and it was all a quest about understanding sex and sexuality and sexual violence. Then we did one on food that was on sustainable food sources and also eating disorders and understanding your relationship to food, the corporatization of food. We did one on money, understanding finances and saving for retirement, starting as a teenager and making a budget for your life—basic economic theory. We did one on spirituality. We addressed all these issues that were arising in the performances. I was also reading a ton about girls and girls’ development.

Again, I felt like I didn’t really know what we were doing and we were winging it. I started reading about girls’ psychology and most of the girls’ psychology books felt like it was about a lot of middle-class white girls. Ninety-nine percent of the girls in viBe were girls of color, almost all of them were from low-income communities in New York. I was feeling frustrated with the academic literature I was reading, and I was wanting to write. I wanted to write to about this work, I think we’re doing something I’m not reading about, so I want to contribute to this. There’s something happening with theater and girls and activism. I started thinking about a PhD but didn’t want to leave New York because I didn’t want to leave viBe so I was looking into different doctoral programs around the city and how I could fund. Could I continue to work, could I get funding for the program? Then I saw the NYU program in educational theater and I was like “what?!” I had no idea

this even existed. There's an educational theater? It was very grounded in Boal and theater of the oppressed work, I was like "holy shit, this is actually what I want to do." There were doctoral fellowships so I got super excited about that program and I got in and I started in the fall of 2005. We started viBe in 2002, so I was working on my PhD while I was running viBe for a good part. I was at NYU in 2005 and graduated in 2010. I knew I wanted to write my dissertation about the girls' theater work and I needed as much support and theory that could help me do this. I pretty quickly realized that I wasn't getting that from the educational theater department, and I started taking classes in the applied psychology department. I immediately connected with Carol Gilligan who was teaching at the law school. I had read her books and was very inspired by her work and by the listening guide method of interviewing and analysis. I wanted to learn the listening guide, and I wanted to hang out with her basically. I contacted her when I first got to NYU and asked to meet with her, to see if we could talk about my work and work together. She was amazing. We did an independent study together my second year there where I went to her office every week for an hour to talk to her. She was a huge mentor for me in terms of feminist psychology and theory around thinking about girls' voices. She totally provided the theoretical frame for my research. Through Carol, I worked with Niobe Way who is another developmental psychologist who I became very close with, taught a class with her. I was part of her research team for years at NYU. I realized I was connecting a little more with the psychologists than with the theater folks.

RS: Why do you think that was? I have a couple questions about that.

ED: I was really interested in what was going on in the girls' heads, why they were writing what they were writing, what impact that was having on them, and how

larger cultural narratives were impacting what they were writing. I felt the theater was not as intellectually rigorous as that. I felt the theater program was a little more practice-based of how to work with kids and how to make theater, which isn't drenched in theory in a way that I was hungry for. I'd been doing this work for 10 years, and I learned a lot from the educational theater folks, I don't want to say it wasn't valuable, but it wasn't what really inspired me intellectually. That was way more in psychology and also in performance studies. Another mentor of mine was Jan Cohen-Cruz, she's amazing. I took her class, she was only teaching undergrads at the time. She was teaching this community based performance class to undergrads and I said "I have to take this class," and she was like "You're a doctoral student." I said "I'll do extra work," I had read her books. She let me in her class and gave me triple the amount of work the undergrads had and I remember in that class we had to an internship that was part of the structure of the class and I was running viBe and I was like can I do my internship at my theater company I'm running? She became part of my dissertation committee and is still a dear friend and mentor to me. I would say Jan and Carol, who were both on my dissertation committee, provided a lot. Jan provided a more historical lens on the history of theater and activism and she had done a lot of work in prisons when she was younger. She had been part of the activist theater movements, so she was incredibly valuable. So the psychology work with Carol really really—.

During this time I was still directing five shows a year with the girls. I was starting to get more and more frustrated with the ways that they were performing stories. It was a lot of autobiographical work in the first several years. I was really trying to push away from the autobiographical work because I didn't buy—. I felt like it was dangerous,

and we weren't really supporting them in way that they needed to be supported. The lines between theater and therapy, drama therapy and performance, were getting too fuzzy for me and I didn't feel like it was ethical the way we were saying to girls "tell your story and then perform it on stage in front of..." "Write the monologue about how mad you are at your dad and perform it while your dad's in the audience," without a lot of follow through afterward on what impact that might have about your relationship with these people in your lives. It might feel really good in that moment, but why does it feel really good in that moment, and what happens a week from now when the show is a distant memory but now you're dealing with these people who you've revealed these major stories to?

Sometimes it was incredibly transforming. I could tell hundreds of stories. There was a girl who had had an abortion and she hadn't told her parents and it had been a very traumatic experience for her and she wanted to write a solo show about having the abortion. We talked about what does this mean? She changed her name in the show, created a character, but there was no question she was playing herself and she wanted that to be how she told her mom. She couldn't just sit down at the kitchen table and tell her mom, so she performed this solo show in explicit detail of every moment of that experience. It ended up being incredible. Her mom didn't mention it, and then a week later they were doing the dishes and her mom told her the story of how her mom had had an abortion when she was a teenager and it brought them closer together and she was finally able to tell her mother. They had this really great talk and they became much closer through the experience.

Those things happened, but there were other things that happened as well. I started seeing a lot of youth theater and getting more and more anxious watching these teenagers tell these stories of rape and trauma and violence without what I felt was a real theatrical lens. I felt like it was getting further away from great art and closer to personal therapy sessions for an audience, that didn't feel right to me.

I knew my dissertation was going to be a case study where I followed one group of girls and do really detailed interviews with them over the course of the year with viBe. That was going to be my case study, this one group of girls. I ended up doing this wacky interview method where I gave all the girls tape recorders and I gave them a list of questions and I had them answer the questions wherever they were in their lives. They had a week to give me the tapes back and then I would listen to their tapes and then I would create a response tape where I would follow up everything they said. I called it "slow motion interviews." I did these over the course of the year with a lot of them, I had hundreds of hours of interviews with these girls. I did face to face interviews also, and focus groups—it was a very rigorous interview process. Then I was analyzing the plays they were writing. My data was the scripts and the interviews with the girls and my observations of spending a year with them. Some of the girls I had known for three or four years, so I had this long history of their writing and experiences and my relationships with them were very deep. What I was finding in my analysis, which was coming through a lot of my work with Carol, the way I was analyzing the interviews, was really noticing the differences in the ways the girls were telling me the stories of what was happening to them in their life and how they were performing those stories.

I noticed the performance of their stories was different than from what actually

happened. Whatever truth is, how you tell a story, but they were telling me one version of a story and then once they took that story and made that story into a play script, they were suddenly doing different things to the story. There was a whole section where they were dramatizing violence more. They wanted things to be more explicit in the performance than they might have been. In one of the stories, there was a girl who had sex for the first time. She'd come to rehearsal one day early in the process and was like "I lost my virginity yesterday!" and everyone was like "Oh my god!" She tells, in detail, the entire story play by play. I interviewed her. She's like, "I want to write my solo show about losing my virginity" and I was like, "Oh my god, okay." She's also a Muslim girl who wears a hijab. Her entire family was going to come to see the show. She's like, "It's okay, I'm going to change my name of the character," and it was again, this idea that I'm going to change the name and then and no one will know that I'm actually writing about myself. When she was talking about what had happened, she was like "It wasn't that big of a deal, I don't understand why everyone makes such a big deal about it. My best friend didn't even believe me because I wasn't crying. You're supposed to look in the mirror and cry because now you're a woman but I feel the same. I don't really understand why this is such a big deal." In her solo show, which was called *Losin' It* she tells the story in very similar detail but she has lines in the performance where she's like "I went into the bathroom afterwards and tears were running down my face." She starts performing all these cultural narratives about what's supposed to happen.

I started seeing that in so many of the girls' stories, that they were accommodating to these cultural narratives in their performance of what we expected girls' experiences to be. It became this bizarre thing for me to be like "Wow, here I am



running this girls' theater company and we're saying 'These of the stories of girls!' but they're not really." They're sanitized stories of what girls think you want to hear. It's not really their stories. It's the performed version of their stories, which is more dangerous to me than a total fictional story that we know is all fiction. I started pulling away from autobiography.

I wanted viBe shows to be only fiction and really pushed to put many lenses of art and artifice between the story and the performances. There was tension between me and Chandra over some of that, and some of the other teaching artists and I was also getting burnt out on the stories of violence. Again and again and again. Every kind of violence—"I hate my body, I hate myself, I'm hurting myself." A lot of rape, a lot of sexual harassment and sexual violence and assault happening. I was getting to the edge of "What if we actually stop rape? What if instead of providing a space for girls who have suffered all of these things to make theater where they can heal, what if we just stopped that shit from the beginning? How do we do that?"

I heard about, through Niobe, who was one of the professors I was working with at NYU. She was like, "Have you heard of the SPARK Summit that's happening in New York?" I was like "No, what's the SPARK Summit?" She was like "You'd be really into it. Deb Tolman is running it." Deb is a developmental psychologist who is part of that whole world. She had worked with Carol and Niobe. I had read her books but I didn't know her at all. Niobe was like, "You two would really connect, you should really meet Deb and she's planning this summit that's going to be about girls and sexualization and activism and I know you're interested in these things. You should go to the summit. You should email Deb."

So I sent this cold email to Deb. I had never met her, I was like “I’m a big fan of your work and I heard you’re doing this summit and if there’s any way I can help I’d love to volunteer. I run a teenager girls’ theater company and work with a lot of girls, and I’d love to bring some of the girls to the summit.” Deb emails me immediately “let’s have lunch, we definitely could use help.” We had lunch and it was this really inspiring meeting of kinship, “Oh my god I love your work, I want to be involved in it.” She started telling me about the SPARK Summit.

She was part of the APA taskforce on the sexualization of girls. They released this big report in 2007 on the sexualization of girls that had a huge, huge impact.

RS: The APA is the American—?

DE: Psychological Association. It had been downloaded over one million times. An academic report? Crazy! Deb was one of the writers of it, and this summit came out of it. The finding of the report was a compilation of hundred of studies over decades. It was not shocking, but it was “sexualization is really bad for girls, but here is all the ways.” It’s mining every possible—academic achievement, hope for the future—all these different areas of how exactly sexualization is impacting girls’ lives. They gathered together with activists to do something about it. We can’t just release this report into the world and not actually take action because the findings are so dangerous. The findings show how dangerous sexualization is. They were going to do this one-day summit to present the findings of the report, and wanted the summit to also include girls and action stations where there were ways to take action to challenge sexualization. They hadn’t really gotten that far in the planning. I said I can help. I work with girls, I run workshops, I’ve done a lot of arts-based activist work. Deb was like, “Great.”

I became the coordinator of the action stations at the summit. I gathered a bunch of other activist friends to facilitate different workshops. The cool thing about the summit is it brought together different—. I had never been to that kind of academic-slash-activist intergenerational space. This was in October of 2010. We had about 400 people. It was well funded; it was funded by the Ms. Foundation and the Ford Foundation and it was at Hunter College that had donated all these spaces. Gloria Steinem spoke and Geena Davis spoke. It had some high profile folks involve so it got media attention. It was a really empowering and inspiring day of action and mobilization and “we need to do something.”

I felt, for the first time in a really long time, in a really positive activist space that was about strategizing solutions. I’d been feeling after my dissertation research and my viBe work of, “Wow, girls are in so much pain right now.” The SPARK Summit felt like, “Oh, we can actually take action.” I got super excited and the summit was great but it was just a one-day event. I sort of forgot about it but wanted to stay in touch, like “This is great, let me know if you need anything. I’m going back to my day job.” Then I got an email from the core planning committee for the summit a few months later. They were like “We want to have a phone call with you. Can we schedule a conference call sometime?” I was like, “Oh, sure.” I’m on the phone with Deb and Lynn Michael Brown, who is a developmental psychologist and part of that world. Jamia Wilson who is a media activist and Julie Barton who ran the Women’s Media Center. A bunch of different organizational partners, and they were like, “So, there’s still all this momentum and energy from the summit. Everyone keeps asking us, ‘What’s next, what’s next, what’s next?’ We don’t really know what’s next. We all have full time jobs.” Actually, this is

sort of unheard of, but they actually had money left over from the summit. They were like “We’ve got money and we really don’t want to let this go, but we can’t do this so we’re looking a hire to somebody who wants to figure out what we can do. We want somebody who has a foot in academia and a foot in the girls’ world. Would you like to be the executive director?” I was like “Uh, yeah! absolutely!”

I hadn’t even thought that there was a job, but I’d been kind of looking for an out with viBe. It had been 10 years that I was there. That’s a long time; I think I’m ready for a next move. I said yes. Crazy. That was the spring of 2011, I started in May of 2011. At the time, in a really crazy way, thought I could actually run both organizations together. It was really one big job and there was the viBe part and the SPARK part. It was a horrible idea, but I ended up doing that for eight months before we found somebody at viBe to take over.

The first thing I did at SPARK that was super exciting about this whole new way of organizing. I was like, “I don’t want to be running another girl’s program. This is not a direct service organization for girls. This is a movement, an intergenerational movement where we work with girls as part of the solution. The first thing we need to do is get a team of girls that I’m working with so I’m not running a program for girls, but they’re part of our organizing strategy if we’re really going to challenge sexualization.”

Everybody was really excited about this intergenerational model of how are we going to organize with girls and adults. That first year we got I think about 12 girls on the SPARK team. We put out [calls] for girl activists [through Facebook and Twitter] who wanted to join the movement to end the sexualization of girls, that’s what we were calling it at the time. [We also reached out to the dozens of girls’ organizations we had partnered with in

the planning of the summit. We got about 50 applications and] we chose these twelve girls from around the country. We brought them to New York in the fall of 2011 [for a training retreat]. I was like, “We need to do some training with these girls, we can’t do this all online, but I know it’s going to be online because we all live in different places.”

We started in the fall of 2011 mobilizing with these girls. The training was a whole combination of “history-feminism-activism 101.” Some art-based training, some organizing training. Blogging, strategizing action and strategizing campaigns. It was a really intense four days at that point in New York. We built a private Facebook group with the girls and the girls had to check in with Facebook every day. That’s how we started organizing, through Facebook. The girls would identify something that was pissing them off or something that was in the media that we wanted to take action on. Then we would strategize on how to take action. In that first year—.

RS: We can either come back to this or—. I’m really interested in, you’ve told these amazing stories of trying to organize girls before email and before the internet—

ED: Yes.

RS: —and now you’ve moved into this movement that’s very heavily reliant on social media.

ED: Yes.

RS: So I want to pay attention to that and what that both allows you to do and ask whether you feel any loss?

ED: Absolutely. Yes. I’m in the thick of it right now. A lot of has changed in the past four years. In that first year, it was super—. The history of technology and girls. When I was first working with girls in San Francisco no one had a cell phone. A lot has

changed. If a girl didn't show up at rehearsal I could call her house phone, maybe, from a pay phone. I didn't even have a cell phone. You just trusted that they would be there. And they were there. I will say, with cell phones and all of the communication technology teenagers are in some way more irresponsible because they can get away with it in different ways. But yeah, there was no social media. At all. Even throughout viBe, it was interesting seeing as the 10 years went on how "Okay, now a couple girls have cell phones, wow now everyone has a cell phone, now there's text messaging and now there's Facebook." As that grew through the organization.

SPARK would not exist without social media. This organization, 10 years ago, we couldn't have done it at all. It literally changed the face of organizing girls. It would've been impossible because what it allowed us to do was to work with girls in different cities and regions [and countries]. We had a girl in a rural Ohio who was like "I'm the only feminist in the state of Ohio!" Girls in New York City, and then we grew. We were in eight countries by the end, I mean by last year we had girls in eight countries and all throughout the U.S. The relationships the girls built online could never have happened without the internet. It was also very intergenerational with the girls in the team. We had girls ages 13 to 22 on the SPARK team which is a huge, huge range. Being on the internet, you don't really know how old anybody is so it doesn't really matter as much that a 14-year-old is pitching this to a 21-year-old who's challenging the 13-year-old. We can forget those boundaries because we're not sitting in a room talking all the time.

It was very social as well. The Facebook group was a very vibrant social as well as political space for the girls. They were really connecting and fostering relationships without ever meeting, which was wild to me, as someone who is used to theater being my

medium where it's all about being in a room together and making stuff. To go from that to purely "I'm sitting in my apartment with my laptop and that's my work right now" was jarring but exciting and liberating also because I felt like I was connecting with girls that I would've never had access to. We were able to build a much more diverse team because of that, in terms of regions and socioeconomics, where the girls came from was so different. Their perception of feminism and organizing and what was important to them felt different. Girls in Maine and girls in L.A. and girls in Chicago. It was very exciting. I feel like I was really understanding girls in the U.S. whereas the last ten years it had been girls in New York City. They are a very specific breed, girls who grow up in New York City.

Our retreat was in the fall of 2011, October, Columbus weekend and it was Halloween season and there was always a lot of Halloween energy—if you're talking about sexualization that's where it's happening. There was a Halloween costume that was horribly offensive—they all are—but this one in particular was a sexy skeleton costume and the skeleton was wearing a yellow sash and it was a measuring tape, and then she had a little button that said "Hi I'm Anna Rexia." It was this horrible combination of sexualized Halloween and eating disorder and it was a horrible costume. We were like, "Let's take action." That was actually our first campaign. We started a petition on Change.org, this is early Change.org days. We had 300 or 400 signatures on that petition and we won. The company took it down. Our demand was "You have to promise to never sell this costume again" and they did. They sent us a letter and they were like "We've removed the costume and we'll never sell it again." It was very exciting. "Wow, what? Did that just work?!" That was really exciting to me. The girls got pretty riled up, like

“Whoa, we can do something.” It’s small but it’s significant. That was October of 2011, and then during the holidays we started working towards, “What is our next campaign going to be? What is a campaign?” I was learning. I had never done real, direct organizing work. I’d always done activism through a theater lens and through an arts lens.

I was learning as I went a lot, from—Shelby Knox was on our leadership team, she’s brilliant, brilliant activist and we became really good friends and I learned from her and from Jamia Wilson also who is a really great activist. They caught me up and then I started hanging out with all these feminist activists and I was like “Wow, this whole community in New York of awesome women I had never really known before.” That was really fun, to see all the similarities between my artist friends and now this activist community. This is a third shift job, we’re all hustling and following passion projects and not getting paid, working late at night. Our second big project, one of a girls’—one of the strategies of at that time was every girl had to blog at least one a month and the blog was a way we communicated with the world about what the issues were they were thinking about.

One of our girls, Stephanie, this was during the holiday season of toys and LEGO had come out with their new friends line with “LEGOs for Girls” and it was super ridiculous. You can build a beauty salon, little figurines and little girls that had mini skirts and sandals and they were not like the other LEGOs. Stephanie wrote a blog that was like, “C’mon LEGO, really? Stop condescending to girls. I love LEGO and I’m a girl and why do you have to resort to stereotyping? What you’re doing is actually really dangerous and you’re showing girls –you’re limiting the potential of what girls do.” So



she wrote this blog and part of our strategy was “When we have a blog, we promote the blog. We tweet it.” Some of the girls tweeted the blog at LEGO and posted the blog on LEGO’s Facebook page. It got hundreds of comments on LEGO’s Facebook page. We were like, “Oh, this is interesting.” Bailey, another girl on the team, wrote a follow-up piece that was more aggressive. Bailey started doing some research on the history of LEGO’s advertising for girls and so she posted that and that got a lot of traction. We were like “Ooh, there’s some buzz around this.” We decided to do another petition. We wrote another petition on Change.org that was not our best petition at all, it was like “LEGO stop condescending to girls and make a commitment to more diversity in what girls can be in the LEGO figurines.” The petition exploded. Within a few days, we got 20,000 signatures on this petition, which was surprising but also good timing with the media. It was the holidays and nothing was really—things were happening in the world—but it was a good contrast story to the holiday story the media wanted. It was a critique of LEGO, a family friendly, everybody loves LEGO. We were like, “Actually, LEGO, you’ve got some problems.” It exploded. We were suddenly getting media requests from all over the world. Tons of media requests. This story went kind of viral. I was on Fox News, which was very stressful also because then it ignited this whole backlash of all this hate from Fox News viewers. It really hit a nerve around gender and toys so there were all these pieces around the gendering of toys aisles and why is there girls’ LEGO and boys’ LEGO? We really became the front, one of the front runners in that conversation around gendering toy stuff. We started immediately media training all of our girls, so I was on Fox but also the girls need to be the ones doing the media. The face of this campaign can’t be an adult, it has to be the girls. The girls started doing all the

interviews, and that was really exciting. Now there were teenage girls and young women talking about these issues, not a bunch of adults, and talking about how it was impacting them and their little brothers and sisters. It got really big, and then we got an email from the chief marketing director at LEGO who was like—. Well, then we'd demanded a meeting with LEGO, so after we were like "Where are you LEGO, why aren't you responding?" We finally got a response, we had a meeting with a bunch of the LEGO corporate folks and some of the engineers.

We ground all of our work in really rigorous research, that's really important to me. I think it's significant that SPARK was started by a bunch of academic researchers, and that as an activist organization it's really important that we're grounding in research. We did what I called a gender audit of the LEGO company. We researched going back 30 years going back in the LEGO company and we looked at the ways they have used and abused gender over the last 30 years as a company. Then we analyzed all the current toys on the market, all of LEGO's current toys and counted by gender how many girl characters, how many boy characters, what the professions are of the boy characters, what the professions are of the girl characters, and we wrote a 40-page report that was a huge critique of everything they were doing and then offered strategies for them on how to improve LEGO. We had pages of all of the things we wanted them to do, and then we presented it to them at this meeting. We got a ton of press. The story erupted in a way we did not anticipate at all.

On the heels of that, we were like, "Now we have the attention of the media. Now suddenly there are all these journalists interested in SPARK and in 'What is SPARK? what are you doing, and are you just fighting toys?'" We knew we needed another

campaign once the LEGO was dying down a little bit. We were trying to strategize what could be the next project? We had been talking about photo-shopping in teen magazines. We often, we would have group chats every two weeks, we would have a full group chat. That had emerged as an issue the girls were interested in. I was like, “we need someone to write a petition, what’s a win? what do we want to demand?” Julia, one of the girls, was like “I’ll write a petition.” She’s a great writer, and so I was like, great, can you get on the phone tonight and let’s talk about this petition. We got on the phone and we talked about so, let’s choose *Seventeen*, because we wanted to choose a magazine that had been making efforts to do positive things for girls. It was more through the lens of “You’re disappointing us, *Seventeen*, you say you care about girls, you say Love Your Body the way it is, but you’re Photoshopping girls’ bodies? How are we gonna love our body when the models are digitally altered?” So Julia wrote a beautiful petition—she’s a ballet dancer in Maine and so many of her friends in her ballet school are suffering from eating disorders and bodies bodies bodies are so in the focus in the media. Julia wrote the petition and we posted it.

At first, the petition was to ask *Seventeen* to publish one unaltered photo spread in an issue so girls could see what the girls looked like without Photoshop. Because the timing had hit, after all this attention from LEGO, we sent out the petition to all of our new journalist friends and said “this is our next project!” That got a lot of media also. The petition got about 80,000 signatures on it and it went global very quickly. We had signatures from like 50 countries around the world. We brought Julia down from Maine and she did almost all the media. She’s this adorable 14-year-old girl and she’s super

articulate and smart and really sweet and passionate. That story—and then it lead to the editor of *Seventeen* saying, okay, I'll sit down with you and Julia.

We had a meeting with the editor of *Seventeen* which was huge, and Julia and her mom and me sat down. Again, we'd done a ton of research so came into the meeting with a stack of 30 *Seventeen* magazines with Post-its exposing all the contradictions. Not just the Photoshopping, but one page is “you're awesome, love your body the way it is,” and the next page is “get that bikini body, how to get flat abs.” We're like, “You're sending really contradictory messages to girls.” They had diet sections in the magazine and all of this stuff.

Part of the campaign, which is one of my favorite SPARK projects that one of the girl's came up with—Alice and Ying Ying—they wanted to follow the advice in the teen magazines for one month. Everything the teen magazine told them to do. Alice did *Seventeen* and Ying Ying did *Teen Vogue*. They spent four weeks every day—they divided into beauty, fashion, health and fitness, and relationship advice. Then they created a blog and they blogged every day about what that day was like according to what *Seventeen* and *Teen Vogue* told them to do. It was awesome, and their blog got a few thousand followers on Tumblr. It was beautiful and it was funny and it was smart. It really was everything I want critical media literacy to be. It very much came from the girls and really ignited a conversation about what were these magazines telling us to do, and how good is this for us? Is this okay? So *Seventeen* ended up promising never to Photoshop ever. It was a huge win, then we got a lot of attention for *Seventeen*'s announcement. Then we were like “let's see if we can get *Teen Vogue* to make the same promise.” Didn't happen.

RS: Why do you think?

ES: Because they didn't care about girls at all. *Seventeen* knew that they needed the respect. Their whole mission was "we care about girls, we care about girl's health and well being." *Teen Vogue* is a fashion magazine. They couldn't make that promise. We met with the editor for *Teen Vogue* and she was horrible. She was really dismissive and mean and cruel. She was very mean to the girls and to me. She was very disrespectful to us; she met with us for about five minutes and was like "What do you want? No." We felt like we were in *The Devil Wears Prada*. It was very bizarre experience.

RS: How did the girls respond?

ED: They were horrified and then sort of amused. Two of the girls, Emma and Karina were the two girls that worked on the *Teen Vogue* petition. I went in with the two of them, and the editor was very mean to the two of them and was like "You two have obviously not done your homework." She yelled at the girls. She pointed at me like "You, you sit over there." I had like to sit at a couch at the back of her office while the two girls were sitting at the desk with her. It was very bizarre. Very weird. So we're like, okay, we're not always going to win every campaign but the truth is we got what we wanted, which was to ignite a conversation about the ways Photoshop and digital altering of photographs impacts girls, and that these magazines impact girls. For me, it wasn't so much about whether the magazine was actually changing their policy or not, but getting girls to think critically about the images they're seeing, and I feel like we achieved that and that was exciting to me. That was 2012 and I feel like—what came after that?

After the *Teen Vogue* we started expanding the team; the team keeps growing over the next few years we grew from 12 girls in that first team to 37 girls last year.

RS: What about staff?

DE: It started with just me. There were a bunch of girls at the summit; Melissa was one of the girls at the summit. She was so awesome at the summit, she helped organize and she spoke on one of the panels at the summit that I asked her to do social media for SPARK. I don't know anything, it was all so crazy that I was running this organization that was entirely digital and I didn't have a Twitter account. I wasn't into social media. I had a Facebook but didn't use it much and didn't care so much about social media. I was on the ground working with girls, so I knew I needed somebody who understood that world. Melissa had just graduated college, she was 22 and we hired her as social media coordinator and pretty soon after promoted her to program coordinator. She became the program coordinator and I was the executive director and we had a leadership board that was very active of five or six women. The first few years we had weekly phone calls with the leadership board. They were not paid, but very active and very involved. The girls got paid, so they were my co-workers. The girls get paid \$25 an action or a blog. It's not a ton of money but it's also not insignificant. It was very important from the beginning that that was part of our structure that girls were staff, that they are working at SPARK. They are not part of program that is being run by adults. The team kept growing and we kept deepening our mission and the kinds of campaigns we wanted to run.

We wanted to get a little bit away from just challenging corporations and into more systemic change and thinking about shifting rape culture ideas. We talk a lot about sexual violence prevention. We did a big campaign the next year, I think this was 2013 maybe, and it was working with high school coaches. The National Federation of High

School Association which is the certification agency which certifies over one million athletic coaches in public schools across the country and we wanted to offer sexual consent education to coaches who could then go talk to their athletes about violence prevention. It was a campaign that probably had more impact than anything else because we got these coaches—we got the NFHS to provide free resources for coaches on sexual consent and sexual violence prevention. It got no media attention. Nobody really cared; it wasn't flashy. It was more a real partnering, communicating, working with the coaches.

We've been continuing the blogging. We've now published over 700 blog pieces and we got a book contract with McMillian two years ago to edit an anthology of girls' writing and make a book with McMillian on girl's activism today. We've been working on that project. I am learning how long these book projects take. We thought it would be done by now, we've sent them a final manuscript and we're waiting on their edits. It should come out I think in 2017 now, they're saying. It's a girl's guide to feminist activism. It tracks a bunch of our campaigns, it has a whole how-to-be- an-activist section for girls, and then a lot of the writing the girls have been doing over the years.

I also told SPARK from the beginning that when I took this job that theater needed to be a part of it. Even if we were online through most of it, I still wanted to continue making theater in New York in some capacity that had an activist component to it. That's been really cool. I've directed two shows a year now through SPARK that are much more activist than the viBe shows were. That's been really cool, shifting some of the theater stuff. I started doing some theater at the U.N. We also connected very internationally. The work started expanding beyond the U.S. and part of my role with SPARK became a co-chair of a girl's participation taskforce at the U.N. where I was in

charge of bringing girls to the U.N. to advocate on behalf of girls issues globally. We had this policy-ish thing, getting girls on the stage talking about activism globally. We had girls speaking on the Commission of the Status of Women at the U.N. every year for the last three years. In celebration of the International Day of the Girl at the U.N., last year I directed a performance piece at the U.N. that was written by girls from around the world and performed by girls in New York, which is super cool.

RS: Wow.

DE: I'm doing something similar at the UN this year also, so that we'll have this global stage venue for the girls as well as the online activist work.

About a year ago, we started getting over 200 applications when we would put out a call for more girl activists to join the SPARK team. We need another space. There's so much hunger for girls to be connecting online as activists that we can't possibly work with all of them because we don't have the capacity at all. We have two staff members. So we created what the SPARK Action Squad, which is an online space for girl activists globally and we have about 400 folks on that squad right now. It's entirely online, and it's run by a leadership team of four girls from that squad and they're all four teenage girls and they create a daily—. Right now it's a private Facebook group and an email listserv and building towards using Slack, which is a new online platform we're moving towards right now. There's a "Take Action Tuesday" where every Tuesday they pitch an action for the girls to do. They have a book club, they have movie nights where they'll watch movies together. They're constantly posting links to issues, things that are erupting in the media that are connected to feminism in some way, or to girls rights or women's rights. A lot of anti-racist work also; that's become a political space online for a huge



group of young folks. It's not actually just girls. There are a few boys in that space which is cool, and a lot of folks who don't identify on a gender binary in that space as well. We don't know that much about everybody. They have to submit an application form to be part of the squad to get access so we know they're not trolls, but's not nearly as engaged as the SPARK *team*.

The SPARK team has also shifted a lot over the past four years. We were entirely online, with the exception of the annual retreat, which kept growing. Last summer, a year ago, we had 25 girls at the retreat. We had 37 on the team, and 25 made it to the retreat. We had girls in eight countries, which was pretty wild. We had a girl in Indonesia, in Jamaica, in the country Georgia, and they'd find us from the internet. We'd organize these campaigns and realize, "Wow, this issue is so different in Jamaica than it is in, like, the Netherlands." Sometimes that was exciting, sometimes it was very frustrating. I would also find—and the retreat grew, we had a five-day retreat last summer in a rented center in New Jersey—it became a much bigger event and it was incredible. Really powerful. We started incorporating a lot more anti-racist work in the retreat. We did an entire day on dismantling white supremacy, basically.

RS: What was behind that change?

DE: We realized we cannot do feminist work without really talking about doing anti-racist work. They are so connected. We made a specific, very deliberate choice that we wanted our team to be majority girls of color. It was significant and wasn't necessarily the number of girls applying, but it was important to us that SPARK was led by girls of color. I mean, it was frustrating—our staff is all white. We actually hired a woman of color to run the action squad, but Melissa and I are two white women and we

were always very sensitive to the fact that this is doing anti-racist work with two white women as the leaders of the organization, as the adults that are facilitating, was highly problematic. We wanted to make sure that girls of color were the majority of the SPARK team and that they were taking more leadership roles in the work as well. Last year at the retreat we did a day and a half of training around anti-racism work. We brought in a facilitator, an incredible, incredible woman of color who was actually one of the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement now. She was fantastic.

RS: What was her name?

DE: Monica Dennis. She was amazing, she did a full day. She was trained by the People's Institute, which does a lot of anti-racist work and she did a history of racism globally through a very feminist lens also. We split the team into self-identified race groups to do some work with girls who identified as white, girls who identified as mixed, and girls who identify as girls of color, and spent a few hours talking about what our role is in this movement.

This past year, after the retreat, our big campaign this past year was working with Google on a really cool project creating a phone app mapping women's history around the world. That was very fun, but I started feeling really disconnected from a lot of the girls on the team. Especially because the retreat was so powerful, and we'd done some deeply personal work together. We'd really built a strong community among the girls at the retreat last year, we talked a lot about really trying to shift the hierarchy of power within the organization.

As much as I have been saying since day one, "You are my co-workers, I don't want to be in charge, I know I'm the adult and the executive director and I have access to

the resources and fundraising and these things, how do we shift this power so this is a girl-fueled, girl-led movement?” We had some really hard, deep talks at that retreat around what it really means to organize inter-generationally and what the girls need from me and what I need from them. We did one of the hardest, really stressful but very powerful—“I’m going to make myself available for any of you to ask me any question you’ve wanted to ask me after dinner tonight.” For two hours I sat with 20 of the girls and they asked me everything, around how I make every decision that I make and why I make certain decisions and questions around fundraising. They see the budget every year. I’ve been very transparent with a lot of what we do but it was the first time at one of the retreats that I’d very consciously been like, “We’re going to really try to talk through authority and redistribute decision making and power and hierarchy and see if we can really do that and what that means.” It was hard. We didn’t figure it out, we were still struggling with what this was going to look like. I feel like because we had that very intense experience and then went back to being online one hundred percent, I was feeling really disconnected as the months went by, missing that personal connection with the girls.

We lost a lot of girls. The team was too big. We realized with two staff members, to try and manage these 37 girls that they were slipping through the cracks all the time. In an online space, you need daily accountability or they will disappear. We actually started talking with the girls about restructuring the whole organization. Those conversations started after the New Year, around January or February of this past year and started talking about, “What is this work that we’re doing; how do we make it as sustainable and as productive as possible; how do we use the tools we have online but also acknowledge

the real challenges of organizing online?” We together, with the girls, the leadership team, and the staff, designed a totally new articulation of SPARK, which we are about to announce publicly within the next two weeks.

It’s still very new, but I can tell you now because it is happening, that this is the new structure and really exciting and much better, I think. We have totally shrunk the team. We had 37 girls last year. We have five right now. We have five cities, and they’re actually going to be two girls in each city so there will be ten girls. Each of these five girls has to find a partner in her city and then she is going to create a team on the ground of girls on the ground that a pair of girls is going to lead the team on the ground and they’re going to be networked across these five cities. Then, we’ll be working online with the action squad which is these 400 girls, as the online arm of the girls on the ground doing this work. We did our retreat this year with the five girls and really strategized and talked about what it means to work on the ground and I realized we have to have a hybrid on-the-ground/online. We had moved too much online and we had lost some of the texture and relationship and energy of really working with girls. The five cities are going to launch their girls’ projects in the fall. We’ve identified the campaigns we’re going to work on, so the campaigns will have a national feel to them and have an online component and will—in a lot of ways, to the outside world what we’re doing, it might not look that different—but the structure of the organizing will be very different.

RS: It reminds me somewhat of Hollaback!

DE: Absolutely, Emily is dear friend of mine. Definitely. Smaller. Hollaback has grown hugely, and I’ve actually learned a lot from her in seeing some of her struggles with that growth. A difference is we’re girl-based. They’re all adult organizers, young

women, but they're all in college or older. We really want to be mobilizing teenagers. That's really the core of our mission, getting girls activated in high school and middle school even.

RS: I'm curious because you've been working with girls since you were—

DE: A girl.

RS: Right, basically. It's been many years now.

DE: Twenty years.

RS: Do you see changes in your attitude toward, or relationship to girls? Or do you predict changes as you age? How do you think about that?

DE: Yeah, I mean I distinctly remember going through several different phases. First I was big sister. I felt very much my relationship with girls was "I'm hanging. I'm part of their generation, slightly older, definitely a different background." I grew up very middle class, white, Jewish, suburbia and I was thrown into working with girls in New York City. I was never like "Oh, I get you! I totally connect with your experiences," but I definitely felt like I was a girl. I was a young activist doing the work in sisterhood and solidarity as a peer. Then, I remember a real split. I was on a panel and it was a panel on girl's activism and they invited me to speak on the panel. I was probably—I was probably 27, 28—and I was really excited to speak on the panel as a girl activist. I remember getting on the panel and they were introducing all of our panel, and then the moderator was like "Dana is going to speak because she's an adult who works with girls and she's going to speak about what it's like to train girls as activists, as an adult." I was like, "Wait, I'm an adult who's working [with girls]?" It was the first time that I had felt that shift. "Oh right, I'm not a girl anymore; I'm a grownup working with the girls."

Now, I'm older than a lot of their mothers. At this point, they were all born after I graduated from high school. I'm 39, I am very solidly in a different generation than teenagers today. I feel like my relationship to them—I wouldn't call it maternal, though there are definitely jokes and some girls who say I'm SPARK Mama—I have very close relationships with a lot of the girls that can probably feel more nurturing and maternal, I definitely take care of them in a lot of ways. This work is so personal and so intimate and I won't ever pretend that "I'm their boss." We pretty immediately get deeply personal because the work is about our lives and our futures as women. I connect with them in that way, but I definitely feel older. The digital divide is huge. Even if this had all happened 20 years earlier, being a 39-year-old working with teenagers wouldn't be as different as it is now. They all grew up with a Facebook account in second grade, practically. Their experience of social media and of fostering relationships online is very different from mine. I'm adapting quickly to it and I'm not in any way "Oh, I'm against that internet thing" at all. I understand its use. What I don't get, and there's a lot of digital divide, in terms of like, I'm not on Snapchat. I get it. I can do it. They think it's really funny when they send me Snapchats when I'm like "I don't understand this." So I have a little old-fogey-ness during the retreat.

What I like is that it can really shift power in a beautiful way where they have teach me a lot. That's really valuable in intergenerational work. Because of the digital divide, there's a lot that they know about more than I do. I need them a lot more than I think previous generations have needed younger generations. They're teaching me how to navigate this world in a lot of ways and it puts them in a position of educator and leader and that's good.

The funny moments—. I have grown bitter in my old age in a way that makes me sad. What I love about working with young people and still, with the girls, is that they still have so much hope that they can change everything. “We can do this and we can do this!” I try and meet them there and there is part of me that I can feel in the aging of my DNA that’s like “Oh no, we tried that ten years ago and it didn’t work.” I know how that’s going to end if we do that, and they don’t know how it’s going to end yet, so they’re still excited about starting it because they don’t know how it might end. I try to let myself be open to, “Maybe it could end differently,” just because I’ve seen things not go well doesn’t mean they’re not going to go well. It feels like a generational difference.

There’s also a generational shift between me and the rest of the leadership team. The other staff, the co-founders of SPARK are in their mid-50s so there is—we have this triple generation thing happening. Deb and Lynn are in their 50s, I’ve been in my 30s since I started this work, the girls are teenagers and a bunch of girls in their 20s who have aged out but are still connected. In some really beautiful ways, we have girls through almost every generation, from their teens to their fifties, collaborating. Actually listening and hearing and collaborating together and trying to rethink some structures of power based on age lines. I wouldn’t say we’ve figured it out at all, and I wouldn’t be like, “And then we’ve dismantled the ageist structures” but I do feel with women, and in particular women aging, there is—I feel it from the girls as they—. I did an academic paper recently that I’m still working on that’s about girls aging out of the category of girl activist. I’ve been interviewing a lot of the girls as they’ve been slowly transitioning from the power that they have as teenagers, which, in the activist world they actually do have power. There’s always a hunger for the “girls’ voices.” When we get media requests, they want

to talk to the teenagers, not to the 22-year-olds. They definitely don't want to talk to the 30-year-olds. I'm interested in that in parallel to what happens to women today as we age. Women lose power as they age; to see that happening with girls, especially in the feminist movement which is supposedly about challenging these structures and stereotypes and ways we discriminate against women for being women. I see it repeated in girls as they go from teenagers to 22-year-olds. We have a lot of girls who are now 24, 25, and were deeply involved in SPARK and now are kind of lost. They don't really have a place. They are too old to be on the SPARK team. What does that even mean? You're at a point where you've learned enough, gotten enough experience that you're a better activist but we don't care about your voice because it's not the "young voice." But you're 23. That's been interesting, and I definitely feel that as I've gotten older, my voice is less and less relevant to the conversations around young feminism. Even though I work with girls all the time and I feel like I understand their—I'm in the trenches with them and I'm not saying that I'd ever want to speak as a girl or for a girl—but I do feel my power fading as I'm getting older.

RS: Almost 10 years ago, you wrote an article called "Ripples of the Fourth Wave."

DE: Oh yes, I did!

RS: What did that phrase mean to you then; what does it mean to you now? Do you still thinking of it as a useful—.

DE: At the time, I was part of the third wave [of feminism]. Third wave was a big deal because first wave and then second wave were so significant, and then my generation coming on the cusp of the Riot Grrrl [movement] and really starting to play



with intersectionality in the feminist movement and understanding new ways of thinking about feminism felt very connected to my generation.

RS: So you identified as—.

DE: —third wave, absolutely identified as third wave. The funny thing about that, I was still 28 or 29 and working with teenagers and was very attuned to the fact that they were not part of my generation. I was on the end of the third wave. I don't like the numbers. Now I feel like, let's get over it, feminism is always changing and evolving as it always should be. I don't think it's useful to separate us in that way and say "This is what third wave did, this is what was good about third wave and this is what was bad." I feel like I've evolved. I identified as third wave when I was 25, but I wouldn't say I'm a third-wave feminist now. I would say I'm part of a contemporary feminist movement that has shattered that kind of cannibalism of "The next generation swallows the generation before it and then moves on." The "Ripples of the Fourth Wave" piece was that I was working on with viBe, I've always been very interested in sharing power with girls and trying to understand how that could work, and that was my first attempt at viBe at creating a program within viBe that the girls were in charge. It came from wanting girls to lead, which has always been kind of core in my mind to training activists. We need to give girls opportunities where they're leading, where they're in charge, where they're trusted. I feel like I got that from a young age. I feel like I took it.

From the time that I was in high school I'd been starting my own projects and then running them. I always felt that was a big part of me learning how to be an activist and organizer and theater director. I wanted to be providing spaces where girls could do that. What failed miserably, in some of those experiments, was the training. You can't

just say “Okay now you have power, go take it.” I didn’t quite realize that. In particular at the Girls in Charge program at viBe—it was a great experiment. We did it for a few years. We did three or four projects, where the girls had to pitch a project and they had to run it. They had to create their own budget, do their own fundraising, book their own space. They had to do it all. The best thing that came out of those projects was the girls’ hunger to go back into a regular viBe program and be led. It really deepened my relationships with a lot of girls. Then they’d take leadership roles within the structures that existed and then could go on. A lot of those girls, I think Airie was one, she actually just graduated with a master’s in social work. That was so long ago these girls are now approaching 30 now, they’re all probably in their mid-late 20s.

No, I wouldn’t say there’s fourth wave coming. Our girls don’t define—. We’ve talked about it in SPARK and they’re pretty resistant to those kinds of labels, though they’re pretty anti-my generation. They think my generation of feminism was too racist and too much along a gender binary, which I do agree with. The biggest revolution I’ve seen in feminism in my generation, is much more trans-inclusivity and a much more fluid definition of gender.

RS: Does that change at all; I mean you’re in a girls’ group. How does the organization—?

DE: So there are three trans girls in SPARK right now. Their presence has definitely challenged notions of what it means to be a woman and a girl, and how we talk about being a girl and what that means in feminism. Two years ago Calliope, then last year we had two so Luxe and Calliope and now, in the theater project actually Kai doesn’t identify along any gender binary at all and is sometimes is like “Sometimes I use

female pronouns, sometimes I use male pronouns and I'm gender fluid." That's been a new experience for me, really working intensively with trans girls and trans folks who aren't identifying along gender binaries.

RS: We've seen that shift nationally. I'm thinking back to the 9/11 story. I'm wondering what other national events or changes have happened that you see being reflected in your work, whether it was the election of Obama or that campaign, the economic crash. I'm really interested in how that affected particularly people of your generation, in terms of the choices you made and the fundraising you were able or unable to do.

DE: Yeah. That was miserable. My entire professional life has been running nonprofits. It's never been able to be a full time job. Even at SPARK, I teach. I've always taught all along. I teach adjunct at NYU and CUNY right now and have consistently since I've been in grad school have taught at several universities around New York. I love teaching and feel deep connection as an activist also that I want to be in the classroom all the time and working with undergrads and grad students. It's part of my practice, not just financial.

RS: What do you teach?

DE: I teach theater and activism at NYU, which is awesome. I teach undergrads who are all actors basically at Tisch and this is one of their classes of "We can use theater for something else." It's really fun, I teach in the educational theater department and also I teach grad students social issues in drama class. I taught qualitative research methods to doctoral students at NYU for four years. I don't teach that class anymore. I teach at CUNY, I teach class called community acts and I advise five thesis students a year. I'm

pretty connected in the academic world. In terms of fundraising, the economic crash made it miserable to try to fundraise and shifted, I don't even know if there were more money in the nonprofit sector, if that would impact the number of classes I teach in other spaces. I also consult for extra money. I'm consulting with a national Jewish education right now on a sex education curriculum for girls.

RS: Which organization?

DE: Moving Traditions, which is awesome. They're great projects, every time I take on one of these projects I love working on but I would like to not have to hustle so much. I've been trying to write a fucking book for four years now and have not been able to squeeze the time together to do that. That's been frustrating, to feel that I've not been able to do the work projects that feel more personal to me because no one's going to pay me to write an academic book and I'm not tenured at a university so it's not part of any package. I don't need to do it, but I really, really want to publish my dissertation study into a book. I've been slowly plugging away at it for years.

RS: Is that what your residency is?

DE: That's what my residency is. This is the first time ever that I am taking four weeks in Santa Fe to just work on that book, it's really exciting.

I feel like my life, I'd be writing and publishing a lot more if I weren't so financially strapped and having to do all these other jobs just to make ends meet. In terms of the work, I do think it's changed. It's become harder in the theater work, on the ground; economically teenagers need to work a lot more than they used to. The summer show has been really hard to get girls to commit to rehearse all summer because they all have jobs. It feels different now. I actually don't remember that as an issue six or seven

years ago and I was working with teenage girls. They're really stressed about money, they're not going to college as much because they can't afford it. That makes me nervous about this next generation who thinks the answer is to graduate high school and try and get a retail job and then not going to college because they're afraid even City College is going to put them into debt. That shifts the content of some of what they're writing about because the economic struggle is real.

The SPARK girls too, we could be such a different scale if we had the resources. It would be insane. If we could do two retreats a year and bring every girl to the city, if we could hire a staff four people, we'd be unstoppable. We can't there. It's been really challenging for us to fundraise because our model is very unconventional. We're not a direct service organization so funders don't exactly understand what we're doing with these girls and how we're impacting them. Because we're working with girls to launch campaigns where the impact of the campaigns is not really measurable. How do you measure a shift in the conversation on blah blah blah? That's been frustrating.

RS: It reminds me of that Femme Future Report.

DE: I was a part of that project, yes. I remember. Yes. It was a one-day convening with 20 activists in the city and we all bitched about how hard it is [laughter].

RS: And Courtney Martin, they wrote a report. Have you seen any impact from that?

DE: I wish I could say that I have. One thing that is happening—I don't know if I can say it's a direct result of that report, I'm not as connected with those feminist foundations to know if on the ground they're really making shifts in those programs.

Again, we slip through those cracks. The Lenovo Foundation has been incredibly supportive throughout the years. There are some foundations who get what we do.

We are actually considering merging with the Women Action in the Media WAM, which Jamia is now the director of. She's a dear friend who was part of SPARK at the very beginning. We started conversations in the last six months about possibly becoming one larger organization, which is part of the future of making this work sustainable. It doesn't make sense for us to be—for there to be all these little nonprofits who are doing such similar, connected work. Once Jamia and I started talking about it, and I mentioned it to some of our funders, and they're really excited and interested about it. That might happen in the next year.

In some ways that was one of the solutions Femme Futures was advocating for. We should not be all doing this work in silos. This is crazy; there's not enough money for everyone to get funded to do their individual work but if we start sharing resources and building one bigger movement together, then we could be more sustainable and do better work. Even simple as sharing an office or sharing this. It's stupid that we're trying to do all these things separately.

RS: Would you say you're currently feeling hopeful, optimistic?

DE: Yes, definitely. I'm always feeling a little hopeful. I'm excited about this new SPARK model. There's something in this hybrid, online and on-the-ground engagement that is going to be a crucial step forward in the future. What I've learned, and we at SPARK have learned, is that we cannot do this work entirely online. I also learned with viBe that you can't do it entirely on the ground. If it's entirely on the ground then you're only serving the bubble you're serving, which is useful in a lot of ways. You're planting

deep roots and I believe in the 10 years that I was working with the girls at viBe those girls had incredible—. We did amazing work with a few hundred girls. But online spaces open up the potential to work with thousands in one click. There needs to be that combination because you're not going to get that deep relationship reaching thousands online, but if you're only working on the ground you're not going to get a global movement. We need to find those ways that we're doing it all.

RS: Is there anything that I should've asked that I didn't ask about, or that you want to talk about?

DE: [pause] I think you got a lot. My throat hurts [laughter]. I've been talking a lot. I think that's good, I think that's where we are right now. We'll see. It could also all crash and burn in six months. I hope not.

RS: It doesn't sound like it.

DE: No, we're okay.

END OF INTERVIEW