**Sue Purchase**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

**April 27, 2017**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Sue Purchase -SP

Amy Sullivan -AS

**AS:** This is Amy Sullivan I’m at my home with Sue Purchase. It is April 27, 2017. At my house and I’m with Sue Purchase. Sue do you want to state your name?

**SP:** I am Sue Purchase and I give Amy Sullivan permission to record this interview.

**AS:** Let’s start with your childhood. You said you’d grown up in Cloquet. Do you want to talk about your parents, your childhood, your early life?

**SP:** I grew up in Northern Minnesota. I was born in Duluth in 1959. Number five of what would be six children. First four years were spent in Esko, Minnesota. Esko is a suburb of Cloquet. A very strong Finnish community. Number five of six kids. Moved to Cloquet when I was five years old. Went to grade school there.

**AS:** What did your parents do?

**SP:** My dad, he worked for the co-op store, very much Northern Minnesota. He lost his job working there and then he worked at the paper mill for Potlatch. I guess for the rest of his life. I must have been nine years old or something. He started working for Potlatch. That was in the mid-60s, the paper industry was huge. They had Potlatch, Diamond Match, and two other active mills. There was a mill bus. It was a mill town. That’s what he did. My mother, she never worked outside the house.

**AS:** How would describe your economic situation growing up?

**SP:** I would say the working poor. It’s interesting to think about. What I remember, my mother always scrabbling for money. Always worried about money, the things we could and could not have because of money. I suspect that my dad probably made good money. For the times and for the mill industry. Given the times there was a living wage but he drank it all up. There was no money. I remember things like he’d come home drunk and pass out and she’d go through his wallet after the fact to see what was left, what there could be for school lunches. It’s interesting to talk about. I don’t know what year it was, ‘65 maybe, when free lunches started. It must have been Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty but we certainly qualified. I think that I was in the third grade...It must have been around third grade however old I would be then. They were blue and yellow. I don’t know if one was free or one was reduced or you got one of the colors for hot lunch and one was for milk. There was some sort of order to the tickets but I remember the shame. I hated it. I hated using them. Growing up I always felt like everybody in town knew about my house, which was fairly true. He was a drinker and he was violent. I grew up at 1802 Carleton Avenue. Carleton Avenue was one of the main streets in Cloquet. I always felt like we were on display for all of the dysfunction and violence and drinking that happened there. Always a lot of shame related to it.

**AS:** Do you have older brothers or sisters or both?

**SP:** My oldest sister Dianne, I think she was seventeen years older than I was. My mother’s first husband was Greek. He was killed in World War II. Dianne was a baby. My mother was from Floodwood, another small town in Minnesota. I think she had grown up with my dad so she knew him. She had my sister Dianne and then she married my dad Charlie after the first husband was killed. I don’t know how much older she was than my oldest brother, maybe four years. There was Dianne and then there’s my brother Chuck. He was the first born son of my dad. Then there’s my sister Scary Mary. She just had a birthday. She’s around sixty five. Then there’s my brother Jimmy and he is four years older than I am. He was a drinker. Scary Mary is a drinker, Chuck is a drinker. Dianne was way into pills. Then there’s me. Then there’s my brother Michael. He’s two and a half years younger than I am. He for sure is a drinker. There’s been a lot of other drugs in the mix. Every single child. Substance use, violence, and trauma. Absolutely. My mother, she was really proud of the fact that she didn’t smoke cigarettes and she’d have a half a glass of wine. She wasn’t a drinker. There was always some odd sharing of pills.

**AS:** Among who?

**SP:** My oldest sister for sure and with my mom. I don’t know if that extended beyond to my sister Mary Jane or not. There was a culture.

**AS:** Do you know what kind of pills they were sharing?

**SP:** Generally speed.

**AS:** That makes sense because that was available. It was prescribed to housewives with lots of children.

**SP:** Absolutely, to get stuff done and it’s good for a little depression.

**AS:** We were at the school lunches, elementary school, junior high; you were telling me a story about your friend who you met in Cloquet, Debbie.

**SP:** So what happens, my parents get a divorce when I’m in the third grade. The mid-60s in Northern Minnesota people didn’t get divorced. Small town environment, everybody knows everything about everybody.

**AS:** Was your dad violent with your mom?

**SP:** Oh yes.

**AS:** It was physical abuse.

**SP:** All my life.

**AS:** Was everybody a target?

**SP:** Everybody was a target. Me less than anybody else in the house. That’s interesting to me too. They got a divorce. My mother had lived in Oregon in the past and always wanted to go back. The summer between fifth and sixth grade we moved to Oregon. It’s myself, my younger brother, and my older brother Jimmy. We’re out there for about six months or so. I loved being in Oregon. It’s not cold Northern Minnesota. Then Jimmy doesn’t adjust well to it. We move back to Cloquet in early February. It sucked. We moved back into this house at 1802 Carleton Avenue. The old man is still living there because he had moved back in the house. My older sister was there. He had moved back in the house when we moved to Oregon. We come back. He’s supposed to move out. What I remember about that is just waiting for him to be gone. I didn’t like him being around. He was just a problem. Two weeks after we got back he died. He died of a stroke in the living room. I wasn’t there. That was something. I might need to write to my therapist later tonight.

**AS:** We can pause whenever you want.

**SP:** It’s interesting because I’m in therapy and we do a lot of talking. There’s just so much stuff. Sometimes not knowing what I don’t know. There was a change. When I think about myself it was Susie who moved to Oregon. I was always known as Susie, as a little girl. My mother would always talk about how Susie was so docile and so calm and this and that.

We get back and we always think about it as that’s when ‘A Boy Named Sue’ showed up. My alter ego. It’s absolutely—I love Johnny Cash. I grew up hearing his music. I was really close to my brothers and I had to be a badass to survive. If I was going to be sweet and docile I wasn’t going to make it. In the sixth grade he gets buried. It’s cold when he dies. They can’t bury him; they kept him somewhere until the ground was thawed in the spring. I don’t remember much of that but the relief of having him gone. I didn’t have to worry about his violence any longer.

It was hard in the sixth grade. There was a new girl who had moved to town, Connie Carlblom. She had older siblings and a fucked up family life too. We’re still friends to this day. There were some older girls in the neighborhood and we started smoking cigarettes and drinking. My older brother was married and had a little girl and I used to babysit. I used to steal their cigarettes. I’ve probably been smoking since I was nine sort of. Bringing booze to school in a baby food jar.

**AS:** And nobody caught you doing this?

**SP:** Nobody paid much attention to what I was doing.

**AS:** Because you were so docile and sweet.

**SP:** They were caught up in whatever else. I think that it was every child for themselves.

**AS:** In your household?

**SP:** Yes. Dorothy was preoccupied in whatever else went on in her life. Probably in retrospect she probably, I don’t know before my dad and before her first husband what happened growing up.

**AS:** Dorothy is your mom?

**SP:** Dorothy’s my mom. Sometimes I called her Dot Monster. She probably had, I don’t know what her childhood experience was but when her siblings would talk about her, she was known as a problem. Maybe bipolar, maybe borderline personality. Certainly she had a lot of trauma in her life. She never drank. She didn’t do drugs. She knew divide and conquer really well and she could be wicked. She would play divide and conquer between her kids really well. She wasn’t a supportive mother. It wouldn’t be like, “Susie how are you doing now that we’re back from Oregon and your dad is dead? How’s life in the sixth grade?” That wasn’t going to happen. I had a lifelong friend, Lisa; we’d been friends since kindergarten. When I got back in the sixth grade Lisa was there as my friend. This other woman Connie. We all got a really similar mindset. We were friends, we had fucked up childhoods.

Connie and I in the summer between sixth and seventh grade we were with her older sister Gail. Gail is beautiful. She’s was just a hip chick. So we’re at the glass block department store in Duluth. I don’t know why we were there together; we’d gotten dropped off somehow. We were there and we’re shoplifting. I’ve got Gail’s purse carrying it. It’s got a pack of Marlboro Reds with two joints in the pack. We get busted for shoplifting. Connie’s parents get called. They come and pick us up. The police must have been involved somehow, the school. Before I’m ever in the seventh grade I had to start seeing the guidance counselor. A man named Brian Burg, I really liked him. I don’t know how all that got set up. I remember sitting in his office. I had to start seeing him before school started. He told me at the outset, he referred to me as being a survivor. I remember sitting there thinking, “What the fuck does that mean? How do you know that about me? What’s going on? What do you know that I don’t know? What does that mean? What am I surviving?” This is my life. I am twelve. I don’t have insights. It made me so uncomfortable. So I just withdraw a little bit more. Certainly the pot smoking just continues.

In junior high in Cloquet all the grade schools come together and you’re united at the junior high. My friend Lisa that I’d gone all through Garfield School with, the new girl Connie who joins us in the sixth grade, Debbie Holman. Along comes Debbie and then there’s another girl, Mary Dickinson. There’s more but that was the core. Mary and Debbie, they had been friends for life at the Sacred Heart school. They’d gone to the Catholic school. What a group of groups and energy. There was about, I don’t remember how many of us in number but there was Robin Ward. Robin Ward came from Garfield School. I knew her all my life too. In the fourth grade there’s modular scheduling. I don’t know if you’re familiar with modular scheduling in the state of Minnesota but by that point it’s becoming the later 60s. Things are starting to change. The traditional classroom is going away. There were twenty minute mods and children moved from classroom to classroom. More autonomy, more independence. That starts in the fourth grade. It continues on throughout my school career up through high school. I think I was the first year to get it and I think I was the last year to get it. That was fun. In the seventh grade we’ve got modular scheduling.

I’ve got to backtrack to this story about the fourth grade and Robin Ward. We’re sitting in a classroom. There’s a teacher named Mr. Saliga. Probably young at the time, twenties, I have no idea. Older guy from a little kid’s perspective. He would talk about shit that was so inappropriate while sitting at his desk to the classroom. One of them, he talked about Robin Ward’s parents being divorced. I remember sitting there thinking, “Wow, there’s somebody else that can identify with me.” Robin and I would be friends all our lives. Up until probably the last ten years. He was sexually inappropriate. We didn’t know. We were little girls and didn’t have a voice and any place to share it. With divorced parents and things that had happened and nowhere to go with it. There’re these layers of stuff that start.

**AS:** That just kind of sets up the trajectory.

**SP:** So we get to seventh grade and we all get together. I’m not sure how we all met. We formed our club. It was the Weed Weevils. It was given to us, this name by my friend Lisa, her older brother Joel, who was very instrumental all my life. We all have Weed Weevil names. We earned them somehow. Lisa’s name, she was the queen of the Weed Weevils, she was Wee Helvi. Not all of us are Finlanders but many of us are. Then Mary Dickinson became Mad Dog. She loved to drink Mad Dog. Her mother was a teacher. She would leave early in the morning. Her mother partied at night and she taught during the day, grade school children. She’d be gone by seven thirty am. This fledgling group of Weed Weevils, these adolescent girls would gather in Mary’s bedroom. We’d have an ounce of weed, a lid, four fingers and we would roll joints and each of us would have one and we’d keep them passing. Then we’d get really high. Then we’d go to school. We had a presence. We were rascals and fun and outrageous and didn’t give a shit. We weren’t shy.

**AS:** Were you getting in trouble all the time?

**SP:** We started. That’s how we start seventh grade. We smoke cigarettes in the bathroom.

**AS:** What was your name?

**SP:** Susie Monster. I don’t even remember, in the seventh grade I’m sure I started getting suspended then. In the eighth grade I think it was Lisa and I, we had skipped out of school. We started dropping acid I think in the eighth grade, maybe not in the seventh. I think I was fourteen the first time I did acid. It was at a junior high fun night, the school dance. It just continued. Then the first day of ninth grade there was like four of us and we had planned, we got two joints and we were behind the school somewhere. There was a church across the street close to the junior high and we’re back there getting high. Somebody reported us so the principal comes from one way, the assistant principal from the other way. We’re caught and suspended from school. My mother was pissed.

**AS:** How long were you suspended for?

**SP:** I think it was only three days. I don’t think we got more than three days. I had been on in-school suspension. Just in trouble. Still modular scheduling. All this independence to move around the school and these new found friends. All of the things that they talk about as things change for kids, junior high.

**AS:** Where were you getting your drugs?

**SP:** Lisa had an older brother Joel who was six years older than we were. He’s the same age as my sister Scary Mary. Joel was way into drugs. We weevilled from him. We knew people around town.

**AS:** So it was easy.

**SP:** It was very easy. We always hung out with older people, older siblings. We figured it out. We were resourceful. The LSD, I don’t remember how we got that. It was something that it just continued to escalate. In the ninth grade after I got caught, there was so much independence you could easily leave school. There wasn’t a lot of supervision by teachers. You were supposed to be accountable, there was passing time. You’d have a schedule and maybe mods one and two you were in Social Studies and then you’d have free time from mods five through eleven. I think there were eighteen in a day. Eighteen twenty-minute periods. You were expected to go to a resource center, use your time wisely, study, and not get in trouble, and not be caught in the hallways. We used it to our advantage. We had no fear. The ninth grade episode, whatever other friends we were with they got suspended, I got suspended. I went home.

**AS:** That was the pot episode?

**SP:** Yes. I got out of my house. I moved in with my older brother. My oldest brother’s name is Chuck. He was always my hero. He liked me. I moved in with him and his wife and my nephew and niece. They were little. My nephew Tom must have been two years old. My niece Michelle must have been four or five. Chuck and Pam, my sister-in-law Pam twenty-two, twenty-three years old. My brother a couple years older than that. They loved to drink, they loved to party. Not smoke pot.

**AS:** Did you just fight with your mom and leave? Is that what happened?

**SP:** Yes, I asked my brother if I could move in with him. I’d had enough of her shit. I had been leaving home, my oldest brother told me the last time I was up here two years ago, and we were talking about me and writing. That I had started writing again probably since 2006. He said to me, “Susie you were a writer since you learned how. You wrote to everybody.” I didn’t remember that. My mother took my diary when I was maybe sixteen, fifteen. I’d hidden it and she read it. It was used against me. I didn’t write after that. There’s this memory that he talks about in me writing. Then it comes back to me. From the time I was really little I’d write to my grandma. Floodwood, fifty miles away, Northern Minnesota. I would ask her if I could come stay with her. It would just be arranged. I don’t remember exactly how I got a stamp or if I figure out you didn’t need to necessarily have a stamp on the envelope. I knew where the mailbox was on the corner. It would be arranged. I’d have an uncle that would come and pick me up and I’d go to my grandma’s house for whatever number of days or she’d call my mother. As I got older I’d just hop on the Greyhound Bus and somebody’d meet me. My grandma knew that my mother was incompetent and could not protect her children. My grandma liked me. So I was allowed to come and stay. I started out really young just taking care of business. I’ve always known that I could only depend on myself. As time went on, and by the ninth grade the old man’s dead and shit’s happened. I’m an adolescent girl with hormones and I’ve got a period.

**AS:** So you take off to live with them. Is it the same town? Are they in Cloquet?

**SP:** They’re in Cloquet, another part of town. I take off to live with them and he’s got more structure for me living with them. I’ve got responsibilities that I’ve got to do and can’t say no and wouldn’t talk back. I respect him. I could drink there. I could smoke cigarettes in front of them. I’m just enjoying it even more. My friends and I we just become more emboldened and empowered. More drugs, more acid. I’m not sure what else was in the mix in the ninth grade. Drinking, a lot of drinking. A lot of pot. I live with them for a year. My mother wants me to come home. I must have. My sophomore year I moved from the junior high to the high school which is on 18th Street. In the ninth grade Debbie Holman starts going to treatment. Debbie gets sent away. We all tried to understand that. We want to be badasses, hoods they’d call us. Debbie gets sent away. I remember there was conversation around that. I don’t know how we knew what we knew.

**AS:** To drug treatment she gets sent away or she gets sent away for mental health?

**SP:** She gets sent away to drug treatment. I can’t think of what the name of that one was. Debbie can tell you. She’s gone for a long time. It is a therapeutic community. Fuck, Debbie had to wear a sign. She had to wear a sign in treatment. It said, “I’m a dirty slip-sliding junkie.” We were fourteen. Oh my God. It’s Debbie’s story to tell. There was shit that had to happen to us.

**AS:** You were part of it. You’re not telling her story, you’re telling it from your…

**SP:** It was intense. We didn’t know. You don’t talk about stuff, it’s Northern Minnesota. It’s the 60s, the early 70s. Things might be changing, things might be becoming more liberal but not in Northern Minnesota. There’s a tradition. Girls are not supposed to be wild and out of hand and rebellious and have a club that is all about getting high and getting over. We did. It was like, “Fuck you. You think we shouldn’t do this? Well we’re going to show you what we can do.” We didn’t care. We had fun. Debbie goes to treatment.

**AS:** Are you sexually active at this point?

**SP:** We become sexually active.

**AS:** Were you being stalked or abused?

**SP:** There’s abuse.

**AS:** While you were drunk or high.

**SP:** There was always but it wasn’t really talked about a lot. It was talked about after the fact among some of us. We’re an ever expanding group. Junior high, ninth grade, tenth grade we start to take on momentum. There’s the core group: Crazy Mad Dog, Wee Helvi, and there’s Connie. There’s Peggy and there’s Debbie and there’s Berta and there’s Brenda and there’s Pixie. Debbie’s name is Crazy Fry Brain of the Weed Weevils.

**AS:** So there’re a dozen of you?

**SP:** Yes, easily a dozen of us. Really we just feed off one another and we all have similarities. There’s Robin and there’s Jennifer. Jennifer had mono, something happened to her in junior high. Maybe mono was just the excuse. I don’t know if she had some sort of mental breakdown. She came back to school and things were never really the same with her. We all start becoming sexually active. Parties and drinking.

**AS:** I got you off track, Debbie comes back.

**SP:** What I remember is I’d start out on my corner of 18th Street, stop by her house in the morning. We’d sit up in her bedroom and do bong hits. Then we would listen to Cat Stevens “Father and Son.” Get ready and then we’d walk to high school further down 18th Street and maybe do some bong hits in the bathroom stalls. Smoke some cigarettes for sure. Get ready for school and there was a bunch of girls in there smoking cigarettes. It was just known, the first floor bathroom you smoked cigarettes. There was graffiti in the stalls. By the time we were sixteen I don’t remember if Debbie stays in high school the whole time or if she comes and goes during different periods of time there. I think she was around for the most part. We continued to get high. That’s a routine and more acid. Berta gets pregnant at sixteen. I think we were sixteen.

Connie’s sister Gail, the beautiful one, she moves to Minneapolis. She quit school. Gail lives in a house down off of Lake Street. There used to be a grocery school called Applebaum’s. She’s living down there with this black dude named Sunny Gangs. I get introduced to Curtis Mayfield, somewhere around in there. I think it was Sunny Gangs, he loved that music. I just bought that CD for the road trip. I found it somewhere cheap. That’s what’s funny about memories. We would hitchhike, we would leave Cloquet. Debbie and Connie and I, we’d hitchhike from Cloquet down to Minneapolis. We went to Gail and Sunny’s house one time. These two guys gave us a ride. They were crazy. Debbie and I still laugh about us. They bought us a half gallon of vodka, drinking on the way down. We get down here and we go to Applebaum’s shoplifting food. You steal everything. That’s part of the Weed Weevil club thing. You save your money for drugs and you steal things, shoplift, a way of making money. We get caught shoplifting in Applebaum’s. Connie and I get to go back to her sister’s house but Debbie gets taken. She gets taken away to juvie or something because she’s got priors. She’s got history.

Our antics just increased. We become more empowered. Growing up angry, frustrated. Debbie goes away. There’s always some different pairing of friends within this group. Some of us become closer. It’s a dance. Berta gets pregnant and has that baby, Amanda. I don’t think that baby fared very well. There was a lot of sexual abuse in that household—things that we learned after the fact. All of these girls, some of us do drugs differently than others.

The eleventh grade I go to live with my sister Dianne in Duluth. She’s got three boys. I have three nephews. Her oldest one is Ricky. He’s two years younger than I am. Then there’s my brother Michael two and a half years younger than I am. We’re close, the three of us. We grew up together. Ricky, smart, smart guy. Not a lick of common sense. He deals drugs. He deals hash, probably sold pot. They’re in to partying. I’m into getting hash from him. There’s just more drugs. I don’t remember exactly what happened but he came to live at my mother’s house. He always lived and spent a lot of time with us. I go to live with my sister in an apartment in Duluth. At least for half of the year. Maybe the full year my junior year is spent at Central High School.

Dianne and I were close in many ways to the degree that we were close in my family. She talked a lot about experiences. She was beautiful. She had long, dark black hair. She wore in a long braid down her back. She looked like an Indian. Indians are discriminated against in Northern Minnesota. She’s half Greek, she’s beautiful. She’s my mother’s first child. My mother never let anybody forget that she’d had a first husband that she really loved. He was killed and she married Charlie by default and she has these kids by him but really Dianne’s the favorite. My sister grows up; to the time she’s twelve years old in the family house. It must have been in Esko with the old man beating the shit out of her. She goes to high school in Esko. This small town, smaller than Cloquet, with black eyes and split lips. I don’t know what happened in there. My grandma thinks that my mother’s incompetent, can’t raise her children, all of that. It really gets established with Dianne. Dianne is sent to reform school in Southern Minnesota, Sauk Centre. A couple different places, Red Wing maybe. She’s sent away. She never comes home to live. She, at seventeen, has Ricky this baby. Her first marriage. Lives in Duluth. Then she would be divorced a lot of different times. When I go to live with her when I’m a junior in high school it’s one of those times when she’s not married. She and I would talk. We would talk about trying to sort out what had happened growing up. She’d talk about her experience being sent away and the violence. We tried to understand why our mother didn’t protect us. There was always this curiosity and trying to understand what happened, our trauma.

**AS:** So you’re sixteen when you go to live with her and she’s how old?

**SP:** She’s like seventeen years older than I am.

**AS:** So she’s like thirty one.

**SP:** Yes. She’s close to my mother at the same time.

**AS:** Just trying to understand it.

**SP:** In many ways hates my mother. Angry, pissed off. That dynamic is just so hard. My sister Dianne wants to be friends with me and friends with my friends. My sister Dianne when I think about music, I was introduced to different music by each of my siblings. My sister Dianne introduced me to the blues. I think from the time I was two years old I’ve loved the blues. Otis Redding, Little Richard, oh my God, Ray Charles. My sister Dianne was a brown girl that loved the blues. That understanding of what it means to be a brown girl when you’re non-white started with her. When I’d go to stay with my grandma all those times, all the old ladies from Floodwood would get together which is considered so Minnesotan, a little lunch. Then they’d want to do the run down where I fit in in the sequence of siblings. Old people, “Oh you’re Dorothy’s daughter.” They’d have me do this run down. I’d say my sister Dianne. It happened without fail. There was always that qualified. “She’s only your half-sister.”

**AS:** Is this because she was Greek? Just because of her dark hair? Did she have a dark complexion?

**SP:** Yes, she’s beautiful. She looks like a Native woman. Yes. There’s all of that stuff. It just gets layered and layered. I live with her. We’re close. As close as we can be. I don’t trust any of them. There’s this thing of wanting Dorothy’s attention. My mother always encouraged divide and conquer. If she could ammunition against one of her children that was so much the better for her. There’s no trust. I think Dianne tried to be a supportive big sister and take care of me, look out for me as she possibly could. I think I need a bathroom break.

[Break in Recording]

**SP:** So I live with her for my junior year. I move back to Cloquet for my senior year in high school. That was just a year of partying. My mother left town for a month and went to the West Coast. It was crazy. My brothers and I, we had a whole month to party in that house. We had a plan. We had Operation Bar Glass. Preparing for my mother to leave town so we could party and have a fun time. We covered up her china cabinet and all of this stuff.

**AS:** Just to protect it?

**SP:** Just to protect things. We had Operation Bar Glass, we had all these other glasses. We were trying to take care of the house to the best of our ability and have a party. It was huge. It was a lot of fun in many ways. There were constantly people in that house. My nephew that deals hash. There was always somebody there and we were getting high. We’d have parties. Sneaking into the bars in Northern Minnesota at seventeen, eighteen years old. We’d bring the party home to the house. Somebody talked about how the streets were lined with cars. There was nowhere to park to go into the house. They were fun parties. They didn’t totally destroy the house. We had a lot of people there, a lot of friends.

There were a lot of things that got talked about after the fact. Apparently one friend was raped during the party. I don’t know how the circumstances were talked about. The friend Connie, she certainly struggles with mental health issues now. She brought it up earlier this year she was up visiting me, asking if I remembered. I don’t know that I remember. There’s pieces of it sort of, snippets. Things weren’t really acknowledged. They just went on. We went on. We continued to party. I left Cloquet right after graduation and went to Minneapolis and then went on further, Colorado. The Weed Weevils slowly dispersed. There were a lot of things that happened, drug use that increased. People that went to treatment like Debbie in and out. It was at the time when girls still wanted to get married out of high school. I think maybe more settled.

**AS:** When did you graduate high school?

**SP:** 1978. All I ever wanted from Cloquet was to leave Cloquet. I was leaving, no two ways about it. I had established more of a life in Minneapolis. I talked about hitchhiking down there and we’d stay with Gail. We continued to go down there, drinking in Moby Dick’s at eighteen, underage.

**AS:** Was it underage in the 70s?

**SP:** Nineteen was the legal drinking age in Minnesota at that point. It kind of shifted back and forth. I’d been drinking in Superior, Wisconsin for a long time. It was just across the bridge. Minnesota was still nineteen. We would drink in Moby Dick’s. I don’t know if you’re familiar with Moby’s. It used to be downtown on Hennepin Avenue, down by the Gay 90s and Augie’s. We would drink in there. The first time I was ever in the Gay 90s I’d been doing acid. It was crazy. The friend Brenda, her older brother Bobby was HIV positive, a gay man. He hung out at the Gay 90s all the time. We had an in with older people continually. At Moby’s that place had a reputation. Downtown Minneapolis in the 70s with pimps and sex workers with big hats with feathers. We were in hog heaven. It was fun. It was entertaining. It was a challenge. It wasn’t boring. We never liked to be boring.

**AS:** Was it scary to you ever? Was it dangerous?

**SP:** Certainly should have been. Should have been scared. Connie met this guy, some black man that we’d met. There weren’t really black guys in Northern Minnesota. Not in Cloquet, there might have been one. I remember her taking off with him. She just talked about this too. She was gone for a few days. She tells some wild story around what happened. None of it was good. Real, imagined I’m not sure. Probably to some degree very real. Kidnapped.

Then during that time I don’t know if we were seventeen or eighteen, Connie’s sister Gail, the beautiful one, living with Sunny Gangs. She is a prostitute in Minneapolis, strung out on heroin. She ends up dying. The story goes that she was on a golf course in Vadnais Heights and she was wearing a lot of silver, turquoise necklaces, bracelets. When the lightning struck because of the jewelry. I don’t know whether that’s a true story, if that’s what we were told. She ends up dead anyways.

**AS:** From a lightning strike?

**SP:** That’s what they said. She’s dead. Sunny Gangs right around that time is accused of killing a cop. We’re living on the North side of Minneapolis. There’s myself and there’s Robin and Jennifer. Connie lives in South Minneapolis. She lives over on Cedar Avenue over by Little Earth. We had gotten in a car accident on Cedar Avenue. We’d been down partying at Moby Dick’s. Then we had some people in the car with us. I think there were two guys and four girls. We’re on our way to some party. Connie hit a parked car. I ended up having my forehead cut open. Jennifer was in the front seat; she hit the windshield and had glass in her face. We were the only two hurt. There was an ambulance going by as it happened. It was an old Plymouth Valiant. I think they pulled me out through the window and into the ambulance. I remember this old guy saying because I think we had a bag of weed or we had other drugs in the car. What I remember is him telling me that he wasn’t going to do anything about that. The drugs weren’t going to be talked about. They brought us to HCMC.

**AS:** Who was telling you that? The cop?

**SP:** What I remember is a cop. That I was in an ambulance. I was laid out on the gurney. I think he saw us as wild young girls.

**AS:** Maybe take it for themselves.

**SP:** Yes, right. We’re brought to HCMC and Jennifer’s face is cleaned out and I’m stitched up. They just let us go. They let us go. That was right at my nineteenth birthday. I’d been in three car accidents in three months. I think I’d been in Montana on a little road trip with Lisa and this woman Peggy. That wasn’t really our fault, not necessarily drugs involved. There’d been that. There was the one in Minneapolis. Then I’m back in Northern Minnesota in Cloquet for Christmas and New Year’s. Lisa and I get in a car accident on Carleton Avenue and I hit the windshield again and we’re drunk. I think I’d had a concussion. They put me in the hospital then. It was always something.

We live in Minneapolis and then Lisa wants to go on a road trip. She calls me up. She’s still living in Cloquet, I’m in Minneapolis. She calls me up at like midnight. She proposes this road trip that we would leave Minnesota on the fifteenth of June, we’d have a pound of pot. Lisa was always a planner. We would go through the Black Hills and we’d camp along the way. Then we’d go to Gillette, Wyoming because there was the oil shale boom or something there. All these people from Cloquet had gone there to work. Gillette is an armpit of Wyoming. We’d go through Yellowstone and up to Seattle, down the West Coast and then into Mexico. We’d take this trip. I remember saying to her, “You’re drunk. Call me back tomorrow when you’re sober.” Which she does. I’m like, “Okay. I’m game but we’ve got to go a month later and only two ounces of pot. We’re not bringing a pound Lisa. We could get in trouble with a pound.” We do the road trip. As it turns out with left with expired tabs. We make this road trip, party the whole way. Yellowstone, the Northwest, we get to Tacoma and spend some time because Robin’s living there. We surprise her. Robin was pregnant and we didn’t know it at the time. We leave, have a great time. Party the whole way. We travelled for six weeks. We didn’t go into Mexico. We ran out of money in Arizona at the border. I had to call my brother. He wired some to Durango.

We get to Colorado, we get to Denver, and I’ve got a friend there who I’ve known since I was fifteen years old. She came to live in Cloquet when she was fifteen. Her uncle was the assistant principal at the high school. She’s still a part of my life. She lives down the mountain in Allen’s Park. We go to her house, her and her mom’s house in Denver. We get some day labor jobs in Denver. Lisa and I get enough money to go up the mountain to Summit County. I think we’d seen a Keystone Resort ad in the paper, in the *Denver Post* or something. We think, “We’re going up there.” We get a job at the employment office. It’s the boom of construction in Summit County. Just really starting to be built up. There’s all the little towns, Breckenridge and Silver Thorn and Frisco and Dylan. Lisa and I get this job up on Wilderness, up on the mountain as construction laborers. Moving this guy from one unit to another building. He pays us in cash. He lets us camp in the finished condos. We think is great. We get a bunch of money for working and we go out on a Friday night and again underage drinking. Now it’s twenty one in Colorado and we’re nineteen.

We met up with the locals right away. We get a room to rent on Silver Lane in Silverthorne at this guy Bob Dennis’s house. Lisa and I have bunk beds and we live across the street from the Mint Saloon. We think we have died and gone to heaven. Willie Nelson used to drink over at the Mint Saloon. Oh it was fun. We’re out of Cloquet. We get in with the locals. I met my first husband there, Ron. He was friends with some other people that lived in that house. When Lisa and I had gotten there it was somewhere in there, we did acid. I got some Red Dragon acid in the mail. We’d do acid and hang out at the lake. Still did other drugs like cocaine had been a part of my life for quite a while. There’s tons of cocaine in Summit County.

**AS:** Now we’re in the early 80s.

**SP:** It’s 1979, late ‘79. I meet Ron. He’s into injecting cocaine. He’s got long hair. I immediately think he is something. He’s vegetarian, lives in some old trailer. The mountains are not developed. A lot of people lived lives with wood stoves for heat, kerosene lamps, vegetarians. Kind of that sort of mountain hippie lifestyle, the Grateful Dead. Ron’s got a trailer. I just think, “Oh my God he’s cooler than shit.” I picked up with him. It must have been late August, first of September 1979. It’s not long and I’m living with him in this trailer. Maybe before that. Ron liked to drink. He liked to drink Jack Daniels and he’d turn the bottle upside and do bubbles as he called them. It was a violent relationship from the very start.

He had this old trailer, those really old ones, a lot of them are still left up there. It’s this narrow hallway, a straight line of rooms. I walk in and he’s in the back. He’s in the bathroom with this guy. This biker named Steve. It’s sort of that *Go Ask Alice* moment. It’s dark, lowlights and Ron’s tied off with a syringe in his arm with cocaine. It was a dramatic moment. I called it the *Go Ask Alice* moment because *Go Ask Alice* was supposed to be the scared straight movie. It was the 70s. I got the rinse. Whatever is left is the residue. You put in a little water to make sure you get everything out. You don’t want to waste what’s in that syringe. It didn’t do anything for me. Maybe opened up a new way of thinking. I was always curious. Why not try it? I think at the time that’s a fairly isolated incident.

**AS:** That was it? You just tried it and it didn’t do anything exciting?

**SP:** Yes, and Ron and I continued to live together. Certainly I didn’t think, “Oh my God, he’s not for me.”

**AS:** You were primed for violence.

**SP:** Yes. So we go to Oregon. My mother is living in Southern Oregon again. She moved back and forth between Oregon and Minnesota more times than I could count. Her and brother Michael, my brother Michael must be still seventeen or something. I get pregnant with Christa. We moved back to Colorado. She is born in October of 1980. She’s a cesarean section. We rent the house on Silver Lane, the same one that I started out renting a room in. We get to rent the whole house. There’s rooms upstairs that we rent out to other people. Lisa lives with us in that house, rents a room. It’s Ron and Lisa and I downstairs. Christa comes home, new baby. I might have occasionally smoked pot while I was pregnant with Christa. I really didn’t smoke cigarettes, I tried to quit. Ron’s violent. I left him.

**AS:** Is he hitting you?

**SP:** Yes. He’s crazy.

**AS:** Sorry I have to ask.

**SP:** You should ask. There’s a lot of it that I don’t really remember. There was one time he’s got me, I’m on the couch I’m nine months pregnant. I’ve got my knees pulled to my chest to the degree that you can in that situation. There’s a coffee table that was homemade out of two by fours. Those thick pieces of wood, it’s L-shaped. He breaks that table. What I remember is him holding a piece of it over my head. It doesn’t connect with me. It’s really threatening. I don’t really remember then what happened there. I know that I run out of the house and that I’m hiding across the road in the ditch. I don’t know what happens after that. I end up leaving Ron. Maybe that incident. Maybe it was the night before my baby shower there was something. I don’t really know where I went.

**AS:** When you left him?

**SP:** I left for a while. Didn’t I leave? I think I left.

**AS:** While you were still pregnant?

**SP:** Yes, but I don’t really remember that. I don’t know if I just went back in the house. I don’t know. It seems like I left. But if I did I wasn’t gone long. It’s close to the due date. I don’t know. I delivered Christa. She’s born. I go back there. I live with them. My twenty-first birthday was the seventh of September, 1980. I remember thinking that for many people that are twenty one they want to go to the bar because that’s legal drinking age. It wasn’t a big deal for me at that point. I’d been in the bar for years. I didn’t see the excitement of it. Some people came over for a little birthday party. I wasn’t drinking. I took it serious. Christa was a tiny baby. I’ve always loved babies. The bedroom was off the living room. There was a rocking chair in there. I was sitting in there breast feeding Christa. Ron came in and he punched me in the face. Punched me in the mouth. I’m not sure why. What my offense was at that point. It seemed out of the blue. He was remorseful the next day and all of that happy shit that goes along with that. That would just continue.

**AS:** How long did you stay with him?

**SP:** Christa was six. I don’t remember how it happened. Within there Christa was a year old. I started injecting again with Ron. I think it was Christa’s first birthday, no it’s not Christa’s first birthday. It is Ron’s birthday. I don’t know if he was turning twenty five. He must have been. We have this birthday party. His birthday’s the eighteenth of March. October to March however old Christa was. She’s there taking care of her. We have this party. I think it’s there that I start injecting again.

**AS:** Cocaine?

**SP:** Yes. That would continue for a while. For at least a year. The times when I can get along with Ron, he used to talk about bell ringers or ear ringers. Cocaine was described that way. If you were injecting you’d get an ear ringer. That was a good hit. I’m sure I was curious about that. He would always take off with the paycheck. He was a paint contractor. He made good money but there wasn’t ever really money. I get into injecting with him. It makes life easier. We can communicate better. I’d put the kids to bed and we’d sit up and get high.

**AS:** You have more than one kid at this point?

**SP:** There’s Christa and then Ron’s got a daughter by a previous marriage. It wasn’t even a marriage, this woman that he lived with, Caroline. Caroline went by Rosie. She was German. Her parents had immigrated to the United States from Germany, Carola and Hans Wolf. They owned a delicatessen in Keystone. Keystone Resort is a small resort. Keystone opened in 1975. This is ‘79. It’s a very small county, it’s just starting. It’s profound because the ski industry and all that it brings.

**AS:** So you end up with the daughter somehow?

**SP:** We end up with the daughter Jenny when she is four years old. Ron had never really had much for visitation, didn’t really know her well. They’d split up when she was a baby. Jenny is so abused by the time she’s four years old. We just get her on emergency, something had happened. There was an incident. We go to court in Breckenridge and we end up having her. She’s part of it. I am twenty one years old and parenting this little girl who’d been so severely abused, physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually by the whole family including her mother. There’s that. Jenny is four, Christa is one, Ron likes to move.

We move down to the Western Slope. He’s working jobs. He doesn’t really stay down there. I’m left down there. Drugs are still involved, not injecting. Pills ground up on bong hits. I don’t know. Drugs are always a part of the situation in greater degrees with Ron. They’re never completely absent from my life. I have something in me, my own life experience whatever it was, reducing the harm, reducing the use. Trying to navigate situations.

**AS:** Would you say that you at that time felt like you were in control of your use? Is that what you’re talking about?

**SP:** Yes, I would say I had more control over my use.

**AS:** Your life didn’t spin out of control?

**SP:** I was never a chaotic drug user to the way that I would describe that.

**AS:** You were able to take care of the people you were supposed to?

**SP:** Take care of the kids.

**AS:** Take care of yourself as best you could with Ron.

**SP:** Yes. I had grown up in chaos. I didn’t want chaos for my children at all. Jenny’s a part of it. Christa’s a baby. Ron moves me to the Western Slope but he’s working in Summit County. He always moved around and I never had a voice. I just went along with it. There was a time; I can remember visiting him in Summit County in the town of Frisco. We were staying in some hotel room. He’d beat the shit out of me there too and I left. I couldn’t leave with Jenny. I didn’t feel like I could leave with her. She wasn’t my child. It was hard having Jenny. Really, really hard. She’s got a lot of issues.

I’ve got Christa and we leave. I think I leave for the summer. I go to my mother’s in Oregon and from there we went to my family’s in Minnesota. I end up going back to Ron. I end up getting pregnant with my son Blake. The patterns just continue. Drug use really isn’t a part of my life at all. I’m living up in Leadville. Jenny is abusive. She’s sexually abusive to Christa. I feel like I had no understanding of that. I just knew that something, Christa had been potty trained and she’d developed a yeast infection. I had taken her to the doctor. Certainly I know Jenny’s fucked up and there’s issues. Talking about it and starting to gain some insights.

Ron’s always gone and his lifestyle just continues. He’s violent. I’m figuring a way to get out of this situation. Jenny goes to live in a foster home. She eventually ends up in state hospital in Pueblo. She’s not bad enough to be there so she gets sent to a group home in Denver, Mt. St. Vincent. It still exists. Ron doesn’t participate. I try to, to the best of my ability, to go to meetings and stuff like that. Now I’ve got Blake and he’s born a month premature. There’s violence during the pregnancy. He’s born a month premature in Leadville. Jenny, the parental rights were severed of Ron’s and of the mother. The mother, Caroline aka Rosie, she was told that if she did not sever her parental rights that she would be prosecuted. Jenny lives at Mt. St. Vincent’s for years and is eventually adopted. She’s defined as a success story given the circumstances of her life. As she was older once she turned eighteen I had contact with her.

During those years in between there was a social worker in Steamboat, I lived in Steamboat too. She was really great, really wonderful. In one letting me know that it wasn’t my fault, that I’d done the best I could by her. That story sort of comes to an end.

Jenny leaves, we move to Leadville, from Leadville we move to Summit County down the mountain. Leadville’s over ten thousand feet high, it’s a high mountain town. They’re beautiful and they’re crazy. Summit County, we move there. Ron is still a paint contractor. His drug use continues. He starts dealing drugs. I think around that time, I’d be sort of in and out of use. I think that injecting may have been something that happened occasionally, maybe more snorting. Ron is certainly spinning out of control. Not that he had much to start with. Things are getting crazy. I’m trying to get away from him. He flushed fifteen thousand dollars’ worth of cocaine down the toilet. Frisco’s a small town, maybe there’s four thousand people. A tourist town, the cops don’t care. It’s the wild, wild West in the mountains. You can get away with anything you damn well please up there. He told me that he thought he was being followed by; he was at the Moose Jaw bar, an ambulance and a corvette. He crawled through a creek bed getting away.

**AS:** So he’s losing it at this point.

**SP:** He is losing his shit. Flushes fifteen thousand dollars’ worth down the toilet. He’s still working on job sites. He travels with two guns.

**AS:** So he’s paranoid.

**SP:** Oh my God he’s so paranoid.

**AS:** He has guns?

**SP:** He’s got guns. Yes. He had guns.

**AS:** What’s your escape plan at this point? Do you have one?

**SP:** I was working on one. We live in a couple little houses in the town of Frisco. Probably non-payment of rent, whatever it was that’s why we moved. Then we moved to this little other area of the county, Willowbrook, in this house. I’m trying to get away. To the best of my ability get away. I always knew that if I wanted to get away I wouldn’t be able to take much with me.

**AS:** And you’re at your most vulnerable when you have left or you’re about to leave. That’s when you’re most at risk of being killed.

**SP:** During this time this house in Willowbrook, a split level house. I’d been cleaning condos. He was extremely paranoid. It’s a subdivision. There’s tracks through the snow and he’d think that people were coming over to the house. He’d make me take my kids to work with me because he thought I was fucking somebody on the side. It’s really a heightened state of alert. I’m trying to get away. He’s becoming increasingly dangerous. I couldn’t shower by myself. I’m telling him I’ve got to get away. I need a divorce. We’re getting high so that I can talk to him. It makes it so much easier. He agrees. His rationale is that if I went back to Southern Oregon where my mother was he’d give me a divorce. We’re going to move together because that’s how it’s going to happen. I don’t know if it’s within a week of us moving, a couple days, the house is packed up. I have these really good friends and old neighbors, Mary Ann and Mac. We go to their house for dinner. Ron had been drinking all day long. He would be so ugly, so unpredictable. We go there for dinner, he drinks the whole way through it. You can read people. I know that things aren’t going to be good. I get in the car and he’s saying shit the whole way home. What happens next is that he beat me in front of my kids. I think they thought I was dead. He rapes me. I still don’t really know how to get away from him. The next day, I don’t remember exactly how it happens; I talked to Mary Ann and Mac. I go to their house. They see my face is just a mess. They’re like, “Susie you’ve got to go. We’re going to give you this money and you’ve got to go.”

Little by little I start putting together a plan. I was never going to raise my children in a house like I grew up in. My friend Denise she goes with me. We plan it. I strategically put things through the house and the next day Ron leaves with my brother. They had to go down to Denver for something. I put my kids in the back seat and I said, “You don’t move. Stay right here.” I threw whatever I could throw in my car and I drove away. I left. I went to Oregon. He follows me. I knew that he was following me. I started out in Southern Oregon in Grants Pass. I’ve got relatives all through. My sister flies in and meets me, my sister Dianne. We drive back to Minnesota together. I leave Ron.

**AS:** He just follows but you didn’t see him?

**SP:** Never saw him again. No, I stayed one step ahead of him the whole time.

**AS:** Then he never comes to Minnesota?

**SP:** I think at one point he’s there looking for me. He didn’t know where I was. I lived downtown Minneapolis, I lived in the Elliot Park neighborhood. Another saga begins.

**AS:** So you never see him again? How do you get divorced from him? You were married?

**SP:** I was still married to him. I live in Elliot Park. Oh my God the people involved in my life there, love them, love them, love them. I come back and I’m staying with my sister Dianne over in Richfield, South Minneapolis. During that time, I hadn’t ever really thought about it like this, my mother had remarried and she’s living with this man in Southern Oregon. While the time that I’m leaving and moving back to Minneapolis my mother moves back. It was nuts. She’s got my daughter Christa, I’ve got Blake. Staying at my sister Dianne’s house. I’m looking for housing, getting on welfare. Five hundred and twenty eight bucks a month AFDC. I think I still have a car payment to make. I’m looking for places to live downtown Minneapolis and on Franklin Avenue. Oh my God Franklin was such a dump. It’s really sort of like a *Go Ask Alice* junkie crazy environment. That’s like 1986. There hadn’t been gentrification started yet. Somehow through all the phone calls, different things I end up with subsidized housing in the Elliot Park neighborhood.

I meet this guy, Ira Simms. My sister Dianne and I used to call him the black Tom Selleck of Elliot Park. He was a handsome man. Ira liked me. I get to know him. We get to be friends. He gives me a unit to live in. He says he’s got a place to live. It is 1601 Elliot, the top unit; it had been rehabbed, one of those old houses, Section Eight housing. I paid a hundred dollars a month. Ira liked to smoke crack. My friend Jennifer, I get reunited with her. Jennifer likes to do cocaine too. Her plan is she’s got a good job, works for some insurance company. We’ll just buy a whole bunch and do as much as we can and get sick of it. I’m not injecting but I’ve got a craving. Things had happened, goofy things. I started smoking crack with Ira. That was a horrible experience. I don’t know if you’ve ever tried crack.

**AS:** I have not tried crack.

**SP:** It is toxic. It is gross, it is disgusting. It hurts. I moved Jennifer in, she pays rent. It helps with money. I don’t remember. I moved it that place in the spring maybe, March, February maybe. I moved into this apartment. Then I live there, I’m not even in there a year. Ron doesn’t know where I’m at. Maybe I’ve been there a few months; he doesn’t know where I am. He had an address and a phone number for my sister. He’d been in Minneapolis looking for me. Something weird had happened then too. I got some phone calls. Something had happened. Nothing comes of it. I’d been warned, he goes back to Colorado. He’d occasionally call my sister. She would arrange for the kids and I to be at her house at a certain time. This is landlines, there’s no cellphones, there’s no three way call either.

**AS:** And he never gets my phone number?

**SP:** He never gets my phone number. Not allowed. We go to my sister’s on Friday that’d she’d arranged. At this point I’d had my kids, Christa for sure I think Blake was too young, there was a group started in Minnesota. It’s the holy land of treatment, social services, all of it. I had Christa in this newly forming group, it was called Children are People Too. It was for kids, I think it was in the Linden Hills neighborhood. It was for kids that came from substance using parents or trauma. I have no idea how I got hooked up with it. It was one of those early sort of hippie, social services. We’d started that.

There’s that weekend and my sister arranges for us to be at her house for him to call. He talks to the kids maybe just talked to Christa. He kind of ignored Blake. I have a conversation with him. He’s nuts and I know this at this point. He’s back in Colorado. When he’d been in Oregon my mother would talk about him being catatonic and the neighbor’s yard. He just continued down this path with this speedball, a mixture of cocaine and heroin. He gets back to Colorado. He’s living with a woman out in Plains, he calls talking crazy. What I remember saying to him is that, “My life would be so much better if yours was just over.” Those are my parting words to him.

The following week, a nice day in Minneapolis, it’s warm, it’s in the seventies. I’m at Lake Nokomis with my kids. I come back and get a phone call from my nephew and Ron’s dead. He stepped out of a moving car. The county coroner from Greeley, the only number they had was my sister’s. The county coroner in Greeley called. Calls and tells my nephew all of this stuff. Craig thinks it could be a hoax. People do crazy shit and Ron did crazy shit. He hung out with a bunch of people. He takes down all the information and then he calls me and tells me about all of it. I have to call Ron’s dad. I have to call the county coroner. He was a really formidable; he’d been an executive for AT&T. Ron was the youngest child and always the problem child. I have to listen to this man tell me about all of it and how they verified that it was him. Ron’s dead. I got two kids, living in Elliot Park. It was a come to Jesus moment, profound, life changing.

**AS:** Was it just a huge, incredible relief?

**SP:** It was so life changing. It was a huge relief on so many levels. I remember thinking first and foremost that for sure I was a single parent. There was no optimism, no hope for the future. Ron was never going to get better. Very cut and dried. You don’t hold out hope anymore. I didn’t have to be afraid. I could come and go. To the degree that would be physically possible, the rest was something else.

**AS:** You didn’t have to think about the moment when he might show up and do something.

**SP:** Ever again.

**AS:** To you or the kids or sabotage you. He’s out of the picture.

**SP:** He’s dead.

**AS:** He’s just what you asked for a week before.

**SP:** Yes, right.

**AS:** That’s so crazy.

**SP:** It was crazy. I go to the funeral. I go out to Colorado. I don’t take my kids. My brother comes down from Northern Minnesota and picks them up. I go out there. My friend Lisa meets me at the airport. She holds my hand. It’s a visitation and I see him laying in the casket. His parents put him in a suit. He had been airborne. He’d been in this car with this woman Holly. Holly had no regard for life whatsoever. Ron had been in this town for three months and had been eighty sixed out of most bars. We go to her house. We pick through Ron’s shit. It was like picking through a garbage dump.

We listen to Holly, I’d already had a phone conversation with her and she talks about the experience and what happened that day with Ron. Kind of piecing it together. They’d been drinking and in the bars. She talks about how in between Fort Lupton and this town of Hudson, it’s an old rural road, dark, no lights. That he looked over at her and said goodbye and stepped out of the car. The accident report said she was going thirty, thirty five miles per hour. He was airborne and he hit a sign that took off the top of his head. He died by the side of the road. It was ruled a homicide.

**AS:** He jumped out of the car?

**SP:** Supposedly yes. He stepped out. That was her story. He’d also been prospecting for some bikers out of Boulder. I don’t know rolled over on a dope deal somewhere. He hung out with people who were intense and dangerous. Very little regard for life, drugs were always a part of it. Shit happened. It is a scary story isn’t it?

**AS:** So scary.

**SP:** I’m never real sure if I should be scared or what I should do with it. A pause would be good.

[Break in Recording]

**AS:** We’re back. Part two.

**SP:** Ron died. I have my kids, Christa in some support group for little kids. I go to therapy and talk about the fact that my parting words to him that it would be better if his life was over. It was interesting in that the therapist talked a lot about, “You know you weren’t responsible for his death Sue.” I was like, “Oh, I thought that I was.” What a relief that is to hear somebody say it. I don’t know if I internalized that message. I learned a lot from it. I’ve never said something like that to anybody again. Maybe haven’t felt the need. How powerful that was. From there, my sister Dianne and I we went to adult children of alcoholics meetings. She introduced me. We went at Abbott Hospital. I remember thinking, it was an all-women’s group, and they might as well have been speaking Chinese because I couldn’t understand them and what they were saying. I couldn’t contribute. I was afraid to talk, afraid of my emotions overwhelming me. I didn’t know how to talk about a dead husband. Really, how do you talk about that?

**AS:** Not to mention all the abuse you suffered under him. You were like shell shocked. Right? Would that be fair to say?

**SP:** It’s easy to say that. I think the day when I found out that he had died, I don’t know if he would talk about ghosts, stuff like that. I just remember thinking, “Now the bastard’s everywhere.” In some ways there was no containing him. Not being able to sleep and always looking over my shoulder, making sure that he was dead. When I saw the body I looked for the paint under his fingernails just to make sure that it was really him. Because of that and that experience and being able to understand it and begin to process it then, I would say that I’m not completely done processing it. A real commitment to wanting to break that cycle of substance use and mental health issues. Not knowing how just knowing that it couldn’t happen. It was just so important to figure out the key. But it’s not a nice and neat little tidy package. It doesn’t happen like that. I think that I thought if I went to therapy, if I went to school, if I did this, if I did that I would guard against it. If my kids had a college education, if I had a college education. If I made more money, if I did this, if I did that. That’s bullshit. That’s not happening.

I don’t know if it was a year. My desire was to get back to Colorado. It wasn’t long after Ron died, maybe the following fall, a year; I’m not sure how long. Within a couple years I was back in Colorado. I started out managing a Safeway grocery store, their delicatessen. The sense that I could be and do something more. I could rise above it and made a better wage and worked there, health insurance and creating a better life. I married again. I have a son Kelly. The marriage lasted a couple years. We moved back to Minneapolis. I went back to school for the third time. During the time that Ron died I tried to go back to school. I was going to go to St. Mary’s. It’s part of St. Kate’s now and be a chemical dependency counselor. That wasn’t happening. I didn’t make it in school. I went back to Colorado.

Came back, went back to school at MCTC and started in Women’s Studies. I had success. I did well in school, I learned and it opened up other worlds. I made a decision to get a divorce. Jim was an improvement over Ron. He still had a drug use history, verbally abusive. I went back to school and that saved my life. It was the beginning of Women With a Point. I did projects related to needle exchange. I read a book *The Opposing Viewpoints Series on AIDS.* They had talked about needle exchange in it. They’d also talked about gay men. It was a woman who wrote it, her brother had died of AIDS. She described it as a twisted celebration of an immoral life. I thought, “Wow, how could you say something like that?” Isn’t that horrible? It prompted something in me.

I should go back and say that around the time that Ron died, I was trying to get a divorce. Living in Elliot Park, I had a neighbor Susan Beecher. She’s a photographer in Minneapolis, a wonderful human being. She was my neighbor. I had people across the street. I had a legal aid attorney that lived across the street handling my case. They were trying to serve him by publication when he died. I was still married to him. I got social security for my kids, survivor benefits. I got survivor benefits for me. It raised me up and out of poverty a little bit. It was such a life changing event. In so many ways. The aftermath of it still continues. Ron never really got fully talked about I don’t think. In that I tried to share with my kids only good stories about Ron.

**AS:** Do they remember anything about Ron?

**SP:** Certainly Christa does. Blake has never really talked about him. Blake had said when he died, one day we were in the car and he’s in the backseat and he’s like, “Can’t believe my dad’s dead meat.” I’m like, “Alrighty.” One time we were in the art museum and there was an exhibit, maybe it was at the Walker, it was a pile of what looked like dog bones. He looks at me and he’s like, “Are those my dad’s bones?” I’m like, “Wow.” I think the first thing that he had said or Christa said when I told them that Ron was dead, they said, “Now we don’t have to be afraid anymore.” It was huge. My daughter Christa has struggled all her life around the death of her dad. She was diagnosed bipolar when she was fifteen. Maybe she was seventeen, depressive before that. Certainly in retrospect, in knowing more I can say that at age eight for sure that Christa had trauma. Things would happen. I didn’t recognize it for what it was. I didn’t know until later. She’s always struggled.

**AS:** How old was she when Ron died?

**SP:** Six. I had a book it was called *How to Deal with When a Parent Dies.* I always bought books. You read something. I tried to figure it out and navigate it. Christa is a story in and of herself that we could talk about for a long time. Her drug use and her struggle with mental health issues. The impact on us as a family, the impact on her children now. She lives up in the mountain with my brother. Her behavior is like her dad’s. She’s somewhat dangerous. She’s been homeless on the streets of Fort Collins for years and in and out of jail. She was released to me two different times.

**AS:** From jail?

**SP:** Prison. There’s very few treatment programs for women in Colorado, very few. Writing fraudulent prescriptions at the King’s Super grocery store and she was arrested there.

**AS:** She was writing her own prescriptions?

**SP:** She’d gotten out of prison, she was released to me. She was out a month. She had two different doctor appointments. Where are you the mom and where are you always the outreach worker? She stole a prescription pad somewhere along the line. Then she wrote it and she tried to cash it at a King’s Super in the pharmacy. It’s a big grocery store. We were there grocery shopping together. I had no idea that she was back in that space. She was still on probation, all of these obligations. We’re grocery shopping and she looks at me and says, “I don’t feel very good. I want to just go sit in the car.” I’m thinking, “Whatever, I’m stuck with groceries. I hate grocery shopping.” Then I’m up at the self-checkout doing my thing and I see Christa walk back in. I think, “She came back in to help me.” She was being led in by a cop. She was arrested as she walked out the door. She was taken to jail in Jefferson County, in Golden, and held there. She was transferred to the prison in Denver.

**AS:** When was this?

**SP:** It started in the end of September in 2015. She was released, went back, got out in May of 2016. It’s your daughter and you’re the mother so what do you do? You can’t say, “No, she can’t be released here.” She doesn’t have anywhere to go. She’s burnt all her bridges. She’s been in fights in Fort Collins where she’s broken people’s bones, very violent. You can see your baby, your little girl. You can see all those other things about her. You let her in and then the same old stuff just starts happening again. I put her out. I told her, “This is it.” I think that to some degree I lost hope. I can’t fix her. I’m not responsible anymore. I’m not the only parent. There are things beyond my control. I’ve always thought that I could fix everything because that’s what I do. I have always done that. Why shouldn’t it work now? I tried so hard. She lives with my youngest brother in this trailer. They’re both nuts. They both have substance use issues.

**AS:** Where are her kids?

**SP:** The kids live with her dad in Fort Collins. He’s got issues too. Not quite in the same way that Christa does. He’s got a young girlfriend. He’s forty six or something. Chrissy, the girlfriend, just turned twenty three in February. She has been the glue that has kept everything together. Zach is twelve and angry. He’s seen a lot. Christa started off really good with Zach when he was born. He got the best of Christa. Then when she was pregnant with Kieran, seven months old, in Tacoma she was in a car accident. Doctor prescribed opiates and Xanax. She was off to the races. Kieran was born and in many ways ignored. Then a couple years later she gets pregnant with Lisa. Lisa’s born with an opiate habit in the NICU unit a month early in Fort Collins. Not long after, she was a year, Bobby and Christa fell apart. Bobby’s had the kids ever since. They spent a year homeless in Fort Collins. They got a place to live. A guy who’s a lawyer and I don’t know exactly how he got involved in there. Bobby was profiled in the Fort Collins newspaper with the kids. The story about Christa abandoning them, which just is fucked up.

**AS:** A newspaper story?

**SP:** Christa was just devastated by the story. They could argue it as not being true. It was certainly judgmental of her.

**AS:** Why was there a story?

**SP:** I don’t know. I think Bobby was involved in some helping program. Maybe it was Thanksgiving or Christmas and they want to do that story about people that need help—human interest. I can find out the details and I’ll send it to you.

**AS:** Back up to you were talking about Ron and his impact on Christa. Then we were talking about Jim and Kelly was born. You were going to MCTC taking Women’s Studies and then divorced Jim?

**SP:** Yes. I thought that school was really good therapy. I learned a lot. I think really between Women’s Studies and I was in a Sociology class, “Sex, Marriage, and the Family.” That was helpful. It provided a level of education for me that I needed and lacked, a sense of understanding. I’ve always been a reader. I don’t put a lot of stock in outside sources. I never grew up with a family where you could check things out. I always went to a book. Education meant so much for me. It opened up a world that I could never have imagined. It signaled the way out. I did really well. I had a 3.8 the whole way through. I worked on the project to create Women With a Point. I did some early project management class or something. This is where I keep getting hung up. I volunteered in domestic violence in Minneapolis after the whole Ron thing. Right in there. That’s where I wanted to go.

**AS:** I was going to ask you.

**SP:** With the domestic abuse project. I don’t know if that still exists anymore.

**AS:** It’s right on Franklin.

**SP:** Oh my God. They used to have, there was like Project Neon or something. I volunteered. I went to those groups. I volunteered. I used to carry a pager. I’d do on-site visits with women. When there was a domestic and an automatic arrest then we made contact with the women. That was really, really a powerful experience. It moved me in a different direction. The involvement of it and supportive community and trying to figure that out. Really a level of involvement always in the community. That’s what brought me in, it brought me to it. It was harm reduction before I ever even had heard the term. There was that background in domestic violence. Going back to Colorado, coming back to Minneapolis, going to school, getting involved in volunteering through Minnesota AIDS Project, internships.

**AS:** Did you finish your bachelor’s degree?

**SP:** I did, I finished it. I did that at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, in Tacoma. I went back to school to finish it in 2004. It was a writing from life program. I got credit for building…

**AS:** Did you go there to live?

**SP:** Yes. I started Women With a Point in Minneapolis and through that I met Dave. You know my third husband, Dave Purchase.

**AS:** Back up about Women With a Point. You started Women With a Point in?

**SP:** In ‘96. In ‘95 I was an intern at the Street Scene Program. I think I mentioned that, through Catholic Charities. I met this man Frank Guzman. Frank, old Latino man, he was something. He brought me to my first homeless shelter. Frank was also working for Minnesota AIDS Project on the Main Line, the first needle exchange in Minneapolis.

**AS:** It was called the Main Line?

**SP:** Yes, it was named after Bill Main.

**AS:** Is it M-A…

**SP:** I-N. Then L-I-N-E. There’re so many things about that that work. Then there was a volunteer or if I don’t remember if she was working part time there, Toni St. Pierre. A labor and delivery nurse. Toni had her own history of drug use, heroin where mine was cocaine. Toni lost her children. I didn’t. She was big into NA and AA in Minnesota. I wasn’t. Certainly during the time of Ron, my family, “Oh Susie, you need to go to treatment. Oh Susie’s not going to treatment.” Worried about my kids. The religious piece, all of those things that I saw as problematic. I could go to school and do other things and just work my way through it. The treatment wasn’t a necessity for me. Really coming to harm reduction that way.

**AS:** So you met Toni.

**SP:** I met Toni and met Frank, met another woman named Gail Thomas. She was working for Seton, which was part of Catholic Charities. She knew about the idea of harm reduction. We would start talking about it. Through Frank and Toni I got involved volunteering for, there was another needle exchange program at the time, called Safe Works AIDS Project. Run by this guy Michael Scavuzzo. Michael was sort of a scandalous guy. But he had this needle exchange. We both volunteered there.

**AS:** Why was he a scandalous guy? Just the nature of his life?

**SP:** Who he was and how things happened. He was kind of slimy. Scavuzzo. People around in the business knew him. Noel Grey knew him. Lorraine knew him. He was a troublemaker. In some way she made really good points. He was a grassroots activist. He wanted to see things happen differently than Minnesota AIDS Project was doing them. He saw the necessity for having a stronger response. This is mid-90s and people are dying of AIDS. They’re getting infected through injection drug use. Minnesota’s slow to respond. Fucked up shit. Michael also had a connection with Dan Big in Chicago with Chicago Recovery Alliance. There’s this small network and I get involved with them. Toni and I decide that we’re doing good work for Michael but we could do something different and really focus on women and get away from him.

We created Women With a Point. It was incorporated in September of 1996. We had a startup kick from NASEN, the North American Syringe Exchange Network. At the time I think they gave seven hundred dollars’ worth of supplies, syringes, cottons, cookers. We had that. Then Toni put in, she would put in a lot of her own money. We worked out of our houses. We didn’t have an office space. We started on Curry Avenue. People knew me down there because at that time working for a paycheck at the same time. I was working in direct services at Catholic Charities where in the branch they used to have showers and hygiene bags. You can have a locker for people who are homeless. I worked down there. Many people knew me. When they’d see me on the streets down on Curry Avenue they were less afraid to talk to me.

I had this outreach bag that looked like a big gym bag. It had a sharps container in the bottom. Then we had syringes and all the various supplies that went with that. There were probably less then then there are now. Probably cottons and cookers, condoms, granola bars, socks. Some form of printed information but being able to talk to people and say, “This is what we’re doing. Do you need any of this?” It was funny because people were offended. “I’m not doing that.” It’s kind of a knee jerk response. There’s never been outreach related to AIDS in the same way on Curry Avenue. There had been the van; we can talk for a long time. There’s a lot.

**AS:** We might have to have a part two.

**SP:** There is a van. Frank and Will don’t really get out of the van very much to talk. It parks on Curry Avenue. The Mainline when it opens, Lorraine…

**AS:** Where is Curry Avenue?

**SP:** Curry Avenue, you know where the bus station is downtown Minneapolis? It’s back behind there. Target Field is down in that area now. That took away, before Target Field was there. There was Mary Jo Copeland had another shelter down there.

**AS:** Was Catholic Charities?

**SP:** Catholic Charities had branch two down there which was really a shitty shelter down on Curry Avenue.

**AS:** So that’s gone?

**SP:** The building still exists but the shelter had been closed for years. That was horrible. That was like a Dickens novel. You’d put men and women, drunk and sober into one room that was poorly lit and you’d shut the door.

**AS:** So there’s a van?

**SP:** Frank and Will, they don’t really get out of the van much to talk to people or provide a level of education. I think Frank used it for nap time mainly.

**AS:** Who was in charge of the van? Was this an organization?

**SP:** Minnesota AIDS Project. The Mainline van. Minnesota AIDS Project was approached by Minneapolis Board of Health because they want a needle exchange program in Minneapolis. Minnesota AIDS Project was the service provider. It’s the main game in the state. They were approached about having a needle exchange. Lorraine didn’t seek it out. I don’t think she necessarily wanted it. She’s from Eaton House and abstinence based education. They’re approached. They held a lot of community meetings. The Whittier neighborhood was particularly contentious. They don’t want this visible presence of junkies, even though AIDS. MAP, they hide the van. They hide it on Curry Avenue. There were three sites at the time. There was Curry Avenue, and then there’s a place on the West Bank down under this bridge it was an awful place, then they had one place on the North Side that they used to park. If you didn’t know the van you wouldn’t necessarily know.

**AS:** It’s not marked?

**SP:** It’s green and white. Oftentimes the doors were shut. Frank liked to nap. Will talked to people a little bit but he just sat in the seat. It was a new program. Nobody really knew it was a needle exchange. There was a research component attached to it. Needle exchange has always been a grey area whether it was legal or illegal in Minnesota. The understanding was that if there was a research component attached to it, it was legal. There’s that. I think that program had maybe been in existence for a year when we started Women With a Point. Women With a Point did not have a research component attached to it. We were not invited by the city of Minneapolis to have a needle exchange. We didn’t ask anybody if we could have a needle exchange. We had outreach bags and we went to Curry Avenue and we did outreach every Tuesday. We did outreach in other parks in South Minneapolis. It’s now a record store, I just went by there today on 26th and Nicollet was a pharmacy.

**AS:** That record store right across from that bar and the CC Club. Then French Meadow is right there.

**SP:** That might be Lyndale. It’s 26th and Nicollet. It’s now a record store that had moved maybe from Uptown. It used to be a pharmacy there. That was sort of junkie central in the Whittier neighborhood. We do outreach in that area. We get the office space on 24th and Nicollet in the Waldorf Building on the first floor in the back. We get static office space there. It’s supposed to just be static office space. We really start creating the infrastructure of Women With a Point. Bill Main, the man that the needle exchange at MAP is named after is getting really sick. He was living with AIDS. He has a seat on the HIV/AIDS Prevention Task Force, the governor’s task force for the state of Minnesota. There’s a prevention task force, CDC mandated group. If a city is getting Ryan White dollars, prevention dollars, they’re mandated to have a state planning body. It had seats; Bill Main was the injection drug abusers seat. I was asked to replace him. I think I was an anomaly.

**AS:** Who asked you?

**SP:** Somebody through the Health Department. We’re starting to get some recognition. The founding board of Women With a Point is made up of Gail Thomas from Seton. She’s got a good reputation, very involved in the community. There is Frank Guzman, there’s Kevin Sitter. Kevin at the time was working for the Red Door Clinic. He’s got a master’s degree in Public Health and one other master’s. Unbelievable human being. I think Kevin sat on the task force at that time. Maybe Frank. I was getting to know all of these people. Here’s this woman, white skin and blue eyes and presents well and she’s starting a needle exchange. They want some of that. I was good to have at the table. I represented demographics well and all of that.

There was another woman, Emma Eskell-Singe. She was the founding board of directors. She was a methadone counselor for Hennepin County; they had the methadone program over on Chicago, 1800. We’re building the infrastructure, a board of directors, non-profit status, applying for grants. The Indian AIDS Task Force is in the mix, Nick Metcalf. We had gotten this startup kit from NASEN. It’s all happening simultaneously. We got a small grant. I can’t remember how that was administered, sort of the timeline. We’d gotten a small grant through Hennepin County to do a brief connect or brief services for people who were HIV positive due to injection drug use in the services. That paid my salary as this is changing. Needle exchange is so separate from the other services, the dollars, everything. It was so political which can’t be underestimated, how political it was. I’m doing that. I’m doing needle exchange. We’re building this board. We’ve got these people. I’m sitting on the task force. There is money available, an RFP is issued and it’s clearly defined which target populations, where the money’s earmarked for, and how you want to apply. I don’t know if it was a general category for IDU, injection drug users.

I had been probably at the first harm reduction conference. I had just been back from there. The first harm reduction conference was in ‘96 in Oakland. I’d gone to that conference. I had been in the Mission District of San Francisco. There’s a women’s program that runs on Thursday nights, still runs on Thursday nights. They provided low-level health care in the back. Pregnancy tests, pelvic exams, they did exchange, they had food, they had support. They exchanged eight thousand syringes a month out of that program. I just remember thinking, “Wow, I could do something like that.” I applied for a grant from the Health Department. I think there was three hundred thousand that was available and we asked for two hundred and eighty nine. People would tell me, Kevin Sitter, he just minded everything. At first we’re having the conversation and I said, “I don’t want to apply for that money. What am I going to do? Make bleach kits?” You couldn’t buy syringes. You couldn’t have syringes. You couldn’t fund needle exchange using that money. It was so ridiculous on so many levels. We applied for the money. It was Gail Thomas and I who wrote that grant together. It was all based on the idea that we would provide comprehensive harm reduction based services for injection drug users and really use the women’s program in the Mission as the model. We got it. We got just about every single dime that we asked for. It was something.

**AS:** Is this from the Ryan White?

**SP:** These are prevention dollars that came through the Health Department. They start with the CDC. It was defined as prevention dollars or Ryan White dollars. Ryan White was always for services for people who were already positive.

**AS:** Just to be clear, the political part was when you got the money from the prevention dollars you can’t buy needles.

**SP:** You couldn’t fund anything needle exchange related.

**AS:** Why, if using needles prevented people from getting HIV?

**SP:** There is a federal ban on needle exchange. To some degree it’s been lifted.

**AS:** But it remains?

**SP:** To some degree, yes. I can’t think of the name of the legislation that’s prohibiting federally to fund needle exchange.

**AS:** It’s like what they’re doing with Planned Parenthood right now. Right? Around federal funds, they can decide what it’s used for.

**SP:** Kind of like the global gag rule. It’s all sort of in that same mix. At that point when I was starting there was a federal ban on needle exchange. Even though they hadn’t really certified the science yet. They weren’t going to fund it. My husband, Dave, testified before Congress for lifting the federal ban. He also was instrumental in working with all the programs in New York. Getting all the needle exchange programs set up in New York. Dave worked with Sam Friedman, Don Dejarle, just an amazing group of people. He’d started the program in Tacoma in 1988. The first legal needle exchange publically funded was Tacoma. It’s illegal to fund needle exchange. I get prevention dollars.

**AS:** Can this fund your salary?

**SP:** It can fund my salary and I can hire staff. We move out of the little office on 24th. I have a bookkeeper named Jules Freeman, he’ll be there. Jules used to be a bartender at the Gay 90s back in the day. He’s a wonderful human being. Jules is my bookkeeper. He comes to me through Kevin Sitter. I think through Jules I get a commercial real estate agent, I can’t think of his name. A little guy, he was educated at Pepperdine as a lawyer. He’s doing commercial real estate. He’s looking for a space for us. He’d say to me, “Sue what do I tell people the kind of work you do? What are you going to do in this space?” I said, “You just tell them that we’re going to do a little HIV prevention with women. That’s it.” We got 11 W 15th Street. In between Nicollet and LaSalle.

**AS:** I drove by it after I met Rae.

**SP:** It’s turning into something else. I drove by it yesterday. It must be something else again. It’s the perfect location. It’s owned by people who don’t really care about what I’m doing. They want their rent money. Chickie was the daughter; the dad’s name was David. David was eighty years old when I met him. He had been a social worker back in the day. He liked me. They never asked questions. It had a back door, it had a front door. We were able to build it out so that there were offices.

I hired David Hamilton. Before that I had already hired one woman. She came when I was still at the Waldorf, 24th and Nicollet. Laura Collins, she had come from the methadone program. She was working for me part time. When we got this grant and moved to the other space Laura came along and I got David. Then there were a couple funded positions and I got this woman Patrice McCauley. Then not long after we got that space we applied for a grant with the CDC which got funded. We were the first needle exchange in the United States to have a directly funded CDC grant. Not used for needle exchange but for wraparound services for all the other stuff.

In the time, in the mid-90s if you said harm reduction people automatically thought needle exchange. Needle exchange is only one harm reduction strategy. There’s so much more. We had those wraparound services. Money was just coming to us. There wasn’t another women run program in the United States. We did it. We got unsolicited money. We got money from the Liz Taylor Foundation; eight thousand dollars came in the mail. There was a Public Welfare Foundation initiative. Public Welfare Foundation is out of D.C. to fund seven or nine harm reduction programs in the United States that were exemplary so that we could lead the way. Women With a Point was chosen.

**AS:** So you’re serving women. Are you just serving primarily women?

**SP:** We wanted to focus on women and not to ignore men.

**AS:** Tell me how that came about.

**SP:** I would say to people, “Women With a Point, we have a point to make and a point to give.” Toni and I were two women who certainly had a point to make related to injection drug use. Double entendre. There’s so much. I don’t know how long you want to have me talk about this. I can stay as long as you want. I want to be respectful of your time too. The more we talk about this the more stuff I come up with. That I think is important but I don’t know where you’re at.

**AS:** I’m enjoying listening. I think just for our sake we should wrap it up by four so that we don’t get a little loopy. Then I’d like to meet again before you go home. To just talk again. What’s going to happen is we’re going to both think of things. I’m going to have questions and you’re going to remember stuff.

**SP:** There’s going to be a lot.

**AS:** Maybe we can carve out a couple hours before you go home.

**SP:** Absolutely.

**AS:** Whether that’s up north or whether it’s before. That’s good.

What was going through my head was this idea about first of all what you’d been through in having been raised in a very violent family where you weren’t safe. Then you married someone where you weren’t safe and you had to flee from him. Then you help women who you’d walked in their shoes. Then you make this organization that is primarily for women but you’re also willing to not exclude men. To me thinking about that as a historian, by the 90s we’re twenty years past the second wave women’s movement. In the 90s it was considered meaningless. You had taken these Women’s Studies classes. I’m just thinking about how you thought, to me it’s making perfect sense how it came out this way. How you approached it as a safe space for women that didn’t exclude men when twenty years before the only safe places for women who wanted to talk about things was when there were no men allowed. Did any part of gay men’s participation; is there any role that gay men played for the HIV, that whole movement or Act Up or any of that? Did any of that come to play in your thinking? Or is it just that you wanted to center women? Not to the exclusion of men but to center women so they knew that they were safe coming there.

**SP:** Absolutely. Based on our own experiences. Certainly knowing enough in terms of HIV prevention that you didn’t exclude people. The focus was certainly on women.

**AS:** Women had been dismissed in the early AIDS epidemic as not being at risk.

**SP:** That’s right. How shortsighted is that. If you look at injection drug use and you look at modes of transmission, you look at women trading sex for drugs. You look at women trying to support small children through sex work or the inability to carry more than two condoms on you at a time.

**AS:** They can’t carry two condoms?

**SP:** I think it’s three actually. I don’t know that I’ve ever known of any city in the United States where it’s expressly written on the books that it’s a crime. It’s commonly known that sex workers can’t carry more than three condoms at a time because that proves that you’re a sex worker. You’ve got to be careful. We could talk all day long. There’s just so much. I think that always recognizing the vulnerability of women.

**AS:** That’s a very known thing in all global feminism. The whole world round we know that where women are suffering, where girls aren’t being educated there’s a problem. That the society is at risk. When you educate the women, when you educate the girls, you take care of families your society can flourish.

**SP:** Exactly. The way that I’ve always thought about it, I’m sure generated out of my own life experiences, men were fine in their place. I was never really sure where their place was and how it fit in. I didn’t dislike them. I thought women needed something more, new. I thought for sure that the creation of Women With a Point was just some hair brained crazy scheme.

**AS:** But then you got recognition.

**SP:** I’m sure that my staff thought I was nuts too. We’re creating it as we went along. My colleagues are on the West Coast and they’re on the East Coast. They weren’t in Minnesota. They weren’t in the holy land of treatment. They weren’t where abstinence rules. Where Hazelden is the mothership. The Minnesota Model. Lorraine Teal had given me a stern lecture when she first found out about what we were going to do. I thought, “Fuck you bitch. I am never going to be in this position again.” I hold my own really well. So we open that storefront. We don’t really have a name on the door. You’ve got to kind of know where we are. We’ve had this whole delivery service that had become wildly successful.

**AS:** With your matchbooks.

**SP:** Matchbooks and gay men and people were just coming out. They were hearing about us, word of mouth. We were trustworthy. Where was I going with that?

**AS:** You opened your doors. I was going to ask you to tell me who’s coming in.

**SP:** One morning in particular, it’s early; three women of color came through, almost one right after the other. The backroom of that little space, it’s like the broom closet. It’s maybe two hundred square feet. It’s got a back door. It’s like closet. We had to do it separately. That space had to be paid for separately. The rent had to be paid for separately. Everything was separate but in the same building. I would see Gary Novating; he was in charge in the prevention department. He’d be like, “Sue, I hope you’re not spending any of that money on needle exchange.” It’s like, “Gary, not a dime.” Separate bank accounts. Being so meticulous. There was no way I was going to do anything that would jeopardize what we had. Understanding the politics, being really savvy to that. These women, they came through. They’d go in the needle exchange room and come out and then they would leave. I remember looking at whoever was working with me and I’d say, “Wow, it is working. Did you see who just came through the door?” It’s important. Demographics, women of color who are using injection drugs, preventing HIV, Hep C, all of that. They found a home. They came in and they found out that the cops didn’t jump out or they didn’t get busted or there was no shame. There was no judgement. They could come back. They could bring their friends.

I got a grant through Minnesota Women’s Fund. I’d had a relationship with them, had been funded. There were some grant funds available through them. They were banking dollars. I can’t remember exactly how that RFP was written. I had this idea, we had a women’s users group. That was the start of the women’s users group. We had a general group, but then a women’s one. I called the potential funder, this is who I am and this is what I want to do with this money. I want to create a financial planning education for drug using women. I talked about what that might look like and my ideas. I said, “You’ve got to tell me right now. If you won’t consider this idea I won’t consider applying because I don’t want to waste my time.” She encouraged me to apply. We got funded. There was a women’s users group. How to manage your drug habit on a budget?

**AS:** Is that what happens at the user’s group?

**SP:** This is what happens at the user’s group. They would look at me like, “Sue you are nuts.” It’s never supposed to be that conversation. The conversation is about being sober, paying your rent, not buying drugs or even considering it. This was about banking and how you can have a habit. You can pay your rent. You can budget your money. Drug use is not mutually exclusive from organization. Your life is not chaotic. You can plan. You can recognize that this is part of it and it serves a role in your life. Being able to open that discussion because those are never the messages. “It’s bad, you’re wrong.” Everything about that. “You’re an awful mother. You don’t love your children.” How much stigma can you heap on? Then you work at dismantling that and providing another point of view. It’s perceived as outrageous and over the top. Probably to some degree blasphemy in the holy land. It’s working.

**AS:** You’re leading them to a place where they might not need to use.

**SP:** Yes.

**AS:** They can make that decision on their own.

**SP:** They can have a little more power and control.

**AS:** Which is very different than saying they have to get to rock bottom.

**SP:** No shit, right. That’s ridiculous. It’s so punitive. It’s so judgmental.

**AS:** It’s also death.

**SP:** It’s death. I had been one of those women. For some reason I have a very creative, innovative, survival force in me. To be able to share that with other women has always been my driving force. Continues to be. Never to ignore, if we just male, female but it’s so much more. It’s huge. My friend Lisa gave me a framed print that says, “Trust your crazy ideas.”

**AS:** Women With a Point, ‘96 things start happening. How long are you at the helm? Where’s Toni at this point?

**SP:**  Toni is out at this point. It’s a hard piece.

**AS:** You don’t have to go into it in great detail.

**SP:** Toni was out before the storefront. She’s out. I learned a lot about perceived boundary violations and other people’s opinions and ideas and rules around all of it. Toni was one of those. So we have the storefront. We apply for CDC funding. That was help. Huge application. It’s the start of it. Through that announcement I start with the project officer. I think I started with Dan Big in Chicago. Dan, looking for a little wisdom, “Sue I wouldn’t even waste my time. They always ignore us. It’s the CDC and they’re stupid.” Just where needle exchange was and all the politics of it. Everything about that. Dan advises me against applying. I call the project officer and once again say this is who I am, this is what I’m doing. I’ve got a needle exchange in Minneapolis and I’m seeing injection drug users. I said, “If you’re not going to think about funding me, if I don’t have an opportunity to really compete tell me now.” It’s like writing a thesis. He encourages me to apply. We do.

David and I, it’s like a couple days before. We’re having this conversation and David’s the grant writer about where the grants are at and what we might have coming. He brings up the CDC grant. I said, “I wouldn’t ever think about that.” We just did it for the experience; we’ll never see the money. I get a phone call the next day from the CDC from the project supervisor. I was on my way to the theater with a friend and I remember I almost drove off the road. They’d funded us. They had funded us. We went from year one probably a ten thousand budget to within four years we are at seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was huge. Through that it was testing and case management, I might have some of the documents in here. Rae came along with that grant. Rae had dreadlocks. I had twelve employees.

We got the building next door expanded as well. We had office space, we had user groups. We were known as the hottest gig in town. We were known nationwide and beyond. It was a big deal. We had a lot of success. We did testing in the jails and in drug court and providing prevention education in prisons. Comprehensive harm reduction in a way that doesn’t happen ever again here.

**AS:** Was that part of your HepC, was the grant from the CDC? You started doing testing or was that after you were gone?

**SP:** The first CDC grant provided testing. That originally directly funded grant. Then because we had that first directly funded grant it opened us up to other pots of money. That’s where we had the research project that never went anywhere that Noel was part of. HepC testing…

**AS:** Did you do that or not?

**SP:** I’m pretty sure but I don’t remember. The CDC grant that was really more about the beginning of HIV testing, rapid testing. You didn’t have to send somebody to the Red Door for a blood test. Before that there wasn’t any swab or anything. HepC, I don’t know if HepC testing started after me or while I was there. It would be good to have Rae and I in the same room together.

**AS:** Maybe we’ll do that.

**SP:** I stayed there until fall of 2001. I resigned as executive director and went to work for a company out of Australia for Fit Packs. That’s another project that we had. That was replicated in New York.

**AS:** What’s a Fit Pack?

**SP:** A Fit Pack is a personal sharps container. It’s a little black plastic container about this big. It’s sort of oval. On one half it holds ten unused clean syringes. It’s got this little divider wall in it. On the other side it’s got a one way flap and you put the used syringes down inside. You can’t access them. Then you can safely dispose of it.

**AS:** Of the whole pack?

**SP:** Yes. It’s a safe disposal mechanism for syringes developed by drug users in Sydney. This other plastics company took it over. I don’t know how I met this crew. I went to the first international harm reduction conference in Brazil in 1998. There’s a man named Peter Galsworthy at the time. He is running ASP Plastics, the company that had Fit Packs. They send a case to me or something. Those guys were nuts. I start using them as a program. It provides a level of safety for the people who are actively using because cops don’t want to stick their finger down inside to get a dirty syringe out. You could be charged with a felony for residue in a syringe. It provided a safety mechanism if you’re a cop patting somebody down you’re not going to get a needle stick. So it was really a win, win. It was an opportunity to talk about them.

Then there was some leftover Minnesota Department of Health money. Lucy Slater would know about this. It was short term. You had to use it and get rid of it. It wasn’t going to be drawn out over time. The guys from Australia were in town and we wrote it together. It was called the “Better Safe than Sorry Disposal Proposal.” For the Minnesota Department of Health. We worked with four area pharmacies. I can’t think of the name of that one on 26th and Nicollet. That was one of them. Another pharmacy over on the West Side of St. Paul, another of the East Side of St. Paul and then the North Side of Minneapolis. They were chosen for geographic location related to race and drug use. West Side of St. Paul primarily Latino, lots of heroin. East Side is more white people and methamphetamine. The North Side certainly there was a lot of cocaine over there at the time. There was probably some methamphetamine, some heroin. Opiates, I don’t know, pills were probably being talked about to some degree. It’s early.

**AS:** This is still in the late 90s?

**SP:** The late 90s. It was a very interesting project. I know I’ve got that stuff here too. I don’t know how well the research was ever written up and exactly what happened with it. Sarah Riebeckite that’s part of putting on the conference up at White Earth, she and I have worked together. We’ve worked on these projects together. Sarah’s got a lot of history. She knows about this project in particular. The data that came out of it, there was a strong research component with that and there was a kickoff. There was the t-shirt that said, “Be Blood Aware.” There was the Fit Pack. We did a sticker for the Fit Pack. There were a lot of steps involved in it.

**AS:** You started by saying you left Women With a Point. But you also married Dave.

**SP:** Yes, I was married to Dave. We’d been together since ‘97. We got married in ‘99. We had a commuter marriage. Dave had obligations. He travelled all the time. He had obligations to Tacoma. He had the needle exchange in Tacoma still, Point Defiance AIDS Project or the Tacoma Needle Exchange. Then he’s got the larger national organization that is NASEN.

**AS:** Was he running that? Did he found that?

**SP:** Yes. You should google Dave. He’s having a conference every two years, annually. He had a needle exchange conference as well. That was held different places throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. I’m still really steeped in doing all of the work. Always with a focus on harm reduction in women. Never moving away from that and always had various ideas, projects, things that I thought should be happening, always maintained involvement. Dave’s got to be back in Tacoma. I’d made an agreement with him that we would live there at some point. I leave Access Works. It’s morphed into Access Works at this point. Women With a Point was too gender specific was the thought.

**AS:** That was right on the cusp that was kind of what I was getting at when I was talking about women’s history and the second wave. We were just on the cusp of that where things started to change. That’s when Women’s Studies programs started switching to Gender and Women’s Studies. It’s this short lived moment.

**SP:** I never really thought about it like that but it’s really, really true.

**AS:** That was really a moment when women had just gotten brought in. We just had this little flash and then gender.

**SP:** It’s neutral.

**AS:** It’s supposed to be neutral. Now they’re calling it Critical Identity Studies.

**SP:** I think that’s bullshit.

**AS:** You can’t prioritize one over the other. That’s another conversation.

**SP:** People give me grief about it but I still prioritize. If there’s women identified works for me but the focus is on women. I think that I’ve had regrets about it. It’s like in some ways I caved to public opinion.

**AS:** We can’t help that sometimes. You were making a decision that was the best for the organization at the time.

**SP:** If you look at what happened not long after that, it is the rise of opiates and women’s involvement. It’s interesting. There’s so much other history tied up within harm reduction or community based public health. However that gets defined. During that time, always during that time, provided a lot of community education and did a lot of work in treatment programs and jails. Talking about why harm reduction matters.

**AS:** During which time are you talking about?

**SP:** All through the 90s. It created a different climate for people in general but women specifically. In Minnesota there are women specific treatment maybe not as much as we would like but it’s here. It’s huge. There’s so much. Trying to broaden a way of thinking. I really think in general people thought I was a little crazy. David Hamilton will tell you that he thought I was a little crazy but good. Really a level of thinking out of the box. I wasn’t indoctrinated. I had success. Really just building on that. I was also burnt out. Things were going on with my own kids. There’s the work side of it. There’s an integration and certainly one supported the other. It’s really, really hard work. The company in Australia, I think I worked for them for four years.

**AS:** Did you work for them in the U.S.?

**SP:** Yes, the U.S. and Canada. There was a lot of emphasis around syringe disposal. There was a national movement just related to disposal. Really as the politics are changing and needle exchange is starting to gain some more acceptance—this is where I left off around the federal ban. In 1998 Clinton’s in office, there’d been protests in D.C. for a couple of years related to needle exchange and Act Up. Dave’s having his conference in Baltimore. All this stuff had been going on Donna Sheleyla and Clinton and they were supposed to certify the science. Everybody was so optimistic. Dave was interviewed on NPR. What happened is that between Sheleyla and Clinton they certified the science that needle exchange did not increase drug use. They refused to fund it. It sent the wrong message.

**AS:** That illusive wrong message.

**SP:** Let me look right now, there is a place in here. There used to be a political cartoonist in Minneapolis with the *Star Tribune.* His last name was Saxe. He did a cartoon that clearly identified two babies in the nursery, in the hospital nursery. One is a baby of color and then there’s the white baby. It says something like, “Tell us again why they refused to fund needle exchange.” They’re clearly identified as HIV positive babies. The other one says, “It might give the wrong message to the children.” I had it for years, I always held on to it. I might have it in here. Some of this in this folder is just articles that I use for I don’t know. It’s a mish mash. Drug related stuff, women in addiction. Stuff I’ve picked up over the years. I don’t know what all that’s about, I haven’t read it. This was above the toilet in the storefront in the bathroom. I’ve got a t-shirt of this image. This comes from a friend in New York.

**AS:** This is great. We’re looking at postcards.

**SP:** This is Carleton Hogan. This is Noel’s brother. As she says, “Carleton was a New York street junkie.” He got sent to Hazelden for treatment. The work he did here early on with Minnesota AIDS Project, Carleton Hogan, no oral history project would be complete without Carleton. This is myself and Bob Norman in the alley outside the store front. Bob used to be the director of Prodigal House. He should be invited.

**AS:** What’s his name?

**SP:** Bob Norman. This is Edith Springer. Edith is credited as being the mother of harm reduction in the United States. She’s from New York originally. A wonderful human being. She was my mentor. I was part of the original handful of people chosen to be trained in harm reduction out of the coalition.

**AS:** We need to get you some labels on the back of these pictures.

**SP:** The Women With a Point T-shirt. We’re in New Orleans at a drug policy conference. This is LaNelle Clancy. They’re West Coast ladies. They did some of the original needle exchange in San Francisco and Sacramento with the baby buggies. Hiding syringes in street corners. Carleton Hogan and David Hamilton. These are other pictures.

**AS:** David Hamilton is the one in New York?

**SP:** He’s at Augsburg now. Definitely need to talk to David. I’m pretty sure he’s coming to the oral history project. The last I heard he was working at Augsburg. These are more pictures of Carleton. I just kind of stuck everything in there.

**AS:** Where is Carleton?

**SP:** Carleton’s dead. Carleton died of AIDS in maybe 2003. Wonderful human being. This is more related to current stuff. Somethings I just keep in here. This is Bill Main doing street based outreach. He became infected through a syringe I think he took out of a sharps container in prison. These are some other cartoons but it doesn’t have that one. It has an article on the flip side. I think that’s Bill Clinton.

**AS:** “The White House Denies Funds for Needle Exchange Program Revealing the Need for Another Exchange Program.” There’s Shaleyla.

**SP:** Here’s Women With a Point personnel policies. Access Work stuff that might have been the name change.

**AS:** Why did we come over here?

**SP:** We’re looking for that cartoon. It’s close to four I think.

**AS:** Let’s stop for now. Thank you.

**SP:** Here is welcome to the user’s group. Papers that I wrote.

**AS:** Don’t judge pregnant drug using women. This is great.

**SP:** This I can bring up to White Earth. There’s so much in here. This was a poster we had on the wall. Our grand opening.

**AS:** Would you say that again about being a good neighbor?

**SP:** We were always absolutely a good neighbor. We weren’t going to give any opportunity for anything but a good neighbor, to disregard us, to judge us, stigmatize us, to counteract the stereotype. We were an amazing neighbor and people knew it. We cleaned up the neighborhood. We did needle sweeps. There were people who were hanging out on the roof when we got there, shooting dope up there. Absolutely a good neighbor. We participated in that neighborhood. This is Frank Guzman. This is Trudy Shafer. She is now; I call her a food with medicine chef in Berkeley. She cooks for Green Day and musicians. Trudy’s awesome. She worked at Seton with Gail Thomas. A very original outreach worker. This is the year when the harm reduction conference was in Oakland. That one cartoon I don’t seem to have.

**AS:** Did you bring a matchbook? There they are.

**SP:** There’s matches. It talks about Sarah. A public welfare narrative, women’s foundation.

**AS:** How did you pay for the needles if nobody would give you money?

**SP:** There’s needle exchange grants.

**AS:** So you did get money from those?

**SP:** Always. Needle exchange you hustle for more. MAC AIDS Fund. If I ever buy lipstick, which is rare, I buy MAC cosmetics because they support HIV prevention in drug users. Levi Strauss supports needle exchange. Comer Foundation that was Lands’ End supports needle exchange. Stephanie has been supporting needle exchange; it used to be with a phone call, since like 1988. They sold Lands’ End. The family foundation still supports needle exchange. It’s been formalized a little more. I just got a grant from them.

**AS:** You just now did?

**SP:** Yes.

**AS:** That’s awesome. Are they based out of Wisconsin?

**SP:** Chicago. The rest of the family foundation is really environmentally focused. I think Dan Big got Stephanie involved in needle exchange early on. They both live in Chicago.

**AS:** The next time we talk we need to talk about what you’re doing. We need to start from when you left until now and what you’re doing in Colorado.

**SP:** I’d love to talk about that. There is just stuff. It’s helpful in that I was doing harm reduction education. Rae and I were together and we were working with Claire Housing, there’s another name. It’s got a more comprehensive organization. It was for people that were working with housing for people who were positive or living with AIDS. It’s all notes from that. That may be helpful. Stuff from grants. This was MDH, CDC thing. David Hamilton’s resume I think. I think some of these are old research.

**AS:** Rae gave me a lot of files from the computer from Access Works. Photos and photo files.

**SP:** You’ve got to love Rae.

**AS:** She’s amazing. She’s a sweetie.

**SP:** Isn’t she? There’s a bunch of stuff.