

Interviewee: Randi Solberg
Interviewer: Mark Bowman
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Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

Mark B: This is an interview with Randi Solberg. This is on May 2, 2008. And we're at the European Forum of Lesbian Gay and Christian Groups in St. Alban's. So, Randi, I'd ask you to begin by saying your name and spelling your name for us.

Randi S Well, my name is Randi Solberg, how we say it in Norwegian. And it's spelled R-A-N-D-I, S-O-L-B-E-R-G.

Mark B. Perfect. Good. Well, I thank you for taking this time to talk with us and be a part of this oral history collection that I'm doing with a few folks here at the Forum. So we've asked you to just begin sort of at the beginning of your life, and talk about how you came into the world and the setting and what that was like. So start where you want to start.

Randi S: Well, I was born in a town in Norway called Halden, which is very close to the Swedish border. When you get into Norway, this is where Norway starts, in my perspective, when you come in from Sweden. And my parents both come from the western coast of Norway. So they had moved to this town because of my father's work. And so I was born there, and the

only child of my parents. And not because they didn't want to have more children, but they were both in their thirties when they got me. And my father was very sick when I was a child, one year old. So they didn't know if he would survive, and if my mother would have to be a single mother. So they decided to stick to that one that they had already gotten. [laughs] So, yeah. So my parents were both Christians, and still are. I'm lucky to have them still. And so that meant that I, in a way, grew up in the church, which is the State Church of Norway, the Protestant Church. Lutheran. And I think that formed my life very much from the start. I started out in Sunday School, you know, coming there every Sunday and getting these small attendancy cards with red fishes and yellow stars, and you had been good showing up all the time. And yeah, I think I got familiar with all these Bible stories that they tell children, all the things that are available for the children to get an impression of Jesus. Yeah. So for me, that was familiar stuff in Norway growing up. I continued into school and there going into children's gospel choirs and Christian young peoples' groups.

Mark B: Okay.

Randi S: You know, going, getting your education and going in church.

Mark B: Did that involve some travel around Norway as part of that work?

Randi S: Not at that stage.

Mark B: Not at that stage.

Randi S: But this is during school days. I mean, when I got into gymnasium where we finish that up to twelve years of school, and we have something, it's kind of a graduation celebration which we call 'Russ' in Norway where we wear red hats and red outfits and we run around and party and celebrate that we've finished. And I was part, also, of the Christian 'Russe' celebration. And there we, I think for the first time in my life, then we went on this kind of missionary..things where we went onto the streets, and invited people to come to meetings where we would sing and tell about how we experienced our faith.

Mark B: This was still in your hometown? Or?

Randi S: Now we were starting to then move a little out of it. I mean in the home area of the country, but you know, the closest cities, so we all worked together, people from different cities. Then after that period, or during that time, then I started to also go on international camps, for instance. I think my first one was in Iceland, where we had this Nordic international camp.

Mark B: For like a week, or for how long?

Randi S: No, that was for a week. Yes.

Mark B: What did you do there? What kind of things did you do at the camp?

Randi S: Well, I mean, of course there were Bible study groups, there were sports activities. And we also went like camping, near hot lagunes by the Helka, the volcano. Which I think two weeks later had the first outburst in many years. So it was a kind of exciting to hear about it afterwards. But still, it hadn't happened while we were there. But it was very, it was a good experience for me to meet people from several countries.

Mark B: Because you had people from different countries who were there.

Randi S: Yes, yes.

Mark B: And this camp was put on by, what group put it on?

Randi S: It's the Christian student organization of Norway and Sweden.

Mark B: So you're at university. What are you studying?

Randi S: That's when I finished normal school in Halden, then I went one year for what they call 'folkehøyskole,' which is a more free year, where you do more practical things, or make a special study there. But it's only for one year. For people who want to just do alternative things for one year.

Mark B: What did you do during that year?

Randi S: I actually did something which is a surprise to people who didn't know me exactly that year, I took cooking. [laughs] Which is definitely not a part of

my personality in general. It also probably kind of a this thought of okay, I should probably learn a little of this, because it doesn't really interest me. So I did that, and then I played volleyball, which was one of my favorites. I played on the school team in volleyball. I had used to play football, soccer, earlier. And also volleyball. And then we did a lot of fun stuff, you know, in going hiking and...

Mark B: Where are you, then? Where is this happening?

Randi S: This is in a very small place called Gvarv, which is almost impossible to say, also for Norwegians. [laughter] In Norwegian broadcasting, in radio, they always say the temperatures around Norway. And very often, Gvarv is the coldest place in southern Norway, and the warmest place during summer. Colder in winter, and warm in summer. Because it's, the way it's put in nature. So it's kind of in the middle of southern Norway. And I got a lot of new friends, then, from all over the country coming together there. It was also Christian school there. Two directions in Norway of these kind of schools. It's a Christian type, and then more this, what do you call, like non-Christian, not based on religion or Christianity, more free schools, as we call them. So you see my path all for long, long time, went in that direction. Then I moved to Oslo and started a different chapter of my life. I studied economics and international management.

Mark B: Some sense of why you went in that direction? What was drawing you? What were you interested in? Was there some point at which you chose to do that?

Randi S: Yeah. Well I was in the situation that I had, I was always good in school, it's like that. So I had a good knowledge, I was interested in what I did in school, even though I didn't find everything fun, of course. But I had different options in mind. I was thinking of physical therapy. I was thinking of engineering, or a more language direction. Then I chose, it's always difficult to know exactly why you chose, or for some of us, it is difficult. And also, when I talked to the other people that chose in this direction, I think it was kind of, I had good perspectives for jobs, for career. And I was career-oriented. I wanted to do something in my life, as I saw it. And it was...I decided not to go to university because I think in some way I felt that was too narrow, too narrow, just getting into one field, whereas management is broader. Sometimes I have regretted that, because it's sometimes a safe thing to go very deeply into one field, and really feel that you know that. This education is called 'siviløkonom' which only makes sense in Norwegian. It's a kind of master's degree in business. And we say sometimes in Norway that that kind of education is, you

become like a potato. You can be used to everything, you know, but you're not a specialist in a university subject.

Mark B: Good. Did you have any sense of sexuality during those years? What were you thinking? What were you experiencing? Anything you recall from that time?

Randi S: Well, from my consciousness, I was straight, I was heterosexual. I think homosexuality in a way didn't exist for me. Especially with the background that I had, it was actually never spoken about. It wasn't there. It was also not that it was a problem, it just didn't exist. So I had a very nice boyfriend from I was fourteen till seventeen. He was American, but the family living in the city, the town where I grew up. And we were both young Christian people wanting to live the way we were taught. So we were in a way not exploring sexuality in that sense. It was always innocent being together, which was good. But I think at a certain time it got clear to me that I was not really in love. I was fond of him, and we had a good time together, but I had a feeling there must be something more, something else out there. I just hadn't really understood what it is about. And maybe because I thought, you know, there must be some secret some place. [laughs] So I ended that relationship. He and his family, or his parents and brothers and sisters, they also during this time went back to the United States. And I was there visiting them for one summer afterwards. And then found out,

that “good friends,” yes, but not as love..time. I mean, he wanted us to get married. We were, at that time, seventeen. I mean, a good thought, maybe. But for me, that was not what I wanted, no.

Mark B: So that was your first trip to the States was at that point, too?

Randi S: That was my first trip to the States. Actually, Douglas, as he’s called, and me, we first got to know each other in England, on a language course, which is quite funny for an American guy, probably, to go to Weymouth in England to go to a language course. I think it was because, since he was living in Norway at that time, of course Norwegian was the daily language. So it was a way for him to keep his English. And also, maybe, getting to know more Norwegian people who were at this course. Yeah.

Mark B: Great.

Randi S: But that was the first time I went to the United States. That was a great time.

Mark B: Okay. So you came back to Oslo. So you did school in Oslo. Did anything else happen to you at that point in your life? You were studying?

Randi S: Yes, I was studying. And this was a time when I was active still in the Christian movement. But at this school, we had an independent Christian group, not linked to the general Christian student group. I think we became a little more liberal than that traditional group. We had a lot of fun together. For a while I was the leader of this group. And we alternated who would do that. And I think, during that time, I held more and more distance to church and to church organizations, feeling that it grew more and more boring. And maybe in a way discovering that I felt it was conservative. Even though I was never in the really extreme conservative or evangelical Christian setting, it was more this...traditional.

Mark B: Traditional.

Randi S: Yeah. So for a while, it didn't mean that much to me, I think. And I started working after having finished my studies. I went into business, an insurance company where I first worked with life insurance, working with marketing. And then going into that career ladder.

Mark B: You were still in Oslo at this time.

Randi S: I'm still in Oslo, yes. And I'm twenty-three, twenty-four. And then I started climbing in the system there, and after some years, I was the manager of one of the business areas, as we say. Organizations, like doctor

organizations, nurses, generalist organizations. Negotiating with them and also everything from making projects that are adjusted to them, to leading and training salespeople. Business work.

Mark B: Right. And you were really quite successful, actually, doing this, probably.

Randi S: It was good. It was interesting. It was also a man's world. For a while I was very often the only female leader or manager in management meetings. There would be fifty to seventy men and then me, maybe another woman. So it was kind of a challenge. But I didn't really see it as a problem. But sometimes a little boring with the men sitting there, cigars, sometimes. Okay. [laughs] But there were also challenges. I mean, I was twenty-nine when I became manager of that department. And I only had one person in the department who was younger than me. The rest were up to sixty, and had been longer than me in the business. So I think what made the top management give me that challenge was that I was, was my background from education, and it was while I, I was eager and showed my ambitious side, and wanting to do the job. But that also means that when I look back, I see that it would have been good for me to have been more, having more experience, and being maybe more secure as a young person in that position. Because when you're insecure and you try to lead people who are much older than you and much more experienced, and experienced in that field. And of course you stumble sometimes. You do some things that are

very good. But it was, in a way, it was an important period for me because I learned a lot about myself. And I was working very, very much.

Mark B: Working a lot?

Randi S: Yes. I used to, you know, work together with my colleagues during the day, very often, or go and travel because our headquarters were in Bergen, on the other side of the country. So I flew quite a lot. I would go to work in planes, this kind of everyday life. And one, I think, I started after a while to realize that I am the kind of person who, if I'm engaged in something, and I learn and I work within that field, then I am the type of person who does put a lot of energy and time and commitment into something. So what I started to ask myself was if I realize that I am this kind of person, then I have to make sure that the things that I put my energy into are things that I feel that it's worth putting the energy in. And one day I had to answer, you know, the question, is this important enough for me? And I had to answer that with a no. So what I did was to quit my job and jump into the dark hole of not really knowing what work I would do, because I felt I wanted to have my space for a while. I mean, I had earned quite some money, and had been living in a, I mean, not high spending everyday life. So I had the chance to know that I could survive for a while if I quit it without having any security coming in...

Mark B: So time of searching, time for yourself.

Randi S: Yes, yes. Very much so. So I had, I remember having my last day at that job. And the next day, I was on a plane to France. Because I wanted to learn French, at least to start to learn. So that was my jump into a freelance life.

Mark B: You were about, how old were you?

Randi S: This was in '95, so I was thirty-two. Yes. And I'm still a freelancer by heart. But I have done different things. After one year of doing more consultant things on a freelance basis, I decided to study journalism, because I have always loved to write. And I was thinking in one way I would like to be able to use my writing in my work, as my tool. I did not want to become a journalist in the sense of newspaper journalist or anything. But I wanted to make sure that journalists did not learn any secrets that I would not know of. [laughs] Because I wanted to be able to use it on a freelance basis, but if I would always run around and thinking oh, they probably know some things that I should have known, then I would feel I couldn't really trust myself being a freelance journalist. So I did it to have a tool, but to use it the way I wanted to use it. Now in that crossroad time period in my life, where I quit my job, that was exactly also the time when I had discovered Women, with a capital 'W.'

Mark B: How did that happen? Do you remember some first experiences?

Randi S: Oh, yes. [laughter] Very clearly. Yes. I actually, the first thing that happened was in a funeral. And I was very amazed at, because this coming together after having been in the chapel, it was the aunt of my father who was buried. And the minister of this funeral, she, I felt that she was looking at me all the time while she was talking to my father who was sitting next to me, and she was sitting a little, across from him, so I could see her with my side eyes. And I got curious about her, and I felt that she was very much also giving me attention. And something was there. And I really didn't understand what it was. Then I started to come to her services sometimes, and I got to know her a bit. And well, so at one point in time she invited me to come on a walk or a picnic in a forest by a lake. We were talking. Then she invited me home afterwards, and suddenly I did somehow understand that this was something more than just a curious friendship. And then I, I think I only discovered that it had a name, you know. That it was about -being lesbian, something that I only understood after I was, in a way, into this affair. That it turned out to be an affair, not a very deep relationship. But for me it was so amazing, just that first time to feel a woman's skin towards mine. Yeah, it really, really touched me. And afterwards I said, 'Well this explains a lot!'

Mark B: So you had gone to France. So you had gone to France for a time, and stayed there for how long?

Randi S: Three months.

Mark B: Three months. Okay.

Randi S: And then I went back to-

Mark B: Back to-

Randi S: Oslo. This woman was then also exactly at the time when I ended my job and before I went to France. So I went to France exactly after having had this encounter for some weeks. In a way also probably kicking me into doing something new. So my life was totally uprooted. And a lot of new perspectives.

Mark B: Right.

Randi S: So for a while I was thinking that I wanted to give it time to see if this had any significance in my life, more than having the encounter with her. And then I started to go to the Open Church Group for lesbian and gay people in Oslo. And that was also very, it was a very strong experience for me. I remember, actually, before I started there, I went to one of the many services of this minister that I had had the relationship with. And she had

told me that some women from Open Church Group sometimes come to her services. And one day I was there and I saw this group of women who came there, and I was thinking oh, these must be the ones. And suddenly, after the service had started, one woman came in, walking through the church, and sitting down with them. And I discovered this was one of the two women that I had been living together with for three years. So we had been sharing a flat for three years. And I was like, oh! [laughs] That was a big surprise.

Mark B: Big surprise.

Randi S: And after that service, we talked a little, and she called me the day after. And we hadn't seen each other for a couple of years, so she asked if we could go for a walk in the woods because she had something she wanted to talk to me about.

Mark B: Must be a Scandinavian custom, huh? Norwegian custom, go walking.

Randi S: Yes. Yes, yes. We always go walking. [laughs] And she told me her story, that she had discovered that she was a lesbian, and she had fallen in love with a woman. And I could sense that she was a little nervous about how I would react to that. And I just listened to her story. And at the end she said, "Well, so, what do you think? Are you shocked?" And so I said, "No, I'm not shocked. I actually do think that I'm a lesbian, too." But that was the

reason why I had decided to go to Open Church Group, that I had gotten the feeling that this must be something that means something in my life. So I decided not to go with her to the Open Church Group, because I wanted to make that first step on my own. I decided I need to enter those doors alone. And that, of course, be nervous...

Mark B: Sure.

Randi S: I went directly to the door, and then I, poof! Went around the corner, instead of going in.

Mark B: We hear these stories a lot.

Randi S: But then I went in-

Mark B: They were meeting in church at that point?

Randi S: No. They were meeting in what we call the Gay House of Oslo, where the main lesbian and gay association have their offices. And when you enter the front door of the house, it's a city house in the middle of downtown Oslo, when you enter the stairs and go into the house, to the right was a café, and to the left were some old apartments, actually. But the big one, and that was the place where the Open Church Group priests would have their services on Friday evening. And they would turn the chapel, turn the rooms into a chapel once a week. Putting up pictures and cross and the

things that were important to them as a church group. So I opened the door to this room, expecting to see only strangers. And the moment, actually, and this is true, the moment I set my foot into this room, I just hear somebody call, "Randi! What are you doing here?" And I thought--oh God, what is happening? So this was a guy that I had studied together with, the management studies. And the first thing he says, you know, "Oh, you know, Erik," another friend of ours, "is in there." So it turned out that I was definitely not alone. So that was, in a way, the start for me to get in touch with faith and with Christianity again.

Mark B: Good, good. I was going to ask what happened to your faith life in the meantime.

Randi S: Because for a while, as I said, I had been a little distant to that. And for me, when I was thinking I want to check out if there is something more into me really being a lesbian, where do I go? So for me, it was natural to seek, to the Christian group somehow. And for me, that was really a new way of experiencing spirituality and hearing and discussing the Bible, a totally different perspective. And for me that was, I think, what made me come home again to a different church home, a different religious or spiritual home.

Mark B: Okay. So what else happened at this point in your life? So you discovered the Open Church Group. You're still in the searching phase?

Randi S: Yes, yes. And after, I also went, after not too long, I was elected into the board of the Open Church Group. But I didn't stay there too long, because that's when I made the decision to study journalism. And then I moved for two years to the west coast of Norway. So I was still engaged in the Open Church Group, but it's an Oslo-based church.

Mark B: It's an Oslo-based church. Okay.

Randi S: So being on the board was not so practical. But I kept in contact. And I always went there when I was in Oslo. So I lived for two years on the west coast, and studying journalism. And then, in '96, which was actually the first, no, that was before I went to Stavanger to study journalism, Open Church Group was the host of the European Forum.

Mark B: Okay.

Randi S: And they asked me to represent them at the Annual General Meeting, and to engage, and in this I was very curious and interested, so I went to the pre-conference for women and there I met Kerstin Söderblom from Germany, and of course, many others... now I'm probably going to start to cry a little...

Mark B: That's okay. So this is in Oslo, and this is the Forum gathering when you're in Oslo, yes. So that was a very significant experience in your life.

Randi S: Definitely. Definitely. I met my partner through ten years..And just get myself thinking-

Mark B: Stop the tape? [pause] Your first experience of the Forum, and what that was like in Oslo.

Randi S: It was, I think we were, it was the first big women's pre-conference. So there were quite a lot of women, which was very empowering and encouraging. But I also met the situation in the Forum that the women felt that they were not well enough represented on the board, and that many groups just sent men. And so I was saying, isn't it possible to do something about that? You know, to, for instance, to put into the statutes that the board should have at least 50 percent women, and that the groups should send 50 percent women. So somebody told no, no, because the statutes say this and that. And I said, "Well, can't we change the statutes?" So a lot of the women agreed on this, and we started to discuss it, and we took it up on this AGM.

Mark B: How did it go? What happened?

Randi S: Well, we were able to get through that the board should have at least 50 percent women. It had to follow first the normal rules of changing the statutes, but it was possible. So it was done. To get the groups to commit to always sending 50 percent women was not that easy, because some of the groups used reasons, 'Oh, we have so few women in our group, so that would be impossible.'

Mark B: Or don't have enough money to send people...

Randi S: Yes. But at least it was, I know the first impression of the AGM, as we call it here in our general meeting, was that it was fairly male oriented though. So it was, maybe kind of provoked me and several of the other women to say, okay, you'll have to go here. And then, of course, many women had been engaged earlier, too. So it was not that, nothing had happened on that. That would be a wrong interpretation. But it was still a kind of male-dominated in the way it was done with us. And we wanted to have some more fun and feminism.. [laughs]

Mark B: Do you remember some of the key women leaders at that time? Do you remember, other names come to mind of other women who were among, some strong colleagues then?

Randi S: I mean, on the board you had Christina Öquist, who was a Swedish, is a Swedish woman. I think, though, that maybe there had not been enough female support around really also maybe help her to change things or I don't know. But I mean, like Kerstin Soederblom definitely, I think we found each other through the engagement in this. Hilde Raastad, who is also here. She's a theologian and a good friend of mine from Norway. She was the first open lesbian to get ordained in Norway. And I mean, she was not central in the Forum work, but for me at this time, it was an important friendship also. But she was active in the Open Church Group and also at the European Forum conference. For me, I was fairly new in that situation, so as well as the new people that I didn't know.

Mark B: Okay. So you had your first Forum experience. And then?

Randi S: Yeah. Well, Kerstin and me, we had what we called or what we thought was a conference affair. [laughter] And it actually ended up with us being together for ten years, and also having several years of those as an open lesbian couple in the minister's house in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. So I used to say that becoming a lesbian brought me closer to church, actually to the sense that I became a minister's wife in a conservative parish.

[laughs]

Mark B: So when you were meeting Kerstin, what was she doing then? What was she doing?

Randi S: Actually she had just finished her doctoral thesis. She was delivering it, I think, a couple of days before going to Oslo. And everybody had told her that she was crazy to go to Oslo in the middle of all this. But she had set her mind and she wanted to go there. So she and two other friends came from Labrystheia, the German lesbian group, came with the ferry to Oslo to be at this conference. And when after she had finished her thesis, doctoral thesis, she was going to have two years of practical parish work in Göttingen, a town in Germany. And this is exactly, when she started that, I started in my journalist studies. Also for two years. So after having had that affair, yes, I called to congratulate her on her birthday, which was just I think a week after the Forum or something. And then she invited me to come to a party in Germany in, I think, July or something. And I went there and, I mean, it ended up in us-

Mark B: You could tell that there was-

Randi S: -carrying on, we didn't call it a relationship at that time, but carrying on kind of an affair or, you know, getting to know each other.

Mark B: An exciting time together.

Randi S: Exciting time, yes, yes.

Mark B: So she's in Germany, but you're off in journalism school in Norway.

Randi S: On the west coast in Norway. Yes, yes. And so, after a couple of months where we also didn't see each other for a long time, we decided that we wanted to make this more steady. And we wanted to be a couple. We had this long distance relationship for two years. And then I finished my journalism studies and she finished her two years of practical work there, and she had a chance to have one year abroad, being paid from the church, have an international experience. So we were discussing whether she should come to Norway, or if we both wanted to go someplace else. So we ended up spending that year together in New York.

Mark B: Oh, okay.

Randi S: Where she was working for the Lutheran World...

Mark B: Service. Lutheran World Service?

Randi S: No, the Lutheran World Federation. Yes, yes. To the UN. They have their office to the UN. And I was there to write. To finish a thesis that I had to do to finish my studies, and then to do creative writing. And to have kind of a sabbatical year, too, connected to that. But we also both took part in a big conference at the UN in spring '99, which was within this year. It was

the planning conference for Beijing +5, this women, worldwide women conferences. And we focused on women and health. And so we went into working groups, trying to get them to have focus also on lesbian women and health. And specifically also mental health. And we actually had the pre of having some positive people in the Lutheran World Federation's office, giving us the permission to represent them there, also doing this work. So I remember one day Mary Robinson, who was then the human rights commissioner in Geneva for the UN. And she was giving a speech, a workshop, and I remember standing and asking her a question from the Lutheran, representing the Lutheran World Federation. And asking then if she was going to put emphasis on lesbian and gay people when it comes to human rights work. And I remember there were several women afterwards coming over and saying to my big surprise that this was very seldom raised. And I had been so little into this kind of work until then that I was really surprised that it was not raised. And I didn't see it a reason for not raising it. I was just provoked that it was-

Mark B: This was like in 1999?

Randi S: '99. Yeah. I mean, of course, for other people that had been working there, it has probably been a normal subject to discuss, different topics....

Mark B: Right, right.

Randi S: But exactly in that context, it was tricky. And then we felt then the challenge when the work that a Filipino woman who wanted to include sexual, or we wanted her to include sexual orientation in the list of different women who are especially exposed for discrimination and to not getting the health care that they need. And we wrote the text together with her. And at the end, all the text was kept, except they had taken out the words "sexual orientation." So that was this first encounter with how difficult it can be, and how difficult it had been for many people through the years when I wasn't even aware that I was a lesbian. And in many ways, I'm really, really grateful to all those people who have gone that road for so many years, and making it much easier for me to just become a lesbian without really having trouble with that. Because for me, I actually never experienced it as difficult to accept I was a lesbian when I first understood what it was. I only had trouble with the homophobia that I discovered slowly but surely.

Mark B: Right. Good. So you and Kerstin had a year in New York. And you worked with the United Nations.

Randi S: Yes. Yes. Discovering, walking across New York every weekend. And losing a lot of weight because just running around. [laughs]

Mark B: It's the life in Manhattan. Yes. Yes.

Randi S: But having the time to do what I was really interested in, curious, and doing roller blades in Central Park, and Park Slope up in Brooklyn, where we were living “Dyke Slope.”

Mark B: Yes, yes. I know that area.

Randi S: Yeah. So that was a very energetic year. And after that year, Kerstin went back to Germany, and I decided also to try to live in Germany for a while, see if that would work. And that’s when Kerstin and I got the minister’s position in a conservative parish in Frankfurt am Main. And I remember the bishop, or what they in English would call bishop, in that area. She said that-

[End Track One. Begin Track Two.]

Mark B: ...bishop’s talking to Kerstin.

Randi S: Yes. Now Kerstin, in her group of the theology studies, she had been one of the very, very best students, and she was the only one getting a trial period when she got her job. Of course because she was a lesbian, and because she also insisted on she and her, she and me, living together in the minister’s house in the parish. So the parish council, they voted on this. And they did have a majority for giving us this three-month trial period. So I mean, we did it, but they did not put up any huge posters saying the

lesbians have moved next to you. Coming soon to a place near you.

[laughs] No, and I remember one little thing which has nothing to do with lesbians, but just this concept of going to this whole new world-when she told me on the phone that we were going to live in this specific parish, and she was talking about we were going to live in the minister's house. And in my head, as a Norwegian, a minister's house is a white, wooden house out in the countryside with no neighbors, and a church like a hundred meters, two hundred meters away. So this is my picture. I said, "Are there any other people around?" She says, "It's in the middle of the main street in this part of the city." "Oh, okay." [laughs] So that, in a way, is also a picture of how I experienced living there. It was very visible. It was not possible to just be there living your own life and not sharing that with others. Because we got comments like, "Oh, we see that you have mowed your lawn today. And we saw you out in the garden." All these kinds of things. Not badly meant, but showing that people were following what's happening, our daily steps...

Mark B: So you had a three month trial period.

Randi S: Yes, yes, we have. And in that period, there was a group of people from the parish who were very upset. And they came from the CVJM, it's the YMCA in Germany, but they are fairly conservative in Germany. Some people there had a family member in the church council, a young woman. And they tried to press her to try to get us out of the parish, because they

didn't want to have a lesbian couple. But there were, in that period, we had also gotten to know several other people, and the parish had gotten to know Kerstin as a minister. And very many of them also liked her very much. And she is a good minister. I mean, she is. And she's nice and friendly. So we experienced once as a symbol of those who were supportive, it came from a group which very for us was a little surprising with our own prejudices. It was, she went to the senior group. Especially women eighty and above in their age. And one day she came there, they gathered around her, with their hats and they would say to her, you know, 'Frau Dr. Söderblom' which is the very official way of talking to the minister, Mrs. Dr. and then the last name, they say, 'We hear that there are some people who want to create trouble and want to kick you out. But if you really get trouble, then come to us, and we will march on the street for you.'

Mark B: [laughs] Uh huh. Wonderful.

Randi S: So I had in my mind this image of these old women walking down the main street with their umbrellas or something, and 'Don't mess with our minister.' Fortunately, it didn't have to happen. So after the three months, the church council decided against two votes that they would keep her and keep us. So at this point of time, it was mainly the church council and some of the conservative people that were very active there who had

realized we were lesbians. Of course, it was not like the whole parish knew, or something like that. But on the ordination day, before that, we Kerstin and I discussed how we would do it if we're not wanted, because we just realized slowly but surely, or if we just wanted to have it done once, and be finished with it, in a way. And we also discussed it a little bit with the bishop. Or actually what Kerstin asked the bishop was if our idea would be okay for her. Which would be that I would give a speech at this ordination celebration. Not in the church, but afterwards, at the reception. And the bishop said, "Well, it's not normal that the partner of the minister gives a speech. But if you want to." And so I was struggling with it, and struggling with the approach. But we decided that we wanted to do it like that. So I addressed the parish, there were like two hundred people there or something. And speaking to them and to Kerstin, with my greetings to them, congratulating them, and also taking up the aspect of being her partner, and of this privacy, or this being visible, and you know, addressing the thoughts of hoping that we can be a good mutual relationship, and that I hope that I could also get close to them. And also taking up this aspect of work contra private life and joy. I remember telling them a little story about Winnie the Pooh, where he's asked whether he wants milk, you know, for me then symbolizing work and everyday life, or if he wanted honey, more for me in that setting private life and the

joy and the sexuality, everything as being a lesbian. And so Winnie the Pooh says, "Yes, both." And after that day, actually we did get a lot of positive reactions. We were really afraid what would be the reactions.

Mark B: Of course.

Randi S: But there were so many people coming up to us and thanking for that, and saying it was much better to know, to know it. And for us, it was much better like that, even though it was tough. But the minister, who was a colleague of Kerstin, who welcomed her to the parish. He wrote an article in the parish newspaper, magazine afterwards, telling about this ordination and I remember he wrote only one sentence saying that Frau Söderblom's Norwegian partner-Randi-was also welcomed to the parish. And they had a photo of the two of us, and the friends of us who were there. And this 'Kransekake', a very typical Norwegian cake that Norwegian friends of mine brought there as a gift for this day. So the cake was you know, on this photo, and the three of us. And just saying the same under this photo, that we had this cake on the ordination where also the partner was welcomed. And after that, he got an anonymous email. And the email said, "Well, now I'm shocked. This goes...crosses all borders. Now I have to read in the parish newspaper what the minister does in bed?" So I was amazed about the fantasy of this parish, reading all that out of this one sentence. So, well, that was the stuff. [laughs]

Mark B: So okay, so you're there. And so how long were you and Kerstin in the parish, then?

Randi S: For four years.

Mark B: For four years. Okay.

Randi S: Yes. She had a possibility to be there five years. It was this five-year position. But she really wanted to go into the university work. And she got the chance after those four years. And in the meantime, for me it was, I mean, it was exciting to be there, it was interesting. But it was also a special situation. I had come from one country to another, not really knowing the language very well. I'd had it in school twenty years ago. So it was a process for me to find, in a way, you can lose your identity, in a way, when you don't have the local language. One thing is to buy bread, but in social situations, family, everything, you feel you're in a way back to childhood, because you can't really participate in the same way. So language, which had always been a strength for me, was suddenly my weakness, in a way. But I started to learn German, or relearn German. Kerstin and me, we had been using English as our common language for those two first years. And from the day I moved into the minister's house, we decided on using German as our common language, except when we were quarreling. Because that's unfair. That's too unfair. [laughter] So but I

mean, this changing countries, changing language, also living, in a way, on Kerstin's workplace, in her setting, everything rotating around the life in the parish, I really got, after some years, the need of having a group of my own. Like this, a room of your own. And so I halfway moved to Berlin, I found an apartment there, and went back and forth for a while. And that was a period in my life where I had the urge to break out of a lot of things, because I think I felt a little captured there.

Mark B: You did? Were you in any kind of lesbian or Christian support network beyond or were you OK?

Randi S: Yes. Yes. I mean, I was still having contact through the Open Church Group in Norway. But I also got engaged in Labrystheia, the German network of, it used to be the German network of lesbian theology students. Then it was widened to also lesbian theologians. Then I widened it to also lesbians who are interested in lesbian theologians. [laughs] It was for, I've always been interested in theology, even though it's not my subject, in that sense, for me it was very interesting to work with them and feminist theology and church politics. So I liked it very much in that group. It was a local group, and then they have meetings once a year, twice a year, for all the country.

Mark B: So maybe we want to go back to the Forum now. So I assume you stayed, you and Kerstin stayed involved with the Forum through this time.

Randi S: Yes, we did. We did. I was, let's see. I was, this period in the minister's house, to set the period, was from 1999, after New York, til 2003. And during that time, we came to the Forum conferences ever year, except the year we were in New York. And in 2001, I was elected onto the board of the European Forum. I was the secretary of the board. And working together with, especially Rose Marie, who was a treasurer, we worked together to that, what we called "portfolio project," which was to try to make the European Forum more professional in the way of having papers showing what tasks that different board members should do when during the year, the planning process, the working process. And also in a way, the same for the people arranging the Forum conferences to have checklists, what to do when, and what do they have to make sure is included, and so on. And for the chairpersons of the annual general meeting. To try to make it a package, so to help, as it being a tool for board members so that they should not use more time than necessary on those kind of things, and rather be more free to do political work. That was our tool on the board. And for two years, I was secretary. But the year after I entered the board, that was the conference in 2002 in Basel, we had started to play with the idea of gathering, writing and gathering our stories of lesbians, of

Christian lesbians. And so at the conference in Basel, in Switzerland, Kerstin and me did a writing workshop for the women, where we challenged them to start to write their stories there and then, doing some brainstorming and ideas and how to try to start a story. Some people would paint and some would start to write. You know, finding their way of telling their stories. So we decided that we would try to check out who else could be interested in telling their stories and contributing and seeing if it would be a potential for maybe publishing those stories. That was intriguing, you know.

Mark B: Of course.

Randi S: We don't know how to organize this, but it's a dream. And the year after, in 2003, in the Netherlands, when we had the conference there, we had decided that we wanted to do this. So I said that I would take the chance of starting this project, not knowing if we had the money, in a way, taking the risk of trusting that Forum and the members would be engaged enough that we would all help fundraising for the book. And also for them paying a little for doing this because if we wanted to get it done, then we had to really put time and energy into it. So I said, I can do that. Instead of looking for freelance tasks otherwise, because this is important. But then had to find it...but I take the risk that I start doing it without us having money. And we made it. I mean, we were able to raise the necessary

money for at least, of course, pay for the costs, paying for some work and...

Mark B: So did you collect the stories yourself? Or other people were collecting and you edited?

Randi S: No, I mainly collected the stories. In Netherlands and in Sweden, the women's groups did the collecting. But then all other countries I was searching through the networks, and through contacts. Especially Eastern Europe was, of course, a challenge. Because there are not so many lesbian Christian groups there, and not easy to find. So I often, it was, Internet and email has revolution, revolutionized this work. The book would never have been possible if it hadn't been for that. So I spent a lot of time searching for gay guys, who would then lead me to either Christian gay guys, or to lesbians in general. And they would lead me to trying to think out, people could, or women who could be interested. And we placed invitation for stories on Internet pages everywhere. And saying also that they could write in their own language, because we didn't want to exclude people who could not tell us theirs in English, because that would give us a very narrow sample if we would do that. So suddenly I would receive like stories, I would receive a text in a language which I did not understand. And I would say, is this a story, or have they sent me their shopping list? I have no idea what this is. So I had to from, sometimes

they would write where they came from, what country, and sometimes I would just see from the email address. So I would try to find somebody who could translate.

Mark B: Translate.

Randi S: And it turned out to be stories every time. So nobody was sending me just junk. It was...they were stories. So they came from Hungary, Russian, in Spanish, in French...Polish.

Mark B: How many stories, you ended up getting how many stories to publish?

Randi S: We did publish not all the stories we got, but we published a very big deal, a big part of it. Because what we wanted, we didn't want it to be a literary, what can I say, high quality literature, that's not what it's about. It's about being a really tough document showing that there are Christian lesbians everywhere. In all churches, in all countries. So this was, we did take away some stories where we thought no, this is not good enough, or this is on the side of the subject.

Mark B: Okay.

Randi S: So we ended up publishing ninety-five stories from twenty-six countries. And there are Catholic women, Lutheran, other protestant women, Orthodox, even one woman who has been a Christian who has converted

to Islam. Yeah. So we had very many different perspectives on spirituality. And some women had left the church. Some who were ordained as ministers. Some who were sitting in the rows, never being active in the church. So there was all kinds, type of stories.

Mark B: Some reflections on the impact doing this project had on you, just in terms of personal impact that-

Randi S: It was, for me, it was a very, I was living and breathing that project for two years. Even though I was sometimes totally exhausted, it was, every time I got a story that spoke to me, and from a new country, I was really, I was euphoric. Jumping up, "yes!" And some of the stories also really, really touched me. Like I remember, for instance, a story from Hungary, a woman, young woman, telling that she had been on a radio show where she outed herself. And she was afraid that her mother would be shocked, and really struggling with this, and she didn't know the consequences of this. And it was a call-in show from the radio. And suddenly there was a voice having called in, and it was her mother calling into the show, because she had accidentally heard that program. And in spite of them having a little trouble later, because it was not that easy, in that radio show she, the mother said that, "You'll always be my daughter;" and, "I love you." And it was...yeah, I'll start crying again... cried., cried my eyes out. Yes....

Mark B: Okay. So you were co-president of the Forum for two years.

Randi S: That was actually, I did that project from...I was a secretary until 2003. And I left the board, 2003, to do this project, yes. And then the main correcting of the stories and the manuscript had been finished, but the not finished in print by the conference in Stockholm in 2004. And that's when I ran for the board again as president, as co-president. And so I was co-president from 2004 to 2006, when I again left the board to concentrate on the Eastern European training project.

Mark B: Anything, reflections on the couple of years as co-president? What did you see happening there? Or ways that it impacted you?

Randi S: Yeah. The first thing I did as president was that I was invited to France, to the David & Jonathan, which is the French Forum group. And they, of course, only speak French in their meetings. You know I told you about these three months in France. And I had known kind of at the time, but that was then already, you know, almost ten years ago now. [laughs] And so it was, that was for me really a challenge again, being there without understanding anything. And having to ask about everything. 'Where am I going to be now, and what's happening?' And I did a speech. It was a really strong experience as president to come there and see the engagement, and also from the women who had been lacking, at the Forum conferences,

very often the women from France. They're a big group, and they were also interested in the book, because of course I could bring the book, and being president at the same time, so it was concrete. Yeah. So that was very, that was a very nice start of that period. Otherwise, I think three things I would emphasize. I mean, the process of getting closer to ILGA, ILGA Europe, was interesting for me because for me it's, I see that our opponents, very often they work together. You know, the Christian people, the church people, and the conservative Christian politicians. They work together. So I think lesbians and gays also have to make sure that we work together, Christian organizations and more political organizations, so that we are as strong as the others are in covering two areas, in a way, which are linked...

Mark B: I'll just say it for the record, ILGA is the International Lesbian & Gay Association.

Randi S: Yes. Yes. And this is the European part, in Europe. But I also went to the ILGA world conference in Geneva in 2006. And meeting there a lot of lesbian and gay activists from all over the world, especially one Muslim man who is an openly gay imam from South Africa. And of course I used the chance, as an engaged journalist, too, to make an interview with him, which was published in a Norwegian lesbian and gay magazine. And then

the ball kept rolling a little. In Norway there among students there, so last year he was invited to a big official conference in Norway, talking about how he sees homosexuality in the light of the Koran and Islam. Of course, challenging a lot of the conservative Muslims in Norway. So this. you see the lines that go there. Also at that conference, the ILGA world people, or IGLA Europe people, too, they set up a meeting with the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief—to have some people representing Islam, some people representing Judaism, and some, or me, representing Christianity. So we had a meeting with her at the UN there. And talking about freedom of religion from our perspective. Like emphasizing that freedom of religion is not the same as freedom to discriminate.

Mark B: Yes.

Randi S: And also that freedom of religion is also often this for us fake wrapping of prejudices that you just present as a freedom of religion. And also that we have a freedom of religion, a right to freedom of religion, which is sometimes taken away from us by word from certain church leaders saying that we can't be really yours, whether it's like according to Christianity or other religions. So that was a very, also very strong meeting, I felt. And challenging. [laughs]

Mark B: That meeting, where was that meeting?

Randi S: In Geneva.

Mark B: In Geneva. Okay.

Randi S: And then the research, the other thing I would mention, the external things was the World Council of Churches in Brazil, in Porto Alegre, where we met.

Mark B: Where we met. Yes. Just say a little about the preparation for that, what your intentions were.

Randi S: Yes. Our intention was, one specific was to have a workshop there, which we applied for and were able, were allowed to have, on homosexuality and the Bible or faith. And in general, otherwise to be there and take part and being visible and speaking with people. Just making sure that they know that we were there. But I remember when I arrived at the airport in Porto Alegre. And this person from the conference was there, and giving out these badges that we had to put on our chests with our names, and then in big letters, you know, "European Forum of Lesbian and Gay Christian Groups." And I thought okay, no way to stay in the closet. [laughter] So we decided to just make the best out of it. So we put a rainbow ribbon on it to make sure that it would be seen. But I didn't know what I could expect or

what would be awaiting me. So I was a little nervous. It was this heart thumping when I saw that badge. And uh oh, how will this be. It was good. We were a delegation of four people from the European Forum. I was as president, and Brenda Harrison was the delegation coordinator. And then it was Kerstin Söderblom. And then they had invited Matti from Latvia as a trainee. He was training youth in Forum. And he was going to be, take part in this Eastern Europe Training Project, which we were starting at that time. So we saw this as also a part of a training. And then like people from MCC and other churches from other parts of the world. And it was, that, I think, was a very good thing. We had, we stayed in meetings discussing what happened, and coordinating some work. And maybe the most important to feel that we belong to a bigger group. You know, you gather, and then you spread out, do your networking and talking, and then you can get back together and gain strength.

Mark B: My impression was that that was a significant accomplishment for the Forum. Because several people have mentioned here just the significance of that participation, the World Council of Churches, in terms of what that meant to the Forum.

Randi S: Yeah. The Forum had sent a delegation to Harare...

Mark B: Okay.

Randi S: And I think, I know that, for instance, Brenda Harrison was there. And I think, I mean, she will have to tell the difference between the conferences, but still, I think at least from what I can evaluate, it was, this conference happened in a time where the Forum had grown stronger in a way, at least from my perspective. And so also, you know, going there, feeling that you had a big, strong group in your back, when you were representing there, and also coming back to a network, which in a way is carrying you. And also, we met a lot of people who were, you know, some skeptical and some positive. All or most people open to talk with us and turning out to be surprisingly positive in comparison to what I had expected, in a way. And also people from churches that are not in themselves open and positive. But we did have one of them, I remember one of the gay guys in the group, he said that he had had one experience on a bus going to the meeting, they were transporting with the bus from hotel to the meeting area, the campus, the university. And he had accidentally been sitting close to an Orthodox priest. And they had somehow gotten into a discussion or a conversation. And the priest had said, no, the gay guy had said, "I see that there are still big challenges for the churches when it comes to discrimination, for instance?" And the priest said, "Yes, I agree with you on that." And he was a little surprised, the gay guy. And he asked, "What are you thinking of?" "I was thinking about women." So that would be something

to do there. And then the gay guy said, "Well, from my perspective, I see the problem or the challenge of lesbian and gay people in the churches." And then the Orthodox priest just looked straight ahead and he said, "Oh, well, lesbian and gay people, they only deserve a burning place in hell." So you have these, you know, quite extreme experiences. And it was a strange experience to walk around the campus and meeting so many of these kind of these high church people in their outfits and their sticks, going there. And it was, sometimes I got to be almost bad consciousness, because I felt that they must have been strange creatures or something. And then I start to thinking, they are human beings, too. How do they feel when I stare at them, you know, and take a photo of them because they look so strange. So it was also a learning process of meeting people that you only see in photos, and that you even see as your opponents or your, sometimes your 'enemies'. And one situation I remember as very special to me was in one of the evening meetings in the tent where we had services. And at one point in one specific service, the person on the podium, he or she, I'm trying to remember, said, or asked everyone to turn to the person sitting behind you, and bless that person. And I remember, when I was sitting there hearing that, I remembered the picture in my head of this Orthodox priest coming in and sitting down behind me. So I knew. Oh, what do I do now? And at first I was hesitating, thinking, can I do that?

What do I do? And then I just suddenly realized that I'm actually being told that I am free to give a blessing to this person. I don't own the blessing, and he doesn't either. And of course, he can run away if he sees my batch and, you know. [laughter] But I just turned around, and I did it. And that was, for me, I almost don't remember turning. It was just this moment of realizing that the blessing is there to be used. And I am also allowed to do the blessing. So for me, that was very strong.

Mark B: Yeah. Excellent. Well, thank you. So, and then maybe just if you want to talk a bit about the Eastern European Project. I know you played a significant role in forming that and leading that. Do you want to talk about the seeds out of which that developed?

Randi S: Well, the reason why we developed this project was exactly the, realizing that our opponents very often used religious language when they argued against us being churches, but also when they argue against the laws, politics, for instance, the EU directives on anti-discrimination laws having to include lesbian and gay people. The right to assembly, to have gay parades. The, you know, they're worried about partnership, civil partnership unions. All these things. And very often, they use theologically based, or religiously based arguments. Whether they are politicians or church people. So we were thinking, okay, we lesbian and gay activists, we have to learn to speak their language. Because if we only

either just concentrate on church, and the political lesbian and gay people just speak 'human rights language', then it's like speaking in Swedish when you are trying to change the attitudes of German people. It doesn't really work out. So we were thinking we had to somehow get the people together across these church, Christian and political borders, and try to develop something which interacts here, so that it's possible to discuss also political issues on a theological or a religious basis, but seen with our eyes, from our perspective. So we started to develop a plan for this, how it could be done, and to see if we could raise money for it. And I accidentally bumped into a woman from 'Kerkinactie', which is a Protestant church or organization in the Netherlands. And they had financially supported our group book 'Let Our Voices Be Heard.'

Mark B: Okay.

Randi S: And I met her accidentally at a conference in Budapest. And we talked together, and I told her about our thoughts about this project. And she said, 'Why don't you send us an application?' And so, in a hurry we finished this project plan, and applied in the other, long rounds, back and forth, you know, discussing indicators, how can we measure if this is a good project or not, how do we do this, and they will ask questions. It was a really good help, too, to develop. And so they decided to give us fifteen thousand Euros for this project. So we said, okay, let's go, we started.

Mark B: You started when? So you had started in-

Randi S: It started in, it started, the planning process and this first application that was in the autumn of 2005. And then we continued to develop the content, and the search for who should be trainees, who should be, take part in this project, this training program. And looking for money. So we also applied to the Norwegian government, to the State Department responsible for equality and anti-discrimination. And so in two different rounds, they also gave us support. So they gave us twenty-one thousand euros, which is also a lot of money.

Mark B: Significant.

Randi S: And then we got a lot of support from lesbian and gay groups, lesbian and gay people, and also having, for instance, MCC paying some of the costs for Florin from Romania, which we very much wanted to have in our course. So ILGA Europe sponsored some parts here and there. So we had a lot of different support. And so what we chose concretely was to put our training modules, we had three totally, put them in time and geography close to the Forum, two Forum conferences and one ILGA Europe conference in order for the participants also to get more into these organizations, you know, network, get friends, get contacts. And also for the networks, the benefit from their experience. And so we had nine

participants from six Eastern European countries. From Latvia, from Moldova, from Poland, from Romania, Serbia, and Bosnia Herzegovina. And so during 2006 and spring 2007, we had these three modules.

Mark B: So each person did participate in all those modules?

Randi S: Yeah. A couple of them. Yes, that was the start.

Mark B: The plan. That's the plan.

Randi S: Yes. A couple of them had to be away for one conference. We set a minimum that they had to participate in at least two. But of course you have to go away for a week together there. And sometimes it's really not possible to get away from work or studies or illness. So all of them had at least two of the modules, and several of them had all three. So there we have, in the content, we focused on different ways to read the Bible. The traditional way, and more a contextual, hermeneutical way. And also on creating more LGBT freedom of religion, trying to make people aware of the trust that it's also possible to read your own stories into the Bible stories. And that you can create. That religion or theology, it's not something which has to be done once and for all, that nobody can add or change. Because that gives self-confidence. And that's what very many activists need to be able to work, to find. And also we focused on the political side of it, how the church or conservative politicians use their

influence in politics to stop the EU directives to properly implement it in their countries. So we worked with that, and we had role plays in different situations like that, where they had to play either from a conservative side, or from the LGBT side, clashing and what we played as TV debates. Both, for instance, once they had to discuss whether the local LGBT organization would be allowed to arrange a gay pride where you have a conservative mayor, conservative church person, and so on, really going into a clash here. And other times it was more about blessing and partnership law for lesbian and gay people. And we tried once to do the role playing with getting, being honest in moderating, being nice and giving them their fair amount of time, and treating them mutual. And then the other role play, we would learn how to be tough, keep them under TV moderating where you have to train to fight for their time. And meeting with the program leader and moderator who had seemed like-

[End Track Two. Begin Track Three.]

Randi S: And we also, one part of the training course was also to focus on hate crimes, and how to report religiously-based hate crimes, or hate crimes in religious contexts, to the UN, to the OSCE, to the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe. I mean, we did not dig deep into it, but just trying to make a forum that they can use and be aware that they can report these things. That it's not necessary to accept that what a priest

says from a pulpit is only a sermon, can also be a hate speech. So it's kind of awareness making.

Mark B: So the project ended up-

Randi S: Well, yeah, we had the last module in May last year.

Mark B: Oh, last year. Okay.

Randi S: Forum conference in Strasburg. And after that, of course it has been a lot of report work, accounting work, you know, all these things that are not so fun.

Mark B: Of course, no fun. But your evaluation, what did the Forum learn out of that? What was really positive? What maybe do you want to do differently next time? Are there more plans going on from this?

Randi S: Well I think for the Forum, and also for me personally, I think one of the things we have learned is that this work, it might sometimes seem a little theoretical because it involves talking about arguments and how to angle things. But to the people who are taking part in the training, this is about life and death. It's about their daily life. And about living in a country, in a church, where they really are not allowed to be themselves, and really harassed. And they hear in another workshop about the project, we also had Leah, one of the women from Moldova, who participated in the

training, telling this from her perspective, and also showing how that had given courage to her and to her small group in Moldova to start, to dare to bring spirituality into their social relations, and try to start a Christian group together. And of course, at first it's about making people stronger and giving them self-confidence before you can start to go out and act in a society or a church, that really build up self-confidence. And I think, because in Forum, it's very important to see that, or be aware that, what for us is self evident, for very many of us, we are used to living in churches or societies that might be conservative. But still, it's a totally different life. And we take so many things for granted, which for many of these people, is not at all self-evident. It's actually a dream that they don't even dare to dream. And so we really are convinced about the need of it. But the challenge for us as you confirm is that we are an organization that is purely based on free work...not paid work.

Mark B: Volunteer.

Randi S: We don't have any employees. Right. only volunteers. Yeah. And of course it's a challenge to go into big projects like the two that we had done the last years. When people had to work, they had different things that they're engaged in. They work in their home groups, too. And then, you know, to try to do these on a big scale. It is a challenge.

Mark B: It's a challenge.

Randi S: So right now we are discussing how can we do this? How can we use what we have learned this far and we want, we would like to try to turn the material that we have into a training manual booklet that can be used for other people who would like to do, either to learn themselves or to do training courses. And also, for the trainees to be able to use some with their colleagues in their countries. So it's kind of building on this trainer/trainer concept. And also on mutual learning concept. Because it's not like we have been teaching them all things; they've been teaching us a lot, too. They're telling us their experiences. So this project, it's Kerstin Söderblom and I, we have been developing and doing this. And I have been doing it full-time for periods as a project manager. And for us personally, we can't go on doing that in this scale, so it's a challenge, now to see what can the European Forum as a whole do out of this, and how can we use this in the future. So that's the cross point where we are now.

Mark B: Where you are right now. Wonderful. Good. Other, this is actually, thank you very much. This is great information, stories. Other things from your own life, Forum, that you haven't shared that you might mention?

Randi S: Well, I think one thing which I would like to say for me, this whole process, it has in a way not only been an engagement. It has almost

become my life, in a way. At least, the work, content-wise, part of my life. Although I'm working in Norway by the equality and anti-discrimination ombuds office.

Mark B: Okay. You've been there how long?

Randi S: Since I moved from Germany to Norway after nine years in Germany, I moved to Norway last year. So in the period after that, I have been working for that office. It's a project work, so it's doing projects and then taking a break and then we'll see again. But what has been important to me during this period where it has been such a big part of my life is that I feel I have developed very much myself from feeling insecure, not really, this being a new field for me, and not really knowing the content. Not really being a very big feminist, because growing up in Norway, you don't become a feminist. You just take things as they are, in a way, because it is fairly good. Although I see now from the perspective of this ombuds office all the, still, the discrimination that is going on, even in a country like Norway. But it's for me, it has really been a proof of the power, power of working through a network, the power of commitment, of stubbornness. And maybe most of all, the power of trust, of the trust that if you start something, it is possible to succeed. Although, I mean, many times I've felt that I want to..curse the European Forum and throw the whole thing away. [laughs] Because of course you have everyday life where it's too much.

But still, deep in me really it has really changed my life, or formed my life. And in a way, it has made me very aware of my image of God, in a way, has also been formed in this sense. Although I feel that if I draw a link to my childhood, I feel I grew up with a picture of God in the same way as what my parents always, represented for me that they would love me whatever would happen. And that formed, also, my image of God. So for me, it has never been that I had an image of God of being a punishing god or a very dogmatic god. It was more a loving god. But I have also learned through this work to experience God as a fighting god, a god fighting against, it sometimes seems a little strange to say feeling that God is fighting on your side. Because you can all maybe claim that God is fighting on your side; it's what you react to what other people do, but it's this feeling of being helped through the work, too. So it has done something with my trust and my faith also in God, I would say.

Mark B: Any dreams, visions, things you're looking forward to as you look ahead? That you want to talk about.

Randi S: Well actually my personal dream is also a, a prime personal dream is to be able to publish a book which I'm writing on privately, which is based on the years that Kerstin and I had in the minister's house in Germany. But where I've tried to use, or tell that story with humor and also with tears, where that is the realistic way. But, because for me, that all represents

living on, crossing borders. Literally and also in constant expectations, roles..all this. And those are important questions to me. So that is somehow my personal thing, which I also feel if I could make it, and if I'm able to do it in a good way, it could also be a contribution somehow. And it would be my dream, because in a way I would like to be able to also live from writing. But that is a big challenge. [laughs]

Mark B: That's a big challenge.

Randi S: And for Forum, I think that my dream is that more and more people in the Forum should make or will feel inspired that we all can work together and take part of the work and also reach out and work together with other religious groups, not just Christian groups, but interreligious or Muslim groups, Jewish groups. We have had workshops together with Muslims and Jewish, on for instance, ILGA Europe conferences. And also in Norway, I'm working fairly close with a group for lesbian and gay migrants. And many of those are Muslims. So for me, these parts link together. There are so many paths, and so many possibilities now that it's more a matter of having both, for example, for the organization and the strength to go on and continue that work.

Mark B: Good. Thank you for taking the time and sharing your story. It's very rich and valuable information. Thanks, Randi.

Randi S: Thank you.

[End Interview.]