

Inner West Council

History Week 2021 Podcast 'From the Ground Up'

Interview with Robyn Plaister

0:00

Welcome to History Week 2021 'From the Ground Up'. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to elders, past, present and emerging. This is Amie Zar, Coordinator of Community History and Heritage of the Inner West Council and today I'm interviewing Robyn Plaister. Robyn was an early Camp Inc member and has been a lesbian feminist activist since the early 1970s. Robyn came close to losing her teaching position at an Anglican secondary school when a photo of her being grabbed by police at the first Mardi Gras was splashed all over the newspapers. She started the first lesbian mothers group in 1976 to fight lesbians losing their children in custody cases. In 1978 she started the first lesbian teachers group to support teachers and provide a more supportive school environment for lesbian teachers and students. Her early politics in Camp Inc New South Wales was depicted in the recent movie, *Riot*. She continues to be involved in lesbian feminist politics.

Hi, Robyn, Was the creation of Camp Inc your first act of activism?

Actually, I started very early, probably when I first said no to my mother when she asked me to do something – that was my first protest. I did do what she asked me, I must admit, but I was registering a protest. From then on, I guess my main activism started when I was at Sydney University and I was there in the late '60s, so I was caught up with the anti-conscription rallies for the Vietnam War. I was also present when Kate Jennings (indistinct) 154 spoke at one of these rallies on the front lawn of Sydney University about misogyny and I had an interesting experience there, because whilst I was at one of these rallies, it was noted that a Detective Sergeant Longbottom, as he was called, from the New South Wales Police was sitting in his minivan on campus. Now, usually State Police don't come onto campus, so immediately all of those that were listening to the anti-conscription draft burners moved down and surrounded his van. We actually with our numbers were able to lift it up. Somebody had run to the union and got a bowl of sugar and put the sugar into the petrol and we carried that from the top of the road that leads up to the lawn, front lawn of Sydney University, right down onto Parramatta Road and left him sitting in it in the middle of Parramatta Road. Of course, when he started it, it wouldn't start because of the sugar in the petrol. And I guess there was another significant rally that we went on from Sydney University, again an anti-Vietnam War one where we walked from Sydney University all the way down to Town Hall and we all laid down in the middle of all the traffic

coming four ways and I do remember a policeman picking me up and just throwing me into the crowd before a double-decker bus was going through. The other thing is that at Sydney Uni at lunchtimes they always had interesting seminars that were being held, not part of the usual courses. These were political seminars of some sort and I always attended those. I mean Camp didn't start till 1970. It started, really, with the commencement of an article in *The Australian* on the 10th of September 1970 in which John Ware (indistinct) 423 announced the founding of Campaign against Moral Persecution. A get-together was held then on the 9th of January 1971 at St John the Evangelist Anglican Church at Balmain. By April, Camp was hiring its first clubrooms at 393 Darling Street, which is that wonderful old sandstone two-storey house next door to the fire station, which is still there. John Ware (indistinct) 455 and Christabel Poll (indistinct) 455 were the cofounders and their aim was to change how people viewed homosexuality in society from a mainly psychiatric, legal and religious perspective. They also founded Imperative due to the interest in Camp from other states to try and start branches in each state and Camp Victoria, which was later known as Society Five (indistinct) 525 and then there was Camp Western Australia started in 1971, followed by Camp South Australia in '72 and then Camp Queensland and also some of the universities had Campus Camp.

5:39 **How did you happen to become one of Camp Inc's early members?**

Well, in 1972 my partner, Margaret McMann (indistinct) 548, and myself were watching TV and the ABC program *Checkerboard* (indistinct) 555 came on which interviewed Sue Wells (indistinct) 556 and Gabby-Anne Tolovich (indistinct) 557, Peter Bonselburn (indistinct) 600 and Peter Devau (indistinct) 601 – that was on the 31st of October 1972. At that time, Marg and I had not met any other lesbians, so as a result of this program and their discussion around homosexuality, we got the contact or Camp and joined immediately.

What did you have in mind when Camp Inc was founded, as at that time it was uncharted territory?

Well, by 1972, Camp had developed into an organisation in which some were focused on public education of people to change their discriminatory views about homosexuality and some concentrated on support for the many homosexuals that were attending. This, of course, led to some political splits. Now, Marg McMann (indistinct) 654 and I entered Camp at a time when the co-presidents, Sue Wills (indistinct) 701 and Lex Watston (indistinct) 701 decided to walk out as they wanted Camp to position itself as a change agent to society, whereas many in Camp felt that they wanted it to remain in the closet and to be safe. Of course, at this time male homosexuality was against the law and that wasn't changed in New South Wales till 1984 but also Sue Wills (indistinct) 729 and her partner Gabby Anne Tolovich (indistinct) 731 felt that lesbian needs were overlooked in comparison to the gay men's needs, so after they walked out - and it was unbeknownst to us at that time as to the real reasons for the walking out – Marg McMann (indistinct) 749 and I walked in and Marg and Peter Bonselburn became the co-presidents and I had various positions on the executive, including editing *Camp Inc*, which was our newsletter. My involvement and interest in Camp was to be political and to make changes that would count, because when you think about it, in the early 1970s regarding homosexuality, I mean psychiatry still identified homosexuality as a disease. Homosexuals were given aversion shock therapy. People couldn't get jobs or they lost their jobs because of being lesbian or gay. If you were out as a gay person, you were not tolerated in the armed forces or in any of the justice areas. Gays were afraid to openly show affection for fear of being bashed. There was a concerted effort in all walks of life to treat homosexuals as "others". You weren't recognised as next

of kin if your partner happened to be in hospital; their family had more rights than you did. You had no access to medical benefits if you were in a homosexual family and lesbian mothers were losing their children due to showing affection to their partner in front of their children. As I said, yes, male homosexual activity was illegal until it was decriminalised in 1984. There was no ability to adopt children. If you were a lesbian teacher or a gay male teacher, you weren't accepted by the Department of Education as it was seen that it was not in the best interest of the child.

10:06 The Family Law Courts, well, they didn't come in until 1975 but they didn't recognise you as a couple. You were not counted in the census as a lesbian or gay household, and you still aren't. The literature that was around then was very negative and tended to be of a medical nature: many stories had the lesbian suiciding in the end. Racism and sexism, of course, abounded, including in the homosexual movement, so many lesbians were involved in trying to change that, so what we were trying to do then at the beginning of Camp was really to educate the politicians, try and get homosexuality included in the Anti-Discrimination Act when it was starting in 1975, but unfortunately that wasn't included till 1982. We were educating school counsellors in order to help gay students, we were trying to write positive literature to get rid of homophobia and internalised homophobia for gays as well, so we were trying to educate within the homosexual movement as well as outside. We were also trying to support the homosexuals through a counselling service so that they could deal with the problems that they were coming up with in society and basically we wanted police to stop harassing gays and lesbians. We wanted to repeal the anti-homosexual laws, stop any workplace discrimination and to protect any lesbian and gay men's rights; that was our main aims at that time.

What sort of actions were you involved in with Camp Inc?

Well, I was mainly involved in the political side of Camp. I edited *Camp Inc* but I also helped run the women's coffee shop, which was a support group for the women that attended Camp. I spoke publicly to many, many groups because we had an educational front where we wanted to go out and talk to people about what we were doing and how we were just (laughs) ordinary human beings going about our business. So I talked to many groups such as, oh, marriage guidance counsellors, school counsellors, nurses, medical students, Rotary; you name it, we went out and talked to them. But I guess my most changing moment in history for myself and lesbians was that in 1975 Gough Whitlam who was the then Prime Minister was offering grants to women because 1975 was International Women's Year. We, Marg and I and others wrote a submission requesting money from the federal government. We requested thirty thousand two hundred to conduct six seminars and to write pamphlets and a book on the position of the female homosexual in Australian society. Now, out of that we received four thousand dollars with a verbal assurance that if the first seminar was successful we'd receive the rest of the money. Unfortunately, that was not (laughs) the case. However, with that money we conducted two seminars and it focused on the fact that lesbians were doubly oppressed, firstly as women and secondly as lesbian. The hope was that this examination of oppression would be instrumental in changing the present attitudes of Australian society from discrimination to acceptance of lesbianism as a valid alternative lifestyle. The writeups of the talks given were to be distributed widely to the medical, legal, educational and political institutions that had perpetrated the oppression and we also sent it to libraries but this was the first time in Australian history that a homosexual group had been given a grant in order to educate society.

15:12 This helped bridge some of the gaps between women working in Camp and women working in the women's movement too because also by that time I'd joined lesbian feminist groups and I was a lesbian contact for the Women's Electoral Lobby, so during 1975 two of us started also looking at what was happening with custody cases where one of the parents was named as a homosexual. We analysed the results of those cases and we found overwhelmingly that lesbian mothers lost custody of their children and only in cases say where the father was an alcoholic would the lesbian mother be given custody but even then there were restrictions placed on us such as "not showing affection to a lesbian partner in front of the children". Eventually, I ran this group separate from Camp just for lesbian mothers from 1976 onwards. The main aim was to provide support to the lesbian mothers and their children, so we held functions so that the children could meet each other and realise that there were other children with lesbian mothers. We wanted to raise money to help any of the cases and to work with Family Law Court councillors in an educational role to counteract any of the negative stereotypes. I think separating this group from Camp was also a political ploy to involve more women from Women's Liberation because in the '70s at that time Women's Liberation was involved in getting women's health centres, setting up women's refuges, women's abortion clinics, etcetera.

Did you see your participation to the first Mardi Gras march in 1978 as the highlight of your contribution to Camp Inc?

Well, I was on the organising group for the Gay Solidarity March on the 24th of June 1978. We had one in the morning and we had what was called a festival in the evening where we'd all decided to dress up and make it more of a fun event in order to attract more people - that was later to be called the first Mardi Gras. I really enjoyed the march going down Oxford Street, but unfortunately as we got close to Hyde Park the police decided they were going to stop it. Our aim was to stop at Hyde Park and to gather around the one truck that was in front of us that had music on it. He was going to read a few telegrams and we would probably all disperse but the police intervening meant that they pulled Lance Gowland (indistinct) 1833 out of the front truck and a policeman got into it and he took off up College Street. Now, we ran after the truck, because I was directly behind it because my girlfriend, Marg McMann (indistinct) 1852, was on the back - she wasn't well: she'd undergone surgery a couple of months before - and so there were people on the back of the truck and it was a tabletop truck; there was nothing to hold onto. Unfortunately, it did stop and we got in front of it. He was revving it up like mad and we were trying to make sure he wouldn't go any further, this policeman, and we were trying to make sure that he wouldn't go any further, this policeman. Eventually, he got out and he locked the truck, so we didn't know - I mean everybody was riled up. People at the back didn't know that the march hadn't ended; they were just following the people in front. So myself and another woman took off down William Street and I think we were keyed up because of the amount of stimulus that had been created by the police and people started following.

20:00 So we went up William Street. As we got halfway down William Street, we could see all the paddy wagons amassing at the top in Darlington Road and when you get up to the Cross really there's nowhere to go but you turn left (laughs) and go down Darlington Road and you end up at the El Almain (indistinct) 2035 Fountain. Now, I was up the front of the group when we reached that and the police asked us to disperse. Now, in those days the Cross was a place to go for entertainment, so there was a huge number of people already on the footpath without our particular march being there as well, so we tried to disperse but the only way was to go back down Darlington Road and, of course, that's when the police - well, they first grabbed me, unfortunately, and they had a lot of paddy wagons

Robyn Plaister

there and I was grabbed by a policeman and they were just opening the back of the van when somebody jumped out of the van, so I fell to the ground and women had got hold of one arm and they pulled me back out of the way. So luckily I wasn't arrested but after that -well, as I was lying there I had a flash in my face and it was some photographer who had come from the *Telegraph* and took a photo of me. Now, I was working in a private school at that time. I knew that I could be fired on Monday when I went back to work and so your whole life flashes in front of you, actually. And afterwards I was staying a little bit out of it but the violence that was involved in that first Mardi Gras was horrific: I've never seen so many women grabbed and pulled by the hair - it was incredibly violent – and thrown in a paddy wagon. So, at the end of it there were fifty three people arrested and then we all went up to Darlinghurst Police Station where we could hear somebody being bashed because they were screaming out in pain and we tried to get in. It was really hard, and obviously it still affects me (laughs) because it was very hard: you couldn't do much. In those days, there were no ATMs, there was no mobiles, so we had people go up from that crowd to all of the places on Oxford Street and try and collect money; we collected money from each other; a hat was passed around. And we tried to get a doctor in to see and it was very hard but we eventually got a doctor in but, you know, at the beginning they wouldn't even accept that. The result for me was that the next day I was called up by my principal and she asked me if I had been arrested. Now, I could honestly say I wasn't arrested, although I could have quite easily been but I wasn't, but she was very worried about what the parents and the children would think and so after grilling me – and I tried to avoid any direct answers to her – she let me go but she came and stood outside the classes I was teaching for the next week and watched me. And the kids, of course, were not very good. I taught maths and I would walk, obviously, down the aisle and help people – you know, you lean over the desk to help people in their books as they were working and when I walked down the aisles the girls would all move away from me. It took a long time, you know, for them to sort of get over it and realise I was still the same person.

25:31 Were there any consequences in your life, in your work, neighbourhood and family due to being known as a lesbian?

Well, yes. Firstly, I had to tell my family because the assumption is that everyone is heterosexual and so this can be very hard because we know through people that came to Camp that many of those that told their parents, their parents reflected prejudiced views of society and some of them were rejected from their families, and certainly if you come from a culturally and linguistically diverse family it was perhaps more likely in those times that you would be rejected. For me in 1973 I told my mother because I was about to go on television. She took it in and we then argued politics for the rest of the night as she was a bit conservative in her views. Unfortunately, in those days there was not much literature around that was positive and one of her friends gave her a book to read where the lesbian suicided in the end. My mother always maintained that I would be lonely. However, I must admit that I have developed a (laughs) larger community and more friends around me than my sisters in their heterosexual world. Also, as an out lesbian I've been threatened in the street. It was always unwise walking hand-in-hand with your girlfriend as it was likely that you could be bashed or raped and certainly we know of people that that's happened. Certainly, I was hit once in a pub because six of us were enjoying a game of pool and the men didn't like it: they wanted to use the pool table. There was no comeback from that because we went to the publican – he wouldn't do anything about it and then we went to the Anti-Discrimination Board and they couldn't do anything as homosexuality wasn't included in the Anti-Discrimination Act until 1982 and, as I mentioned earlier, I nearly lost my job as a

teacher since my photo was in the newspaper. And unfortunately, really, for many of those that were arrested at the first Mardi Gras, they did lose their jobs because the newspapers named all of those people that were arrested, even though they hadn't gone to court. Now, teachers in private schools can still be either not hired or got rid of because there is an exemption under the Anti-Discrimination for private schools as far as employment's concerned.

Now, Robyn, you also appear in Digby Duncan's 1980 documentary, *Witches, Faggots, Dykes & Poofers* (indistinct) 2852 which has recently been restored and has been fictionalised in the 2018 ABC telemovie *Riot*. As well as receiving a Grand Stirrer (indistinct) 2902 award in the 2001 Edna (indistinct) 2905, how has your high profile impacted on your life and your activism?

Well, I guess having that initial photo in the paper has meant that I've been asked to be involved in more interviews and films, etcetera, but I would have chosen a life of activism anyway because it accords with my values. After I left teaching I worked on a project of national significance, which was to encourage girls in maths and science across Australia and I worked in that for about five years and then I ended up working my whole life in equity in the public sector, working with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islanders, women, culturally and linguistically diverse people. [What] (indistinct) 3001 was highly important to me and other teachers was that myself and another woman started the Lesbian Teachers Group in New South Wales (indistinct) 3008 include homosexuality as part of a resolution on sexual discrimination. We also raised the way that homosexuality was treated in the sex education course because it was highly ignored at that time or treated negatively.

30:32 And we wanted to hold social gatherings especially for lesbian teachers that were working in the country who may come to Sydney during their breaks and didn't know any other lesbian teachers, so we used to advertise in the Teachers Federation newsletter, *Education*, and also the Women's Liberation newsletter and we'd have these wonderful meetings during term breaks where we said that we served lesbian tarts. We did form a lobby group within Federation and try and change some of the ideas around it and also tried to create literature that we could get into the schools' libraries which would be positive influences for girls in the education system. Another thing that I've been involved with is the first Mardi Gras - it's a group of '78ers and I have been giving talks for them more recently. Also, I'm in the 1040 (indistinct) 3158 lesbian group - that's having had ten years in the women's movement and being aged over forty, we aim to support other women and provide educational seminars for them. At the moment I'm very much involved with Robyn 3222 Kennedy in editing a new book called *Camp: Australian Pioneer Homosexual Right Activists*. Now, this book will be a primary Camp Inc source document as we have photographed and also interviewed thirty six original members of Camp from all over Australia to tell their stories in their own words. Presently, we're at the layout stage with this book and it will soon be printed and launched, COVID willing, of course, and, yes, we're very proud of this book because it exemplifies all the work that was done in Camp during those formative years in the '70s and we cover from about 1970 to nearly 1980 of all the work that was done across Australia in different areas.

Thank you for joining us in today's History Week Podcast. Camp Inc has its fiftieth anniversary this year and it will be commemorated by a published book titled *Camp: Australia's Pioneer Homosexual Rights Activists*. They will also be commemorated with a heritage plaque that will be located at their first meeting point in Balmain.

Interview ends