

Sister Clara (Josh Brown)

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SPEAKERS

Sister Clara, Elliot Wesselborg

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- E** Elliot Wesselborg 00:03
Hello, my name is Elliot and I will be having a conversation with Josh Brown, also known as Sister Clara CumPassionata, for LGBT Oral Histories of Central Iowa, a project of Grinnell College. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of LGBT identified people in Iowa. It is April 23, 2020, and due to social distancing as a result of COVID, this interview is being conducted remotely. So hi, welcome. Glad to be talking with you today.
- S** Sister Clara 00:32
Thank you.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 00:34
So I guess if we want to start on, how about you introduce yourself and tell me how you identify?
- S** Sister Clara 00:39
Yes, so my name is Sister Clara CumPassionata, n-a-t-a. I'm the Reverend Mother General of the Missionary Order of Perpetual Indulgence. And I also go by Josh Brown.



Elliot Wesselborg 00:56

What was your life like growing up? If we want to start there.



Sister Clara 00:59

Sure. I, um, I grew up in Southern California, during, uh—I moved to Southern California in 1961 to live with my mother and stepfather and, and so spent a lot of time just in Hollywood, you know, and around there and it was a very colorful time.



Sister Clara 01:19

I can remember once I was—my mom and dad were on our way to a friend's house, and it was Marilyn Monroe's hearse it went by and we pulled over and we said—my dad said to my mom, "Oh, my goodness, that's Marilyn Monroe's hearse!" You know, so, it was a very colorful time as a child, certainly.



Sister Clara 01:38

Growing up as a little sissy boy, you know, it became pretty apparent at one point that, that I was very different than other kids, for sure. And so that meant it came to me very early on and, and I tried obviously, to hide that for quite a little bit, you know, being a sissy, little, geeky boy. And girls would pick on me and I was a horse boy (??) and all of those kinds of things, you know. And so, those gifts that many of us as children, you know—these days, fortunately we celebrate—were kind of hidden during that time.



Sister Clara 02:21

I first had an understanding that there was queer community when I was fifteen, when a friend who had been a runaway said, "Oh, we should get Hollywood. It's amazing!" And, we hitchhiked from the Valley, you know, to Hollywood and all of a sudden there I was on Hollywood Boulevard amongst the hippies and the Hari Krishnas and, and some understanding, you know, that there was queer community, there as well, too. So, it was a incredibly eye-opening experience.



Sister Clara 02:51

I went to my first gay pride parade, which was the second in Hollywood, you know, at fifteen years old. And so, um, yeah, that was, that was—those ere my early years, you know, being a queer kid, for sure. And it wasn't very long before my parents found out, you

know, that I was gay and were concerned that somehow I was being coerced into this lifestyle. And in fact, by the time I was sixteen and a half our family relocated from California to a little town in Illinois—population 600—where my maternal grandmother's family had been early homesteaders, just to save me from being queer.

S

Sister Clara 03:42

And of course, it worked. Bless their hearts. What they did, though, was coming to that little town I, uh—London Mills, Illinois, population 600—met the first love of my life in that town, another long-haired hippy gay kid, you know, and we became lifelong friends until, until he died. And so it's interesting how that kismet, you know, can happen to many of us, for sure.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 04:13

What was the first pride parade that you were at like? Who was going? What did it look like?

S

Sister Clara 04:19

It was absolutely packed. Hollywood Boulevard was packed, first of all, and it was really out there. I remember this float that was a Vaseline jar with dancing boys on it. And I thought to myself, Oh, my gosh, is this one I'm going to have to do? You know, it was so far out there that the next year there wasn't a gay pride parade. I mean, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce—everyone said, No, we need to take a look at this right now, and figure out what are going to be some parameters for celebrating being gay without just being so out there.

S

Sister Clara 04:55

There was a lot of celebration, though. Besides that thing that was just so out there—too far out there—you know, just a time for people to be out there on the street, you know, at a time when you would be arrested for dancing, for instance, in a club. I mean, being a young kid, you know, I can remember going to my first gay bar that year as well, too—snuck in, you know, and there I was, it was called the Zoo. And you can be arrested for touching another person of the same gender in that bar, during those times, too.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 05:29

What year was that?

- S** Sister Clara 05:31
And so 1972—1972 yeah. So, yeah, those are my early memories of the, of the parade, anyway.
- S** Sister Clara 05:43
Also on a—UCC (note: MCC?), Troy Perry's church, you know, he was founder and it was, it was happening there in Hollywood during that time, too. So I'm just the validation of who we are and what we deserve in life. So some of the beginnings of that—were happening.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 06:04
Did you have a group of like LGBT people that you hung out with, besides the one friend?
- S** Sister Clara 06:11
In Hollywood, early on? No. Maybe of people who were a little bit older than I was, you know, that were mentors as such, during that time. But once again, it's like I was venturing into Hollywood under the darkness of night to see what it was about and coming home during the day. And then at one point, you know, I had ran away from home for a brief time period, just figuring, This is what I need and where I needed to be. And it wasn't very long, before I realized, Oh, this is a tough place to be, you know, being a young queer kid, out in the streets, almost, at one point—and then came home then and it was shortly after I returned home, that my parents figured that out—that it was important for us, perhaps, to move back to the heartland, you know, to the _____ (unintelligible???)
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 07:06
Where did you go when you ran away? How did you survive that?
- S** Sister Clara 07:10
Well, it was like, word of mouth, you know. Back in those days, there was a guy who was a dancer in one of the clubs, and he just would have people like, come and stay at his place, as well as sleep on the sofa or whatever. And so we stayed, we stayed at his house. Then it was one friend mentioning another—just kind of crash pad kind of things, you know, and yeah, it was hippies, it was—they come in with the queer kind of bunch, you know, during that time and people supporting each other, and uh—

E Elliot Wesselborg 07:53
Was that—would you say that was most of the community that you were hanging out with at that point, was like the hippie—hippie set?

S Sister Clara 08:01
Well, it's kind of a mixture—young queer people during that time and some of them, kind of hippie kids as well, too. Yeah. But young queer in particular.

E Elliot Wesselborg 08:15
Was that mostly other men? A mix of people of different genders?

S Sister Clara 08:19
It was primarily men. Yeah. Primarily.

E Elliot Wesselborg 08:23
When you went to Illinois, how did that—how did that change your access to queerness? Were you still in touch with any of those people from California?

S Sister Clara 08:33
Just by letters, you know, I mean one friend in particular. And then, and a teacher, my drama teacher, was an amazing kind of person for me during that transition, you know, moving to the Midwest.

S Sister Clara 08:47
And it was—the only solace for me moving to this little town was, you know, I was a theater kid and I sang and I thought, Oh, this will be wonderful! I'm moving to this little town, I'm going to a school where there's 168 kids in the whole school—the high school. And I thought, I'll be the star. That'll be it, you know. So my first day at Spooner Valley High School, the secretary walked me down to the chorus room and it was a brand new school—it was the first year that it'd been built, this combined school—and opened the door to the music room, and out of 168 kids in that school, there were 120 in choir.

S

Sister Clara 09:35

They had an orchestra with amazing strings. The same teacher had been there for over twenty years. She kind of—Dorma Lindstrom (??) was her name—and she kind of looked at me and she was like, Have a seat. There was no big fanfare—here's this wonderful persona that was coming in, that'd been to Hollywood and performed on stage. It was like, Have a seat, kid.

S

Sister Clara 10:00

When they did Vivaldi's Gloria, for their spring cantata, and it was, it was a wonderful time of—really, a mentoring from a teacher teaching some humility, I think, with my craft as well, too—and in the place of, just because you have a big voice doesn't mean anything, you must learn some discipline. So that was a wonderful place to be, you know, and she became a mentor, too.

S

Sister Clara 10:27

I suspect, you know, that probably—even though she'd been married and had children—I suspect that she probably was a queer woman. And it was just not uncommon for those times. Other people, had said, Oh, I think Dorma's probably a lesbian. There was a sense though, of just kind of her kids, you know, and I became, like, one of her kids and maybe we were family. And some of them had been—were off to college or whatever. And it was just kind of that group, that mentoring group.

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Sister Clara 11:00

So it was unspoken, but later on, it was like it was a given: Oh, this is how this person mentored me during that time, taught me German art songs, you know, and I can remember going to state competition and how excited I was, you know, "Mrs. Lindstrom, I got a ten!" A ten was perfect. And she looked at me and she said, "I wouldn't give God a ten." I mean, that was the type of person that she was, you know, instead of "Come on, here we go."

S

Sister Clara 11:31

But at the same time, I'd watched those planes fly west, thinking, One of these days, I'm going to be on that plane, going back to Hollywood. And then Wayne came into my life—the love of my life—and it became kind of there in the distance. And figuring out what life was, you know, at that time, with someone who was my age, in this little town.

S

Sister Clara 11:53

And how fascinating of a town it was, too. I became just enthralled with history, it was on Spoon River. Edgar Lee Master's "Spoon River Anthology" became very alive in that town with all of those antiquities. And I remember smelling mold for the first time—this dampness of a town in the Midwest—It's like, What is that smell and how fascinating that was. And we lived in this, this hotel. My family bought this hotel—it was kind of like the shady rest hotel on the corner of London Mills and that's kind of where we settled for a while.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 12:32

How did you—how did you meet this boy? How did that come about?

S

Sister Clara 12:36

I was sitting on the front porch of this—of the hotel, which had been closed up for a couple years, and he came down the street—he lived up the street a little bit—and I'm sitting on the front porch, all by myself in a rocking chair and there he was, in his jean jacket, you know, with a keep on trucking kind of patch on it, and long blonde hair, and he said, "How's it going?" And I said, "Oh, good." And he said, "You're that Hollywood kid? You're that California kid, aren't you?" And I said, "Yeah, my name's Josh." He said, "My name's Wayne."

S

Sister Clara 13:09

And he's like, "So it's good to see the hotel's opening soon. I always wondered what it looked like inside." I said, "Well, come on in, I'll show." And, you know, we opened it up and there was a big staircase in the front and up, up the stairs we went and got to the top of the stairs, and my very Christian grandmother was in the bathroom that they were restoring, with my grandfather, and she was cursing at him. (laughs)

S

Sister Clara 13:36

It was like, Oh my gosh, I couldn't believe she was cursing. She was like, "You have an old goat," (??) you know, whatever. And I was like, "Oh, well, I guess, that's the grandma behind the curtain that we've ever seen before," you know—quickly scooted out of there, you know, and became friends.

- S** Sister Clara 13:53
He said, "Well, there's, you know, this is where you catch the bus to go to school—" It's like, A bus to go to school? All right, you know, there we were—"And I'll see you in the morning."
- S** Sister Clara 14:01
And so on the bus I got and off the bus at the end of the day. It's like, "Do you want to come on over to my house? We'll watch Dark Shadows." And he was like, "Do you smoke pot?" And it was like, "Well, of course I smoke pot." Well, I didn't smoke pot. You know, I had smoked pot once. But I didn't smoke pot. He smoked pot and knew everything there was about it, you know, it's one of those kids—certainly that Dorma Lindstrom wouldn't have approved of—you know, the kids from the other side of the track, whatever.
- S** Sister Clara 14:37
So we started hanging out, you know. We'd come home and we'd go to the little grocery store and we'd get a Pepsi and something to munch on, and we'd watch Dark Shadows on the television. It became kind of our routine during the day and, you know, listen to Beatles albums and just kind of hang out, go camping on the Spoon River. It kind of, became kind of what we did, you know, until we, at one time, started exploring our sexuality. And from there, it's like, Oh, I guess this is who we are. There's no turning back.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 15:18
Was that the first person you had like—had a relationship sexually with?
- S** Sister Clara 15:23
In Illinois? Mm hmm. Yeah. And I mean, I had sexual relationships in California, many of them, but the first one that really seemed to have any kind of heart connection at all? You know, for sure.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 15:39
Who was teaching you about sex back in California? How are you learning about it?
- S** Sister Clara 15:44

Well, um, probably through magazines and through experimentation with other people. I mean, uh, yeah, I think through experimentation with it with other people. And oftentimes—many times, there'd be a—they're boys, you know, boys are boys, regardless of what your sexuality is, you know. You kind of get together, you kind of play around, this, that, or whatever. You know you're not necessarily labeling yourself—many times young boys would be talking about the girl next door and how big her boobs were, and next thing you know, you're masturbating. I mean, that's kind of, it seemed, during that time, how things would evolve.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 16:26

Were most of those like encounters related to a bar scene? How did you meet those people?

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Sister Clara 16:32

No, not a bar scene at all. I'd only been to a couple different bars during that time: one that I snuck into and another someone said, "Oh, you want to go to the Bitter End West. That was the amazing, cool club. There was one in Hollywood and there was another in New York. And he's like, "Here kid, I'm the liquor distributor here. Show 'em your card and you'll get in."

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Sister Clara 16:55

And so early on, I went into that—to the Bitter End West and I showed him the card, of this person and he kind of looked at me and was like, "Go on." And I went in—I didn't know what to order. It's like, "Oh, let's see, I think I'll have a screwdriver. That's right." So I ordered a screwdriver and sat out at this table and it was like the music was kind of starting—it was a place that had live music and other music as well during the time—and one of the early people in there, and all of a sudden, in came this group of people. And there was like, Liza Minnelli—Liza Minnelli and these—surrounded by all of these young gay guys. And they're looking and I had this big table and the guy said, "Can we share your table?"

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Sister Clara 17:22

And it was like, I knew who she was. I had seen Sterile Cuckoo—I knew who Liza Minnelli was. It was like, Yes, I'm sitting there and it's this big, round table and there she was. And you know, and I kind of looked and I got up and I thought, I'm really not sure if I should be sitting at this table. And off I went. I was pretty starstruck in that moment.

- S** Sister Clara 18:00
So those were really the only two bars that I had been to at that time, being under age, whatever. Certainly, I wouldn't—didn't really want to risk things too much. And so my time in that element was very short.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 18:16
So going back to Illinois, did people know about your relationship? How would that seem?
- S** Sister Clara 18:23
Not at all. They knew that we were friends and that was it. Um, but, I mean, I'm kind of—I was the kid that was—I'm a sissy boy. It's hard, you know. I got the whole lisp, I got the voice, you know. It's like, I remember quickly getting rid of some of my more flamboyant clothes that I brought from Hollywood with me, looking just for jeans and things to kind of fit in or whatever.
- S** Sister Clara 18:51
But right out of the—it became quite apparent that I was a queer boy. And so, the bully kind of older kids in town would be like, "Faggot!" You know, or whatever. All kinds of—a couple times there when you'd need to keep away from them for sure. But, um, yeah.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 19:17
After graduating high school, where did your trajectory take you?
- S** Sister Clara 19:22
And actually, I lived in London Mills just for a year and a half. And there was a—I had a row with my, my father, regarding that crazy grandmother that I had, who just was not a healthy individual at all. And she was one who would kind of stir the pot in many family relationships. And, you know, we were the family of her—of her adopted children, who lived on the West Coast, and so we saw her the least. The other aunts and uncles, they knew that she was trouble and they had distanced themselves from her. And she was causing some trouble, and I said something and my father was just not having it. He smacked me—and he never—in the face. It's like, Don't you see what's going on? This is crazy! And so I went to live with my maternal grandmother then, in Peoria, Illinois.

S

Sister Clara 20:18

And when I went, in Peoria, Illinois—well, in between that time actually: the summer before my senior year, I had gone to Western Illinois University. I was in their summer music theater program. And so it was a time, once again, that, all of a sudden I was with theater people from all over the country actually—a lot of people would come from New York and would come and do some music theater, you know, where they're working on their degrees and you'd get a stipend and get paid. And, and so, you know, I was around older students who were gay, and they knew I was gay, and it was like, Come on over, we'll have some lunch, we'll hang out. It just became—We know who you are, we're that same kind of tribe. Come on, let's hang out a little bit.

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Sister Clara 21:06

So then when I went to—when I moved to Peoria, then, first day of school, I go into theater class, and who is my teacher? Someone I had been in summer music theater with, you know, the summer before. You know Dana____(??) when you say, "Oh, my gosh, what are you doing here?" And it's like, "I'm in your class, Dana." And so music and theater, you know, singing, that was—it became kind of my—where I fit in in school, certainly.

S

Sister Clara 21:36

However, in Peoria, there was a much—there was a very vibrant queer community for its time. You know, 1975, there was a gay bar, called the Quench Room, on Main Street. And it wasn't long before I'd heard about that. Someone had mentioned something or other—somebody in high school actually had mentioned them. It's like, We kind of look older. I think we can sneak in, you know, on Wednesday night. They got beer for thirty-five cents. We'll go to Pizza Hut and we'll go in the back door. And there we are, and so we get a booth in the back, and the older one—the one who looked the oldest, would go get a pitcher of beer. And there we'd sit.

S

Sister Clara 22:14

And it was really the first time that I was exposed really to queer women, you know? And right away, they kind of knew that we were the younger—the younger gay guys and they became very protective actually of us. It was like, You'll want to stay away from this guy. He'll try to hustle you, he'll do this or that, you know. It's like, Oh, by the way, we're playing softball out on the farm if you guys want to come on out, you can hang out with us. And so that became another wonderful kind of avenue of being mentored. You know, being a young queer person and mentored by queer women, in Peoria as well, too.

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Sister Clara 22:59

Of course, being the theater kid, in this bar, the Quench Room, all of a sudden, drag became the thing. I can remember seeing these drag queens and, Oh my gosh, I want to do that! I am a thespian, after all. And it wasn't long before I was in the bar Wednesday night, amateur nights, and there I was. I had my hair done and I had a little frock that I was wearing and it was runner up at this Wednesday night kind of thing. And it became kind of what I wanted to do. I wanted to win this amateur contest.

S

Sister Clara 23:39

And so, in that town, a couple other young queer kids—that were Black, actually—became my dear friends. One was named Miss Chanté and the other was named Titty Mama. And Titty Mama was this big, broad, out-there queen who was wonderful. And so, she was like, "Well, on Wednesday, let's get together. My grandmother who I live with, she'll be off to church, and we can get to the house and we'll get our hair done. We can roll up our hair and then we can walk out to the bar, and we will take our clothes with us so that we can get ready and do our show," or whatever. And how bold it was, this white kid with two other Black kids, with our hair and curlers and a little bandana around it, you know, walking through town to get out to do our show.

S

Sister Clara 24:35

But amazing personalities to begin with—and then at one point, it was like, Miss Chanté's mother—these girls, they actually thought that they could really pass as being girls. You know, they just became so secure in what they looked like and how they were acting and actually went to church—they went to church in drag and they went to this big Baptist Church where there were two different services. And one of their mothers typically went to the first service and they were staying over at their friend's house, and so they went to the second service and came in after it started and they were in the back row. Big ol' church lady hats on or whatever.

S

Sister Clara 25:17

And as they left the church, Titty Mama's mama came down the aisle and saw her son in drag in the back pew. And she pulled a gun out of her purse! Held a pistol on him, said, "You get the hell out of here, looking like that, defiling my name in the house of the Lord!"

S

Sister Clara 25:39

Now it wasn't a problem that she pulled a gun on her child in this church, but that he was dressed in drag, you know—and then chased his ass home. And so it was like, I mean—what a colorful story, too: Mama's mama pulling a gun out there in church. But, you know, we became friends. We became friends, certainly.

S Sister Clara 25:56

And it wasn't—I started hanging out with the person who was the headliner at the Quench Room, Timmy Taylor, was this drag queen's name from Nashville. Would come up and we'd do big shows and I kind of, you know, would help her, was kind of her gopher or whatever, helping her with her shows.

S Sister Clara 26:14

And then one Wednesday night, I was—I won and then before long it was like, Miss Gay Peoria. And it was like 1976 and I became Miss Gay Peoria in 1976. Clara Cum was my name. It was such a scandalous name, you know, it was like I needed to think of a name, and someone says, "Why don't you pick Clara Cum?" Nobody had a name like that, you know. They were like, Brandy Muchet (??) or names like that.

S Sister Clara 26:44

And so with that name, people laughed. It was like, "Oh, how wonderful. Comedy will be my thing, you know, collaborative comedy." And so it wasn't long before I became Clara Cum and the Kumquats, the Bicentennial Bombshell.

S Sister Clara 26:57

I would do all of that middlers things and I had this just troupe of people who had put Clara together: someone who'd do my hair, and someone to help with makeup, and someone who'd do the gowns and sets and all of that stuff. And had these guys, you know, with half a yard of fabric wrapped around them, coming out on stage. And, you can have any type of talent at that time, if you had gorgeous guys with a half a yard of fabric wrapped around them bringing you out on stage. So it kind of became my place to kind of fit in, I think, in Peoria at the time.

E Elliot Wesselborg 27:32

When did you leave Peoria? Where did you go next?

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Sister Clara 27:36

Well, so then, while I was in Peoria, um, I kind of had a little following, a little drag following, I guess. And there were a couple women who I met and one of them became my wife: one Margarita Tuesday (?). Experimenting, having sex with a woman for the first time, and my mother had always said, "You need to stay away from girls." She never told me about boys, but, "You need to stay away from girls."

S

Sister Clara 28:08

And using the rhythm method, that very first time that I had sex with a woman, we made a baby. And it's, yeah, 1975-76, you know, '76 there and it's like, what do you do? You get married. You get married, and that's what we did. My parents were elated! All of a sudden, their little queerish boy was now getting married and they're having a baby, you know, and all of that.

S

Sister Clara 28:36

And, and we were friends and so, just the sexuality part of it was like, "Oh, well, okay." You know, it's like it's—maybe it's not cut and dry. And maybe we are where we are in exploring all of that—sexuality. Certainly I felt really—identified with the gay community.

S

Sister Clara 28:37

And, I mean, she had me in a gay bar and she knew I was a drag queen and we would hang out there and actually worked in the club—there was a club there called Club Peorian, and it had a big marquee in front of it that said, "Gay Disco,"—in 1976, to say, "Gay Disco"—and it became the place in town to be. And I would perform there and I worked there and she did the books and those kinds of things for that club, and it kind of became where we fit in there, then.

S

Sister Clara 29:32

Our relationship, just figuring out how to be parents and all of that and in Peoria, and just some family kind of struggles as well. It became problematic and it was—when we split, there were two children by that point. And I had a much stronger family support system, and so Jason and Julie lived with me and would visit her on the weekends. And she quickly found another relationship, that was an amazing man that she fell in love with who was a big DJ—a Chicago DJ, you know, and off to Chicago she went.

S

Sister Clara 30:21

It was that summer after, um, after we divorced that I, too, made my way to Chicago from Peoria with a friend—just going out, having drinks, and in this bar on a Friday night, The New Flight. I was sitting there, you know, new kid in town, and across the bar, I saw this guy came in with his friends. And he looked like Jesus: this long, thick hair and I was like, "Oh my god, Johnny, look at that guy, looks like Jesus."

S

Sister Clara 30:56

Well, he was too old, probably, for Johnny's taste. I mean, he was thirty-two or something at the time, you know? And I turned around and then he was gone, and it was like, "Was that an apparition?" (both laugh)

S

Sister Clara 31:10

There he was gone, you know. And so it was, uh, I guess it was a two o'clock bar or whatever. And so across the street, later, on Sunday's disco, which is a four o'clock bar—and actually five o'clock on Saturdays—I walked in and I sat out at the front bar, and all of a sudden somebody bought me a drink. And then another person bought me a drink, and then there was all this—all these beverages in front of me and this—around the bar came this woman named Lynn, and she looked and she looked down at my cocktails and looked at me and said, "Can I buy a drink?" I was like, "I don't know where all these came from. I don't know." She said, "Come on with me. I want to introduce you to my friends."

S

Sister Clara 31:46

And back by the pinball machine, I went—we went through the door. And there he was, Tom—Jesus—that long-haired guy, you know, who's my husband and my partner for forty years now—I met that night and it was just like, there—it was truly for me, not even visually but that, that heartfelt connection that was there.

S

Sister Clara 32:15

Yeah, yeah, and so figuring out, then, we started a relationship where I would come from Peoria to Chicago on the weekends, when Helen had the kids and visit, or whatever, and figuring out how to be together, you know. And he moved to Peoria.

S

Sister Clara 32:35

I actually started working for my dad and his company, building dump truck bodies. I became a welder. He taught me how to weld. I think I probably was the only queer welder in the shop. I'm pretty sure that I was, actually, and being the boss's son—certainly he didn't give me any extra grace, or whatever, on what working ethics would be.

S Sister Clara 33:01

And all of a sudden, I became this real muscular kind of guy, from doing all this heavy lifting and stuff, which was kind of wild. So, you know, being Miss Gay Peoria, muscular drag queen welder, that was part of all of that that was there too. And then, you know, brought Tom home into Peoria, and he was—you know, many times in many towns, during those time, the new guy in town is incredibly good looking, even some of these people who are your friends, they'd be like, "Oh, do you want to hang out?"

S Sister Clara 33:36

And it was very short-lived that, you know, it certainly—this wasn't going to work out. I decided that I needed to move to Chicago. And I remember telling the front office at my dad's business that I was giving my two weeks notice, before I had mentioned it to him.

S Sister Clara 33:57

He knew that, that I was queer. I mean, he knew that Helen and I were divorced, and one Sunday afternoon, when the kids were at their mom's house, Tom and I'd went out for a tea dance, which was very popular on Sundays, had one too many bottles of beer, and I didn't wake up the next morning. And he opened up—he had a key to my house—and opened up the bedroom door. "It's time for work." And there's Tom and I in bed. It was like, "Oh, well, okay."

S Sister Clara 34:27

Well, there was no doubt at that point, you know, that it was maybe time to figure out how to do all of this. Now fortunately, with the kids' mom, we had met Larry and Helen and Tom and I—you know, when Tom—it became apparent that Tom and I were a couple—to meet, you know. And I mean, Tom is a social worker in Chicago and he'd been an educator before that and, uh, and just a solid, wonderful person. And so there was no fear that, you know, he wouldn't be a healthy individual, and it was—You know, then Tom and I would be primary custodians of the children and raise them, as well.

S

Sister Clara 35:07

So after I'd given my, my notice at work, you know, I had a big family—there were eight kids in our family—and typically we'd come home and sit in the kitchen and have a beer after work and talk about the business a little bit. My mom would pick up the kids from daycare and bring them there. Sometimes we'd eat there and go home.

S

Sister Clara 35:28

This one day in particular, there was like nobody in the house. My dad and I were in the kitchen having a beer. Then we had another beer. Then we had a third beer. Before you know it, I was pretty schnockered, you know? And it was like, I was going to tell him, "This is the deal." It's like, "Dad, I'm going to move to Chicago." He said, "Well, I really wished you'd have talked about—with me, first." And I said, "Well, you don't understand, Dad. The reason why—" He said, "No, I understand you."

S

Sister Clara 35:56

He wouldn't let me say I'm gay. But he stood me up and he hugged me and he said, "I understand." And that was it. Tom was always welcome in my parents home, you know. It was just like, "I understand you" and that was it. So for those—a person from where he was, in getting an understanding of what it's like, I suppose, to have a queer child, you know, it was as far as he could go. And I feel very blessed by that.

S

Sister Clara 36:25

When I—in retrospect, when I look back, what it must have been like for him, with all that fear around what it might have meant to be queer, and having a queer child and, you know, running away from home and hanging out with older people and all of that kind of stuff, and trying to save them from something that was—they had no idea what it was—was really a sacrifice, I think, as I look in retrospect. It was that, for sure. But it was part of the path of life. Obviously, I believe that it's where it should have led, for sure.

S

Sister Clara 36:59

So, Tom and I went off to Chicago and I went and we lived there for a couple years. And, um, and then, when Jason, my son, started kindergarten, actually, at Rogers Park, there was a school—a daycare school—there and they had kindergarten as well. And when it was time for Julie to start kindergarten, it was like—and Jason to go to first grade—it was like, it's time to start looking at schools.

S

Sister Clara 37:25

Now, Chicago public schools were absolutely horrible then—and I understand not the best right now, perhaps—but Iowa had a tremendous education system in the early '80s. Unfortunately, it's not what it should be today, but it was tremendous.

S

Sister Clara 37:43

And Tom grew up in a little town, Ira, you know, seventy-eight people. His mom and dad were the Ozzie and Harriet Nelson of the town. I mean, very well respected family and the type of community where people help each other out and it's, Your kid is my kid. And it's just that picture of what we were taught, you know, that community should be like, as kids.

S

Sister Clara 38:12

And so Tom and I decided to move to Iowa and we moved—his mom quickly found us a place to rent on a Gannon family farm—the Gannons are in Jasper County, you know, one of the biggest farm families—and we rented a house there then, and came with Jason and Julie, and they went off to little Mingo Elementary School. My son had twelve kids in his class and they had Apple computers, you know, amazing for the time, and so just that wonderful education that they were given.

S

Sister Clara 38:47

And coming into this community, this small community—Mingo and then Colfax Mingo, later on when they consolidated—and being two gay men raising children, never had any issue at all from any of the adults in the community. And just that _____ (??) of who we were.

S

Sister Clara 39:08

And, you know, Tom had children as well, who lived in California, Gretchen and Caroline, and we became a very blended family. The girls would come and visit at Easter, and Christmas, in the summer for a couple weeks. And Jason, and Julie, and Gretchen, and Caroline quickly became siblings, with Grandma and Grandpa Carpenter there at the helm.

S

Sister Clara 39:37

My family living in Illinois, a little more distant in the kids' lives. Tom's parents became just

wonderful mentors for them. Not only for them, but you know, for me as well, too. Tom's father, an amazing person. I call him the Dalai Lama of Ira. You know, this strong person who had been in World War II, a Marine, very strong, male figure, very nurturing, would go to all of the ball games at Mingo Elementary School, long after his children weren't there—supporting people, you know. And in the midst of a troubled time once, I can remember sitting around their kitchen table and having a very divisive thought and he said, "Oh, Josh, you should be kind whenever possible. And it is always possible." (laughs) And just the depth of that insight—Ah! Didn't the Dalai Lama say that? (laughs)

S

Sister Clara 40:37

And so Grandpa Carpenter became that person in my life as well, too—that strong, sensible male figure that was very nurturing and invalidating. The first year that we lived in Iowa, you know, we went to one of Tom's family reunions—I think on his mother's side—and it was very patriarchal in the way it was set up: each family would sit at a table and the male from the family would stand up, and he would introduce the family. And there I was in the family. And so it was like, "This is my son, Tom. And this is Josh and this is Jason and Julie." And it wasn't like, "Well, how do they come about?" It was, This is the family. And this is where it is.

S

Sister Clara 41:25

And so, what a gift that was, certainly—to me, to us, to our children—I think, to be raised that way. Being parents, though, it was like—and living here in, in the Midwest, our times with seeking out what queer community was—it changed quite a little bit from, from Chicago, obviously, where, you know, you'd walk out your door—I mean, we, the community, we lived there, you know. We lived in Boys Town long before it was Boys Town, and where some of the big clubs are, you know, Roscoe's—that was our grocery store. Sidetrack, you know—our dear friend Gary Ziebold was the first DJ there. Pepe and Arthur opened that club and it was our, our laundromat, you know, and that's kind of how it was there. So, we really needed to figure out what queer community meant for us here.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 42:20

How did you get introduced to the queer community in Iowa?

S

Sister Clara 42:24

Well, Tom had lived here and he had said that there was this magazine called "RFD" and it's a reader-written journal and actually it's the longest in-publication, reader-written

journal for queer community that's continued, you know. It's over forty years old now. He said, "You know, when I lived here before, there were these guys who lived out in Grinnell, kind of a hippie, fairy kind of collective, who had started this magazine—this little zine, and then became a magazine. We should get a hold of that."

S

Sister Clara 43:01

And so we subscribed to it. It would come out four times a year and we'd kind of wait for that magazine to come out, just to see a different type of way of communing with people in the country, you know, outside of going to Des Moines and going to a gay bar, or whatever. It became really fascinating to me and to us and we'd meet some of the other people outside of the bar scene. In Ames, for instance, they had a Unitarian Church there and they had Halloween parties and things like that, you know. Met some people from there, and then also met a librarian from Grinnell. In the early '80s, they had a pretty vibrant—I think, for its time—a queer community center, and we'd come and watch movies and things, there, whatever they would host there.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 44:06

So what, what kinds of things were the magazine publishing that kind of gave you an alternative to a bar-centered gay scene?

S

Sister Clara 44:15

Well, because it was kind of a long-haired, Radical Faerie bent about what queer community could be, that it really wasn't centered around how much money you had in your pocket, and how you looked, perhaps. And then also who we are as people, you know—this amazing book called "Blossom of Bone" by Randy P. Connor—what came into my life, and it talked about who we are as queer people throughout the ages. And then, through RFD, also that Radical Faerie kind of spirit—I really enjoyed that as well too.

S

Sister Clara 45:06

So Tom and I had decided it would be fun to go to a gathering, and there were gatherings all over the country. The first huge Radical Faerie gathering was in New Mexico in 1979, I believe it was. But there were stirrings about what "radical faerie" meant in queer community long before that gathering with Harry Hay, who was the self-proclaimed kind of father of the Radical Faerie community, if you will, and John Burnside.

S

Sister Clara 45:43

So, we thought that it might be fine to go there and then, I was—I worked in behavioral health at a Des Moines hospital, and with adolescents, it can be very tough kind of work. Also during that time of life, I decided that I was going to stop drinking alcohol 100%, because at times, you know, for me the effect was less than what I wanted it to be. You get to that stage of intoxication where obviously you're not being that happy-go-lucky kind of person. You're either crying in your beer or you want to fight someone. And when you're going into that situation with somebody you love, perhaps it's time to reevaluate that.

S

Sister Clara 46:31

And so I did, you know, and so I stopped drinking, but I didn't learn how to really get sober and to deal with that. And life became really, really intense. So one day I came home from work and Tom and I had this fight—we had bought this amazing farm near Colfax, like Victorian farmhouse, and I was in the midst of rehabbing this, this farm in my mind—what it should look like. So Tom came home one day and I said, "Oh, Tom, I found this wallpaper. It's absolutely amazing. It's this Brunswick & Fils pattern. It's incredible. It would look absolutely fabulous in the dining room."

S

Sister Clara 47:13

Now, Tom's a really laid-back, Norwegian Lutheran kind of hippie guy, right. He's not into some fabrics and some Brunswick & Fil. And he looked at me, and he looked at that, and he said, "Well, how much is that going to cost?" And I said, "Well, it's \$5,600."

S

Sister Clara 47:28

He said, "\$5,600? Hmm, do you need this?" I said, "Well, of course I need this! This is absolutely the perfect wallpaper for our home." You know, I'm a nester. I build home. This is what I needed. And this time he said, "Well, you got all this vacation time, Josh. Maybe ought to pack up that 1981 Dodge Diplomat station wagon and head off to Tennessee—take a vacation. I'll stay home with Jason and Julie, you got lots of vacation time. Ah, you know, this—well, you maybe should go—get back from there, if you still need that wallpaper, we'll figure that out." (both laugh)

S

Sister Clara 48:08

So that's the _____(??). And so I did. I had never, you know, I didn't start driving a car until I was twenty-five, when we moved to Iowa from Chicago. Because earlier than that, it

was like, Well, you're going to get Driver's Ed or you're going to be in this play, you know—because they happened at the same time of day. I didn't need to drive a car, but I needed to be in "The Odd Couple." Of course, I needed to be—you know, those kinds of things in high school.

S Sister Clara 48:35

And so I called ahead and spoke to Gabby Hayes, this person who is a Faerie who was at Short Mountain and said, "I need some directions. I'm coming—I'm coming to Short Mountain, to this gathering." And he was like, "Okay, well, these are the directions, but you need to follow them very specifically, because, if you don't—if you take a left and you shouldn't have taken that left, you're going to be in Never Never Land. It's the hills of Tennessee."

S Sister Clara 49:06

So I packed up the car and off I went, stopping at every rest area between Iowa and Tennessee to just open up the hood of the car, make sure it was driving right—just rest, you know, making this a two-day journey—sixteen, eighteen, twenty hours or something crazy to get there. And when I got to the mountain and got off of the paved road and on the gravel road and all of a sudden, there I was on an unpaved, ungraveled mountain road, deep into the mountain. I was just scared to death. And I come around this curve and there were people on horseback and they kind of looked to me deep, like, Who are you? And I thought, Oh, I am in Never Never Land. How am I going to get this car turned around?

S Sister Clara 49:58

And I kept going down the windy road and all of a sudden there was this pink triangle pointing towards the driveway. And I got out of my car and I decided, Oh, I need to change my jeans. You know, I got out my travel jeans and, well, I had to take a pee and quickly piss—all over these wonderful jeans that I was going to put on. They were my good jeans, that I was going to wear down the driveway, right?

S Sister Clara 50:20

And there are all of these beautiful, purple blossoms from this tree that were all over the, the drive and I'd never seen that flower before. And I get down to this cabin and it's an 1840s cabin. And it'd been an old commune for long before it became a sanctuary, a queer sanctuary. And I get on the front porch and there's a woman in, making some, some

stew on top of this wood-burning stove and this guy comes out, Johnny Jean, and he's like, "Are you here for gathering?" And I thought, I'm at the end of the world, why else would anybody come here? I was like, "Yeah." He said, "Well, come on, brother. I'll show you where you can put your tent."

S

Sister Clara 51:01

Over in this yard, where there's this yurt, this old wooden yurt that's amazing, you know, I started putting up my tent. Pretty soon another guy said, "Oh, let me help you carry your gear," and put some of my gear down. And I'm going over the hill there and this long-haired, hippie kid, a little younger than me, came over with these outstretched arms and he's like, "Welcome home, brother." And he gave me this incredibly embracing hug.

S

Sister Clara 51:30

Now this was long before cell phones, there was no electricity there. It was kerosene lamps and wood burning stoves and that's how you cooked. And in circle, we would meet every day and we'd have a talisman that we would hold, and when you had that talisman it was just your time to talk about who you are, where you are in life, what your thoughts are, and everybody else would listen—and not listen to respond, but to listen to understand.

S

Sister Clara 52:00

And throughout that process of listening to understand, I really got a better understanding of who I was, and really where my tribe was. And certainly in that Radical Faerie community, it's my tribe, you know, and I've been going to gathering since 1992, once, twice a year, whenever possible. Because, you know, it's my tribe and even in the ever-changing community that's there, just those bonds, you know, were there on the land.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 52:37

Who is coming to those gatherings? Like the first ones you were going to, where were people from?

S

Sister Clara 52:41

And they were from all over the United States, actually. A lot of people from Chicago and New York, people from Asheville, North Carolina, and Atlanta, New Orleans, a couple from California who would come that far, early on, to gathering there.

E Elliot Wesselborg 53:02
And how many people, about?

S Sister Clara 53:04
In the first gatherings there, they were little, you know—1992, I think maybe 100, 125 maybe, at circle. Sister Missionary Position, one of the founding Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, lived there on the land. And actually, that became my second real introduction to the sisters. I knew who the sisters were from being in California, but actually meeting a sister.

S Sister Clara 53:41
It was one night around a campfire, this small, little fire—there were maybe six of us around this little fire after dinner, and this person got up and started running through the woods, just frantically running through the woods, and he'd had a bad reaction to deciding to quit taking his psych meds and smoking some marijuana. And I, you know, my career had been in behavioral health and so, immediately it was a crisis, you know, so I ran after him and just ran after him and kind of calmed him, kind of grounded him, and took him up to the cabin, into the library. And I sat with him, you know, as his friend, got his medication, till he got to a more stable mood.

S Sister Clara 54:24
And that next morning at breakfast, Sister Mish said, "Had you ever thought of becoming a sister?" I was like, "Well, not really." And he's like, "Well, I see something in you. I can see where your commitment to community is. Maybe we should entertain a dialogue around that." And so that's certainly where those earliest thoughts of what a vocation as a sister started from, as well.

S Sister Clara 54:52
Gathering started growing there after the march on Washington. And after that, on the way home, many people coming back west—all of a sudden, you know, there were 600 people there, cooking on a wood stove. Enough food for 600. And many of the out-there, Radical Faeries, you know, Harry Hay and John Burnside. And I had—I met Harry Hay that year, and he had, you know, written a book about being queer and Radical Faeries, or whatever, in his story, and found actually John Burnside, his lover—more of a heart connection with him. It's kind of—I think in their relationship, you know, the person that's

kind of somewhat in the supporting role is many times the person that has more depth, I think. And really enjoyed that meeting, for sure.

E Elliot Wesselborg 55:53
How long did you stay there?

S Sister Clara 55:56
And I stayed—the first time, I think it was nine days, probably nine days the first time. Yeah.

E Elliot Wesselborg 56:06
And about the same length every time since then? Or—

S Sister Clara 56:08
Um, it's—and you know, they have work week before and after gathering, sometimes. So I've been there twenty-eight days, is the longest that I've stayed there. I come during work week and then—so Sister Missionary Position at one point, became Sister lamosama DeLite, the Sodomite. He went on a world tour when they were looking for Osama bin Laden. Mish shaved off his mustache to go snorkeling and all of these kids in Thailand were like, Osama! Osama! (laughs) And so he took to heart the decision to kind of change his name at that point.

S Sister Clara 56:52
So yeah, yeah, and becoming, then, a sister that next year, in 1993, through introduction with Midwest Men's Festival—a little closer to home in Leavenworth, Kansas, just held at Gaea Retreat Center, which is a wonderful, wonderful place that hosts lots of different groups—became more of my local queer family, if you will.

S Sister Clara 57:23
And for many years, every year I would go to Midwest Men's Festival. But once again, you know, it's like—there's a fifteen acre lake there and they did my ritual for becoming a sister. Mine was, was amazing. You put all of these very talented people together, you know, and they had constructed a Venetian type of boat out of a canoe and I would be rowed across this lake, with these beautiful luminarias hanging off the side of the ball.

"Carmina Burana" was playing in the background, over on this platform, if you will, a swimming platform in the lake, and a lone drummer was having—telling people when it was time to go.

S

Sister Clara 58:13

And so the "Carmina Burana" is playing in the background and there's beautiful luminarias and people are all dressed up, you know, for Sister Clara to become a black-veiled nun. Or actually, my white veil—it was my white veiling, actually. And so the wind had kind of picked up and Sister Chiki Chiki Bing Bang, from Boston, who now is a sister, was doing the rowing—a very muscular young guy—in this canoe, but the wind was blowing us back the other way. And so the "Carmina Burana" had gone through about three times. Then all of a sudden they started—I could hear them singing, singing show tunes from from the beach over there.

S

Sister Clara 58:32

So it was this wonderful mixture, this production of like Cecil B. DeMille meets Mel Brooks, by the time that it was over and said. And so, on July 12, in 1993, on this beautiful full moon, on the feast day of St. Clara, I became a sister. Yeah, what a wonderful blessing that was.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 59:21

Were you still involved in drag after coming to Iowa?

S

Sister Clara 59:26

And I was not. No. No, other than maybe for like Halloween—I do kind of like skag drag—I had a beard and a mustache and, and I didn't want to let that go, certainly. But then, as you know, as I became a sister then, that bent on—in community, and mixing that. The first time that I came out as a sister in Des Moines for a charity event, the queens were like, "Who are you and what are you doing, making fun of us?"

S

Sister Clara 59:59

You know, they had no sense really, of who the sisters were and the history of that. And our sister—you know, our sistery, you know, has depth, you know. I mean, it was Gilbert Baker, Sister Chanel 2000, who created the rainbow flag. The first safer sex pamphlet, "Play Fair Play Safe," was created by the sisters. And so, you know, that's some of the advocacy that the sisters had done early on, certainly. And, and to this day as well.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 60:23

So, what kinds of different projects were the sisters involved in at that point?

S

Sister Clara 60:37

Well—and so, here in Iowa being so—well, at the time that I became a sister, it was primarily supporting AIDS, you know, the AIDS crisis. And here in Iowa, my first sister work became through The AIDS Project of Central Iowa. They did—once a year, they would have the All Iowa AIDS Benefit. And for eight years I helped with that in the Embassy Suites grand ballroom. And I became one of the emcees, along with Mary Brubaker and Dana Carton, who were newscasters and then Heidi Soliday.

S

Sister Clara 61:26

It was a four-hour show and it used to go on way into the evening and it was like anybody had something to perform: let's get them on, you know. And so, as I started helping out with that, you know, David Batrida (??), who was one of the producers of the show, was like, "Why don't you see if you can kind of tighten this up a little bit?"

S

Sister Clara 61:47

And so I did. So every seven minutes, there'd be a new performer, you know, all night long and it became kind of the venue that I put a lot of my sister energy in. Everybody wanted to be in that show, because, you know, it's the biggest show in town—in the state, at the time—And so people from all over the state—and so figuring out really for it—t's a variety show, so, let's figure out a good balance of everything that there was to offer, at the time.

S

Sister Clara 61:51

There were times when it was kind of hard, because people were like, I can't believe you didn't ask you to perform. I've been performing forever! It's like, Well, maybe not this year. Maybe next year, you know. And so—but you kind of crack that, you know, the ruler, if you will, as a nun, to get the work done. At the end of the day, it's about the work. It's not about the personality. And they did tremendous work.

S

Sister Clara 62:43

And one of the things I appreciated about the benefit was, the money went directly to people who were in crisis when they needed it. Navigating through Ryan White and

through funding, when you're someone who has just found out that you have HIV and, and you're sick, and the rent is due and what are you going to do? It kind of picked up where other things didn't support that need. And so I really felt blessed to participate in that for many years.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 63:16

Can you talk a little bit about like, the sisters' evolution into more formal organizations?

S

Sister Clara 63:25

When it became a more formal organization?

E

Elliot Wesselborg 63:28

And as Iowa coalescing into, like, a standalone entity?

S

Sister Clara 63:34

Sure, sure, sure. So when I became a sister, there were the mother house in San Francisco, where it started, you know, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, forty-one years ago on Easter, when, when Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch, Kenneth Bunch—who was from Iowa City—had gone out to San Francisco to discover bigger queer community, from Iowa. And he took along with him some habits that he had acquired from the Brothers of St. Joseph in Cedar Rapids, that were retired nuns habits. He was in this group called the Sugar Plum Fairies, and so they would perform in—with these habits, doing Vatican rag and things like that in the bars.

S

Sister Clara 64:26

So he took these, these habits with him. And then, along the next year, came Fred Brungard, who is Sister Missionary Position, and they were in the Castro and he looked around and all they saw were all of these clones, you know—it was a very clone-looking time for men—and said, "Let's put on these habits and we'll have some fun." And they went out into the Castro and all of a sudden they were just swarmed by people. And before long, there were half a dozen people that were sisters. And then, you know, they got a grant from the San Francisco Arts Foundation to build the original wimples that the sisters have—the headpiece of that.

S

Sister Clara 65:13

They became a 501(c)(3) in San Francisco. And just in such an incredible, entertaining novelty, if you will, at the time, you know, as community activists, as well. They always had a political kind of bent, you know, around what queer rights was about in 1979, and then also supporting the nuns in El Salvador, you know, politically, that were assassinated during that time, and those kinds of movements. And then there was an order that started that next year in Australia, as someone moved to Australia and started order, and then Seattle.

S

Sister Clara 65:59

When I became a sister, that was primarily where the sisters were. And then Paris—in Paris, as well, too. Thirty years ago, the sisters started in Paris. So, going to gathering at Short Mountain, there became kind of a need for me really to be part of the bigger sisterhood, I felt, a connection. Because other than, you know, I would go to Chicago and manifest as a sister during Pride Parade there, hand out pamphlets, really around what Radical Faeries were about, because I really wanted to spread the word around that.

S

Sister Clara 66:39

And so Mish had a—Sister Mish—had the idea that perhaps we should start a missionary order. And so we did, then. We started the Missionary Order of Perpetual Indulgence in 1996. Sister Longara Mascara, the Calamitous Occasion, from Kansas City; Sister Pinky Lady Slipper, from Kansas City. Mish and Sister Mary Shock Therapy from Russellville, Arkansas became the founding sisters.

S

Sister Clara 67:12

And so we would support each other in our work in our hometowns, but also through queer community outside of _____(?), you know. Really wanting to support Midwest Men's Festival and Short Mountain Sanctuary. I became an auctioneer and I would auction things with All Iowa AIDS Benefit as well, too. That became a big focus on my work that I did.

S

Sister Clara 67:41

And so by 1996, the end of 1996—or no, by 2006, excuse me. By 2006 the mother house in San Francisco would get inquiries from all over the United States: people wanting to start a house. And so, on June 6, 2006, the LA (Los Angeles) sisters held our conclave—666

conclave in LA. And so sisters came and decided that maybe we should start a more formal process. And the United Nuns Privy Council was formed.

S

Sister Clara 68:25

Now as a missionary sisters, we decided that we didn't really want to become a 501(c)(3), because, you know, we lived in many different states, and just the work that we wanted to do, navigating funds and monies, all of that kind of stuff really wasn't what we wanted to do. We wanted to work alongside other 501(c)(3)s and other groups, just to do the work without that. So, missionary sisters became part of that—the United Nuns Privy Council as well and there's been an explosion all over the United States and throughout the world, over these—since 2006. You know, we have a Sisters in Poland, in Czechoslovakia as well, too.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 69:17

What does your—the Iowa chapter of the Missionary Sisters look like today? What are your activities?

S

Sister Clara 69:23

And so as a solitary nun ,currently—and throughout the years there have been other nuns who have been sisters that have started here and seem to migrate other places. Sister Wilma Titsgro, you know, is in Guerneville, the Russian River Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence for many, many years, and was there abbess last year. And there have been half a dozen, probably, sisters in Iowa.

S

Sister Clara 69:56

So as a solitary nun, you know, I'm just the Reverend Mother General of the Missionary Order. Sisters will come here and we'll get together for our conclave for—some come for two weeks, here in Iowa, centered around pride primarily. Other times, you know, sisters will come and we'll meet and support other activities here in town.

S

Sister Clara 70:24

Our sisters from Kansas City—many sisters—through the Missionary Order, other houses have started, you know, in Madison, Wisconsin, one of our missionary sisters started a house there, and they're a very vibrant 501(c)(3) in Madison, Wisconsin. In Nashville, Tennessee, they've been there many, many years and they started from missionary sisters.

And then in Kansas City, the City of Fountains Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

S

Sister Clara 70:55

For many years, we tried to get a couple people that lived in that town that were wonderful activists to become sisters. And they've had a very vibrant house for a couple of years now, as well. So that's kind of the foundation of what we do.

S

Sister Clara 71:11

Now, as a group, we really aren't looking for new members. You know, the work that we do—the eleven of us, from all over the United States now—we're kind of like a family and fitting someone into that—the vetting process of really what it's about for a person and being as old as we are, there really needs to be a lot of depth to that.

S

Sister Clara 71:43

For so many people—for many people, it seems like it's all about, Oh, I'm a sister, hello! You know, Yeah, scoot me into the bar first, get invited to the cocktail parties—this, that, whatever, for some people. We—I have no patience for that, (laughs) as a person, you know, so.

S

Sister Clara 71:59

And then as an order, we were the first order, you know, west of the Sierra Nevada mountains and all the way out. And when, when St. Louis wanted to open up a house, one of the sisters in San Francisco was like, Well maybe you should mentor them. And it's like, Well, St. Louis is a little ways from Des Moines and Newton, you know, so that's not quite so easy to do. Unfortunately, the _____ (unintelligible ??) to kind of help with that.

S

Sister Clara 72:31

So yeah, so, the sister presence here in Iowa, it's not as out-there as it is in many other places. Now, certainly, over the years, there's been—maybe there should be an order, like in Des Moines, for instance, and I've offered, it's like, I'll be glad to kind of help you with that, but at this stage, where I am in my life, it's a lot of work and bar-centered work I find taxing. Yeah.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 73:05

I'm curious about how, like the sisters as a whole, how their work has changed as like, obviously, you're talking a lot about AIDS benefits and work around HIV. How has that shifted as like, the trajectory of HIV has changed in the US?

S

Sister Clara 73:23

Well, early on, unfortunately—I'll talk a little bit about Guerneville. One day, it's thirty years ago, they became a house. In that community there, they decided that they wanted to support the community as a whole. And so it wasn't just money that they were raising for HIV/AIDS, but for lots of other needs in the community. The first thing they did was they saved the music program in the elementary school. All of a sudden it became, There's no money in this elementary school for them to have a music program. It's like, What? You know, no, no, this is where we need to focus putting money. So many different houses figure out in their communities what needs to be addressed—the needs that need to be addressed, and then figuring out how to fit in and work towards those goals.

S

Sister Clara 74:22

There was a time, many years ago, where the people from Fred Phelps came to town at East High School. It was a—there was a big rally to support their LGBTQ organization. Now, Fred Phelps came to town because they were at the Capitol. They were—there was some legislation that was going to be considered to support queer youth and they didn't believe that that should be, you know.

S

Sister Clara 74:55

So I got in my habit and I went over to East High School there, then, and there I was, you know, lone nun with my daughter, who does work for the Catholic Worker house, and other Catholic Catholic Worker people, you know, in Des Moines, which is an amazing organization throughout the world. And there we were in solidarity with them, supporting their need to be seen and to be validated and their right to be validated and to be seen as well.

S

Sister Clara 75:23

Fortunately, that day was kind of a funny—that this, uh, motorcycle, this Christian motorcycle group actually came up and they—where all the Fred Phelpsers were right there—and they just stopped their motorcycles in front of them and just start to revving

on their engines and kind of smoked them out and chased them out of town. So where there is a need, where there's a real validating need, I think I look for there to be a sister presence, you know, if possible.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 75:59

I wanted to circle back around a little bit to RFD and what the community around that looked like. So you mentioned going to like, Grinnell, to just spend time in people's houses. What was it—was a lot of the community just like, informal friendships? Or how did you connect with people that lived further apart?

S

Sister Clara 76:20

Right. So in Grinnell, when I went to Grinnell, actually, it was the librar—I believe it was a college librarian who hosted queer get togethers there, where films were shown and stuff at the time. RFD Magazine had started there with this Radical Faerie hippie collective. And then they were there maybe a couple years and then it moved to the East Coast to Falling Water, on the East Coast, and the people who were part of that collective moved all over the United States, you know. Many—so a few to Iowa City, Kenny, then, to California.

S

Sister Clara 77:12

But through RFD then, people—we would host people in our—on our farm, that were traveling through. It's like, you bring your tent or you meet people and you kind of have a series of conversations through letters: who they were and where they were going, you know. And we'll have a meal together with you or meet or whatever, you know. And that was kind of the strength of the community, the Radical Faerie community, through RFD.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 77:41

And what kinds of articles were—was RFD publishing on? What topics were being discussed in those circles?

S

Sister Clara 77:49

They had a big support for Brothers Behind Bars, for instance. You know, for people who were incarcerated who were gay. And then just a wide variety of artists. I should—I should find an old RFD and look at that and think about some of those early things.

S

Sister Clara 78:12

But maybe discussing what gender is, you know, to begin with, and just the fluidity of—for many people—of where that was. Getting in touch with our feminine energy and celebrating that as people in a patriarchal kind of society, you know, that we were raised to believe this is who we should be and just bending that to meet where, where we feel we are in our souls, and pushing the boundaries around that—those societal norms—were some of the—and then a lot of other—a tremendous amount of poetry.

S

Sister Clara 78:50

And then there was, you know, there was a kitchen queen who would post wonderful vegetarian recipes and certainly, challenging people on just looking at the power of vegetarianism. And then permaculture, lots of things around permaculture that were in articles as well. Eroticism, in the sacred—you know, our sacred sexuality. And as sisters, for instance, we take vows to expiate stigmatic guilt and to promulgate omniversal joy, and so much of that is in line, I think, with Radical Faerie culture as well, too.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 79:40

When you talk about the, like, Radical Faerie collective that kind of dispersed from Grinnell, where was that? Where was that—Who was part of that? Where was that centered?

S

Sister Clara 79:50

And so there was, um, there was a farm that was outside of Grinnell and Donald Angstrom and Rick Graf, who were—and later became very powerful, vocal people in Iowa City with Gay Liberation Front and lived for many, many years in that community, who were queer activists. Kenneth Bunch, then, who became Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch. Michael Pearson, who was a straight-identified man, lived there in collective. And then there's a couple other people. One person—who I can't think of his name right now—who went off to the East Coast, then, and RFD went with him. And he became kind of the publisher, then, of RFD for many, many years through a small collective there.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 80:54

Was it mainly gay men that were engaging with this, or was there a variety?



Sister Clara 81:00

Primarily. Early on, I mean, it was—and the difference between—in Radical Faerie community on the West Coast, for instance—it was very male-dominated. And it was Harry Hays' thought and all of that. Now, in Tennessee at Short Mountain, it was like, We are all one. And it's like, it's—that dogma around us male, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, was not validated at all.



Sister Clara 81:28

During a circle in the march on Washington, that we had up in the herb garden there—this huge circle that was there—there were young faeries who were, you know, questioning that dogma around that. And I remember Harry saying, "Well, when the talisman comes to me, I'll speak to that," and it was never spoken to. Because it was a deep-seated kind of dogma. But he was part of the Mattachine Society, back in California during those times. He was one of the founders of that group as well, too. So it wasn't, it wasn't his gig at all, for sure. But, but certainly in the—I think that at Short Mountain, it became the importance of us as a tribe, irregardless of where we are with our sexuality.



Elliot Wesselborg 82:23

Were you connected to the people who attended those gatherings after you all dispersed back to your like, home cities and home states?



Sister Clara 82:32

Yes, they would come, and people would travel and come through. For instance, several of the people who are from Tennessee, they—the theater troupe called the Eggplant Fairy Players, you know, they would come on tour and they'd come by, you know, stop at our farm. And then the _____ (??) Family Circus, you know, some people who performed in many of those different places, they would come by as they traveled through. It was kind of like we had this fairy rest area, you know, here in Iowa, just right off of I-80.



Sister Clara 83:01

You know, it's a wonderful kind of thing, how people would come in and out of our lives. Our daughter, Julie, spoke to that. It's like, "I came home from school one day and there was—the circus had come to town and they were staying at our house." And my son Jason—Tom and I, we hosted a—every month at our farm near Colfax, we had a group of guys who would come. It was our Saturday Night Social Club for Country Queers, we called it, and Tom had put an ad into the register—long before the Internet, of course—

just a support group for gay, straight, bi, questioning men, you know, outside of a bar, and he would kind of vet them through correspondence and they would—we'd get together every month at our farm.

S Sister Clara 83:58

There was, for a time, a gay mayor in Melbourne, Iowa. And he and his partner came to our Saturday Night Social Club. My son was in high school at the time and it's a Saturday night and Jason was going to his friend's house and one of them said, "Well, what's it like growing up having a gay dad?"

S Sister Clara 84:23

Well, you know, my son was raised by a thespian after all, so he said, "Well, you know, there was a time when I had to figure out what gay was—started with Michael Jackson, you know, Oh, my dad's gay. So I got my head around that one. Then there was a time when my dad went off to Short Mountain. And he came back a Radical Faerie. And I got my head around that one. And then the next year, my dad became a nun. So, you know, there are times when I get off that school bus and I'm concerned that my dad is going to be out there in his habit, trying to flag down a seed truck, telling him the good work of the Lord." (laughs) And so that's it. That's that in a nutshell.

S Sister Clara 85:13

So for us, having that monthly kind of group—a support group—was a wonderful thing to have in our home, too, because people from all over, you know—there would be maybe a seventy-five-year-old, closeted farmer, who in his heart, he was gay, but his wife had no idea where he was at—his kids or his grandkids or whatever, but he just wanted to be around other gay people. Or guys who were, you know, eighteen years old and certainly they weren't going to go to a bar but they wanted to figure out what queer culture was outside of that, you know.

S Sister Clara 85:47

So we did that, I think, for probably eight years. We hosted that every month at our farm. Then, even at—when we moved to Des Moines, we had it, we had a house behind Lutheran Hospital, on the river, and did that for a while, too. It was amazing how people would come, even in snowstorms and ice, because it was just such a valuable kind of thing for them in their coming-out process.

- S** Sister Clara 86:12
Our dear friend who lives in Florida right now—when it became apparent that really he needed to get divorced, you know, for him to live his authentic life and needing support around that whole process, it became valuable for him and he felt some support through that group.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 86:32
(pause) Sorry, I'm just like, percolating all of this. That's—
- S** Sister Clara 86:38
That's good—
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 86:39
—had so many amazing things to say.
- S** Sister Clara 86:42
Can I take a break just for one minute?
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 86:43
Of course, yes.
- S** Sister Clara 86:44
Yeah. Okay.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 86:45
I'll put a pause— (pause in recording)
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 86:51
So, you're talking about spaces outside of bars that were community spaces for lowans. What were other non-bar spaces where queer community was created?

- S** Sister Clara 87:08
For a while in Des Moines there was an LGBTQ Resource Center that was right next door to the Blazing Saddle, and they started a library and when Tom and I lived in Des Moines, then, was part of helping out at that center. They had a hotline, sometimes people would call in crisis or just somebody in town and wanting to know where things were, you know. And then with that library, as well.
- S** Sister Clara 87:48
Rick Miller was—is a wonderful person in Des Moines, who's been very active in helping with that—at the time. So I did some volunteering there. I think primarily between those two—our Saturday Social Club and in the Resource Center, that primarily was where I spent time in Des Moines.
- E** Elliot Wesselborg 88:17
I'm also curious about the impact of HIV and AIDS on the communities that you're a part of at that point.
- S** Sister Clara 88:27
Mhmm. When—Well, I first—when Tom and I lived in Chicago, we had a Christmas party with just some friends at our house. We had a friend who worked in Evanston, at the hospital in the lab. And he said, "There's this thing that's happening and we have no idea what it is. And it is—it's targeting primarily gay men."
- S** Sister Clara 88:56
When it became known as GRID, then, and when we moved to Iowa, in a sense, it kind of seemed like we were moving away from it, you know. But it wasn't very long before it was like—it was here. And just seeing how it impacted so many people.
- S** Sister Clara 89:19
My dear friend, Gary Ziebold, who was the first VJ at Sidetrack in Chicago, that bar that Pepe and Arthur opened, and also was the person who put together Clara Cum's big shows at that, you know—the person who put all of those together—was the first person that I knew that was HIV positive, and then had AIDS and died from AIDS.

S

Sister Clara 89:50

And just how tragic that was, at such an early age—someone who had done no more than I, sexually, in the planet, you know, would become HIV positive and then die.

S

Sister Clara 90:07

For me to be sixty-three years old, and to be HIV negative—it's a blessing. And then, for a while there was some survivor guilt, certainly early on. I remember the first time I was tested—brave enough to be tested—because I was just sure I was positive and just gonna wait to get sick, you know, because it would be inevitable. It reminded me of when I was in junior high school in California, knowing that I would go to Vietnam War and die, because that's what was expected—That's what would happen, and so many people were.

S

Sister Clara 90:48

I was working at a hospital in behavioral health with children and a kid bit me and so off I went to Employee Health and they said, Well, we can test you for HIV, because from this fight, you know, you might have been exposed. Well, the likelihood of this little nine-year-old boy exposing me to HIV was probably, probably minimal. But was I exposing him? And so I got tested.

S

Sister Clara 91:15

And it was back in the days where you waited a long time to find out what the results were and then, once again, and I just could not believe it. And it kind of seemed like this get out of jail free card. This was going to be the one time that you, you were given this reprieve. You know, because so many of the people that you knew became HIV positive. And then my friend, my dear friend Gary, you know, who died.

S

Sister Clara 91:47

As a sister, there was a time, I think, in 2002, where I was interviewed by an Italian radio station—LGBTQ radio station in Milan. And they had called San Francisco and were interested—or contacted San Francisco and interested in some of the work around HIV/AIDS that the sisters had. And then also wanted to speak to people outside of gay Mecca. And so I was interviewed that day around, you know, the work and the project that I was doing, and then, Why, why I was doing that work? And I was really confronted with that question for the first time, and it was, Because I'm alive you know. What a blessing is that to be alive? And with that blessing, I believe this responsibility. (pause)

E

Elliot Wesselborg 92:46

I also wanted to ask a little bit about how you see like, queer intentional communities playing a role today? Now that there is more acceptance of queerness in the mainstream, but still being part of all these amazing, vibrant communities that were put together around being different.

S

Sister Clara 93:15

I find it just so exciting. It's amazing. And I think about the first time that I was in circle, where you're sitting in a large circle and there—after the march on Washington, the gatherings in Tennessee, they just blew up, and they became huge gatherings. And we, you know, every day at ten o'clock in the morning, we would circle up, and the circle sometimes would be four or five hours long and people would come in and out of circle, and listening. And I remember the first time listening to someone who was my child's age, probably, and just the depth of their understanding of where they were on this planet, and that I had so much to learn from them, just by listening to them.

S

Sister Clara 94:08

In Tennessee, then, besides the sanctuary, there were many different intentional queer communities that were forming there. People started buying up land around there, and there's now probably a thousand continuous queer-owned acres there in Tennessee. There's a real desire to keep it really out of the mainstream. It's—where the location is—all of that kind of stuff. And it's really difficult to do, you know, very protective of that as well, just because of where it is and just because of how it's designed.

S

Sister Clara 94:43

But at the same time, you know, it's a sanctuary. So 365 days a year, 24/7, they're open, and people are welcome to come irregardless of the amount of money in their pocket. If they need to be there, they need to be there. No one's going to ask you for money. You're going to be fed. You can stay. And people who have more will give more and that's kind of what you do. And so those foundations, those early foundations, I think, really have fed some of the intentional queer communities.

S

Sister Clara 95:16

It was exciting for me to see then, how they would spring up in Chicago, and then obviously in California and other places—in Asheville, North Carolina. Just to be in a

space where it's home and you're supported and you've got one person looking out for another—I think it's healthy and gives hope. And gives hope, because along with that, at the core of our being, I think, there's that message that we have to share with that younger person.

S

Sister Clara 96:00

I was outed in City View Magazine. I think the year might have been 2004—no, 2002, because the sisters were doing a Play Fair Play Safe tour through the Midwest. And so, as part of that, somebody from City View came to interview me about the sisters and about the work we're going to do and this event that we were having at a bar, Dally's (??), in support of the AIDS project. And by the time that it was done, I opened up City View, you know, when it came out, in the center spread, and it was less about the sisters and more about me. It started out, "Josh Brown is a man with a mission."

S

Sister Clara 96:44

It was like, Oh, my gosh! And it's like—and then quoting me, like, "What about that little queer kid in Mingo, Iowa? What are their needs?" You know, and the importance of being a healthy model—a role model—as a queer person.

S

Sister Clara 97:00

So I immediately went to work and I said, "Oh! I was just outed in the City View Magazine." And my boss said, "Did it mention the hospital's name? And I said, "No." He said, "Ah, you're good to go then." I mean, obviously, my colleagues and the administration and everything knew who I am, and my family, my life, or whatever—but it's like, your work's your work, you know.

S

Sister Clara 97:29

And I feel blessed to have that place, you know, that this is my voice. I'm able to be able to share what's in my heart. In my best—in my best days, I see the divine really in everyone—that connection—on my best days.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 97:49

How have the queer communities that you've been a part of changed over time?

S

Sister Clara 97:58

Well, obviously, the bar community became so corporate. Everything—it's just crazy, you know, that part of all of that—to have Pride sponsored by just a whole host of corporations and—oh my goodness, and then you've got to—If you don't have \$5 to get in, you can't be in the in-group and all of that stuff. Oh no, come on, sister, you're good to go and just because of who you are—But what about the person next to me? You know, they don't have the sacred clown habit on or whatever, but what about them?

S

Sister Clara 98:32

So that's the disappointing part, for me, of queer culture—that it's so monetary and it's about who gets the permit first during, you know, celebration of Stonewall, for instance. In New York, we have a missionary sister who lives in New York City, Sister Lottie Da, and has done the drag march and did that for many years—was one of the founders of that. And then Madonna was going to want to have a big thing right outside of the Stonewall. Fortunately, as a sister, she's had very good relationships with the police there and they said, Oh, you know, you better get your permit in first, because this is going to be a hotspot. And Madonna wasn't too pleased when she was upstaged, but oh well, there you go, it's not all about you. And that was it.

S

Sister Clara 99:22

So that's, that's the sad part of that, I think. (pause)

S

Sister Clara 99:32

I do appreciate, though, the—those one-on-one kind of relations that you have. For instance, living out here in the country, near Newton, you know, when I retired, it was like, all of a sudden Netflix and pizza became my best friend. Sitting in my Ekornes recliner, that stress-free seating, and I was ready for the old folks home, or whatever. And I just started gaining weight and gaining weight and gaining weight. And all of a sudden, I turned to Tom and I said, "This damn chair's wore out." And I was like, It's not the chair, it's your body, you've got to do something.

S

Sister Clara 100:10

So we went off to the YMCA and we came through the door—two old, queer men coming through the door—and we were just so validated the minute we came through the door. "Oh, we'll give you the senior citizen discount. Oh, you're a family? Okay, we'll sign you up."

It was like, at the Y in Newton, Iowa? Just so validating, coming through the door, you know.

S Sister Clara 100:32

And just meeting other people there who are older—older people, or whatever. And, you know, you have gaydar, you kind of have a sense of what it is, you know, it's like, just visiting, or whatever. And right before the Y closed down with COVID, there was a person who had moved home to be with his mother who is very, very sick. Amy, who is the person at the desk, who was so embracing of us said, "There's this guy that's coming in around ten o'clock in the morning. He's just moved home to take care of his mom, and he's another nice guy like you. I think you guys'll be friends."

S Sister Clara 101:10

"Nice guy," or whatever. (both laugh)

E Elliot Wesselborg 101:13

Oh my gosh. (laughs) That's hilarious.

S Sister Clara 101:18

So we actually met, which was fun, you know, and talked a little bit about what it was like for him to move home from Colorado.

S Sister Clara 101:31

And then all of a sudden, it's—during these times, right now, obviously, there's no going to the Y. There's no swimming in the pool. You know, one of the big losses for me personally, of this is, you know, not having the pool. But at the same time, just given time for introspection on where I am right now, and then what my work is here, as I wake up during the day, my blessings, certainly.

E Elliot Wesselborg 102:01

To have that space, like an unplanned space, changes things a little bit.

S Sister Clara 102:07
Yes, yes for sure.

E Elliot Wesselborg 102:09
Um, I also want to ask, is there anything that you think is unique about the queer community in Iowa? However you interpret that question.

S Sister Clara 102:19
Um, I think it's gentle. I think it's gentle. I mean, one of the groups that Tom and I have been blessed to be part of, are the Prime Timers of Central Iowa. And Dr. Loren Olson is a psychiatrist—a queer psychiatrist—in town who wrote a book about his coming out experience, called "Finally Out," which is an amazing book and I recommend it to everybody, especially men in particular who are middle-aged or whatever, to read it—decided that it might be good for us to form a chapter of this worldwide organization in Des Moines and so Tom and I became part of the steering committee.

S Sister Clara 103:00
And we've met—we have friends who have moved from Texas to Iowa to retire, just because it's a much more gentle place to grow old. And, and just the affirmation by the community, you know.

S Sister Clara 103:20
And so yeah, I think, it's—you—there's the ability to, I suppose, get to know people easier, into meeting in each other's homes and, you know, potlucks and in picnics and walks around Grace Lake, and those things. Because it just—because of the size, I think, the size and I think that's a blessing, too.

E Elliot Wesselborg 103:58
Is there anything else you want to add that I haven't touched on?

S Sister Clara 104:04
Hmm. (pause) I can't really think of much.

E Elliot Wesselborg 104:14
We covered a lot of ground, definitely.

S Sister Clara 104:18
Well, certainly, I mean, there is—I do know that I'm speaking from a place of privilege, for sure. You know, our daughter, Julie, works with the Christian peacemaking team that really has less to do with Christianity, but more about the peacemaking team, you know, and had in her work, you know, in Kurdistan, Iraq, in the meta peace team, in Palestine before that. And in the Des Moines Catholic Worker house in the Catholic Worker community, I had a profound sense of my privilege.

S Sister Clara 104:56
And along with that—I mean, we had internet. That's privilege in itself. We have a telephone. We have, you know, all of those things. So with that comes responsibility, I think, too. And I felt very blessed to have had this very privileged life. There was a time growing up as a little, queer kid in California where girls used to be my ass man, that sissy, little, geeky boy—who would have thought that I would have such a blessed life? I mean, I—to have—to be with the men that I love for forty years and to have raised children and we have thirteen grandchildren and just have a very affirming family.

S Sister Clara 105:40
And in 2010, we were—our granddaughters who live in California, in Berkeley, they kind of sidelined us—these very activist young women. They're like, "We want you to get married." And it's like, "Oh." And it was like, "Why?" It's like, "Well, not only—first of all, I can't believe that I have a grandfather who's a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence who can get married in Iowa, when we can't get married in California. Not only is it important for our family, but it's important for you to take that stand."

S Sister Clara 106:18
And I kind of looked at Tom and got on my knees, you know, in a Bloom Bakery and I said, "Will you marry me, Tom Carpenter?" And he was like, "When?" I said, "Next year."

S Sister Clara 106:27
And so, on the rainiest day of the summer in 2010, we were married at First Christian

Church, across from Drake University. In front of 120 of our family and friends and with our children and our grandchildren and I carried my baby grandson down the aisle. The most affirming moment that you can imagine. And our minister, Peg, from from MCC, was like—it was, it was a sacred and a lawful union, you know, that were united and those rights so easily can be taken away from us.

S

Sister Clara 107:13

And this divisiveness that's happening in our culture right now, in this political administration, we cannot take lightly. And I believe that it's our responsibility to fight that, because there have been times in the past, when all of a sudden it looked like, Okay, we're here. You know, before World War II, where it was taken away. And even after—during World War II, when the Jews were taken out of the concentration camps, the queer people were put back in.

S

Sister Clara 107:48

And so I think it's important for us to not take too light the privilege that we have and along with that, the responsibility for us to look towards the future. And I dream of that day, you know. I feel very blessed to have seen people your age and younger and just how vibrant and committed they are to each other and culture and to our world. And hopefully those seeds will continue to be planted, so that my youngest grandchild can live the life of privilege I've had, and more. You know, and take that throughout the world.

S

Sister Clara 108:36

You know, 25,000 people die every day because of starvation. A lot of people are dying because of COVID today, and that's what's in the news. But we forget about those people who're dying, because of starvation. And, you know, it's easy for me to do that, as I order my food to be delivered to my front porch, so I don't have to deal with the people in the grocery store, because I want to say safe, you know.

S

Sister Clara 108:59

It's important, I think, for us to dig a little deeper every day and honor those blessings.

E

Elliot Wesselborg 109:07

Then I just want to thank you so much for your time and for all these amazing stories that you've shared with me and anyone else who's listening to it. And we just—everyone in the

project, we really, really appreciate everyone who's willing to sit down with us to do this.



Sister Clara 109:22

Well, thank you so much. It's been a privilege and a blessing. Thank you and I appreciate being able to tell you my story.