



CUNY Digital History Archive
Transcript of interview with Renate Bridenthal
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Andrea Vasquez: Today is Thursday April 21st, 2016 and this is an interview with Renate Bridenthal about her activities in the 1970s at Brooklyn College. My name is Andrea Ades Vasquez, and I'm here with Yana Calou; and we're doing this interview for the CUNY Digital History Archive. So, I'd just like to open up the conversation—and it is a conversation—asking you about the period before you actually came to Brooklyn College. Maybe you want to tell us what you were doing, or how you landed at Brooklyn College, or anything about your background that you feel like starting with, a few minutes.

Renate Bridenthal: A few minutes. All right. My first job was, actually, at Borough of Manhattan Community College for one year and then a very specific German history—which was my field—slot opened up at Brooklyn College and I applied for it. I got it, although I was still ABD [All But Dissertation]. I hadn't finished my dissertation yet, so it was on a lecturer line. I arrived at, BMCC was 1966, and then Brooklyn College I arrived at in 1967. As I said to you privately at another point, one of the first things I saw arriving on campus was Bart Meyers, handing out leaflets about protests against the Vietnam War; and I thought, I have found my people [*laughing*]. So that was really good.

The history department was not as welcoming, and I had been hired with two other people—two men—over the summer by the chair. So the department was actually quite angry that we had been hired in this informal way without an appointments committee. So we arrived a little bit under a shadow, all three of us. I soon learned that the shadow over me was a little bit longer, and that was the beginning of a feminist awareness. I didn't have much before, because I'd done so well in graduate school. You don't notice it, and I didn't think about it. But that was a little bit of a beginning, when they told us, all three, that they'd be watching us very carefully; and they said to the guys, "We expect a

great deal of you.” They didn’t say that to me; and I thought, hm, there’s a little difference here.

So that was the beginning; and I don’t know how far you want me to go here with my personal history, relevant to Women’s Studies or ...

Vasquez: I’m also curious about how you found yourself there; what were your first impressions, and what else was going on on campus?

Bridenthal: Well, that’s the thing. It’s a good question. It’s the important question, because it was a time of movement. There was movement about everything. There was movement about civil rights. There was movement about the war, and there was a women’s movement; and the History department in particular, I soon noticed, was very conservative. Gertrude Himmelfarb was there, for example. I got in trouble very quickly over the anti-war stuff, very quickly. Now, when was the invasion of Cambodia, ’74, ’75? [clarification: 1970] I guess that was later. When was that? We’ll have to look that up. It’s so long ago. Everything’s merged in my mind. But there was a great deal going on. Brooklyn College had a strike. Actually, I do have that. So, wait, we can get that right away. I have a clipping about that. This was the Daily News, ’72. All right. This was when we chained ourselves into the UN Security Council.

This guy with the little flimsy beard is [Hoby], and I’m next to him. You know [Hoby]. You don’t know [Hoby] Spalding, my ex?

Vasquez: Oh. He’s been pointed out to me in the street, but I don’t know him.

Bridenthal: Oh, yes. Well, he’s the one with the flimsy beard in the middle, and I’m next to him. We chained ourselves into the Security Council ...asking to meet with the head of the UN to complain.

Vasquez: And was he at Brooklyn College also?

Bridenthal: Yes. We met at Brooklyn College. So that was ’72. That was all part of things. Brooklyn College had a strike, which in fact a lot of the radicals, including— you wanted to hear more about Bart. They had really organized, in preparation for a strike; but there were all these open mics, and everybody could talk. I didn’t know they had organized, and I was getting impatient with all this language. So when I got to the mic, I said, “Well, I’m going on strike, and I’m going to be under *that* lamppost; and anybody who wants to join me...” — so that’s how I became of Concerned Faculty, of which there is this thing.

Vasquez: Oh, yes, I saw this picture. You sent us this.

Bridenthal: Yes. But, so, it's interesting. I mean, Bart was a good guy, but he was a guy and they were all guys. I didn't know they had made plans, because I wasn't included. I just was being impulsive. So they let me get this far, and then they said, "But, do you know parliamentary procedure?" and I said, "No." They had this other guy whose name I've forgotten. He was in political science. He said, "I know parliamentary procedure." So then I was brought down, and he was brought up; and as soon as he was standing up there, he said, "But do we really *need* parliamentary procedure?" We said, "Nah."; and I realized I had just interfered with what had been a program. But that didn't quite land in the feminist part of my mind. It sort of *was* and it wasn't sort of. I think *yes, really*. But also because they had plans.

Vasquez: So there was a whole period of activism and activity against the war and other things ...

Bridenthal: Complete turmoil.

Vasquez: ... before the idea for a Women's Center even came ...

Bridenthal: No, it was all simultaneous. This was all happening at the same time.

Vasquez: All around '72. Right.

Bridenthal: This is '72 when we really started talking to each other. Unfortunately there's no date on that leaflet that I sent out, but the meeting of the women, soon after, was '71.

Vasquez: Oh, okay.

Bridenthal: So it was even before. So, I don't know. Maybe I was more aware. But it seemed like the war thing was more important somehow on its own. We did have a strike for a few days. We weren't the first. About 400 universities had already gone out, so we weren't so original, but we did do it for a few days. Then some students were sitting in President Kneller's office, and some of us were with them. The others were calling the cops on us. That line went straight through my department. Hoby and I and [unintelligible 00:07:32], I think, were sitting in the president's office during the strike; and Paula Fichtner and Hans Trefousse and the conservatives were calling the cops on us. That line, even after everything else subsided, lasted for years. We weren't talking to each other until CUNY was under such pressure that, to save the department from being totally sliced, we started cooperating and being at least somewhat civil.

Vasquez: So that would be in the late '70s.

Bridenthal: Yes.

Vasquez: So back to your college: Just a little bit about who the students were and how involved were the students in these activities that you've described, that faculty were involved in? The anti-war activities? What was the sentiment among students and the administration? Clearly you mentioned the administration, but how much were you involved with students?

Bridenthal: I was not personally so involved with the students; but I think because there was a huge student turnout in favor, I think the students were divided. The faculty was divided. The country was divided, and it showed up at the college. There were some very political students who were very determined, and they came out of it with other demands, too, like for a Puerto Rican studies program, a Black studies program. We weren't the only thing going. It's just that that's where my energy went. I have to say, my energy was a little divided; because I was also active with the historical profession, which has the American Historical Association—so we were fighting there, too. That's a whole other bunch of documents. So I was a little bit on one—mono—the war and the women's thing. But everything was going on.

Vasquez: All the – post-open admissions moment, right?

Bridenthal: Absolutely. That was '75 I think. Yes.

Calou: Can I just ask a quick followup question around the ways in which you feel like you came to a feminist consciousness, so much so that you would be one of the founding members of the organization that then turns into the program in the center; that journey from, if you weren't necessarily seeing sexism within, from a present lens, and you saw that retrospectively; then, what was the journey that you ...?

Bridenthal: New York Radical Feminists. Obviously I was getting there, because I joined up. They were running consciousness-raising groups.

Calou: And they were not a university affiliated [unintelligible 00:09:58].

Bridenthal: No, they were a completely self-organized group of local feminists. Now, I shouldn't say I never had any kind of—I was raised by a mother who—my father died when I was six, so she was a working woman on her own. She raised me in very, basically, feminist ways. Don't depend on a man to support you. Make something of yourself. There was all that basic stuff there. I just seemed to be succeeding at it and didn't worry about opposition. Then I encountered opposition in several forms. One was the department; the other was marriage. *[laughing]* So I began to see that it wasn't all settled. Radical Feminists had a very good consciousness-raising group. I actually used some of that material later when I taught Women's Studies. They had an outline of what you should do at your meetings, and it's in these documents.

So they brought us together in the neighborhood. Nobody knew anybody else, which is a good thing because you talk more freely to strangers whom you will never see again, like on airplanes. So there was a topic for every week, like childhood, adolescence, siblings, growing up, dating, jobs... chronologically through your life. You went around the room. Everybody told their story, and then the idea was you pull out of all these individual stories what is general; what is social. Then you see the social aspect of sexism.

Then it was expected you would be really angry and energized, and you should go out and do something about it. Since I was raised as a socialist, at least, I figured the thing to do something about it is on the job. So that's why I started my piece, which was getting people together; which, because it was the time, and a lot of people were arriving at similar conclusions, that's why 100 people turned up. Now with those ...

Vasquez: Before we get to that very meeting, was there any union activity on the – since you were seeing yourself as a worker and organizing on the job, was the union present?

Bridenthal: Not on this. They were very, very helpful to me in probably the most important way, which is protecting my work. What happened was, by 1970, when all this is happening—I finally finished my dissertation three years later. I was slowed down by personal problems but we don't have to go into those. So by '70 I had the PhD. Normally that would have put me—from lecturer; I was on the lecturer line – to instructor; but the instructor line had disappeared. So the next step would have been assistant professor. If you put yourself up for assistant professor, then you're liable to be considered for—you become tenure track; but I had already gotten in so much trouble with the department that I didn't trust them to give me tenure.

Vasquez: So it was around which activities that you were in trouble?

Bridenthal: '70 – just the anti-war stuff.

Vasquez: The anti-war stuff. Okay.

Bridenthal: So later it turned out that they were angry at me around the feminist stuff, because that lasted. The war ended, and it was over. This all continued [*laughing*]. I didn't know that. The secretary told me, they're much angrier with you about this. I thought, really? That was so much more disruptive. This was just organizing. But anyway, so, by '70 I had the dissertation; but I didn't trust them to give me tenure. For the lecturer line, I would have gotten the certificate of continuous employment, which was a form of tenure. What the union did—and this was Polishook—was, they established, on my case, a precedent that other people could use, which is, I could take a leave from the lecturer line to which I could return and then put myself on this vulnerable line of assistant professor and hope that I would get tenure. So every

promotional step was a big struggle, but the unions stuck with me on grounds of job fairness; not on feminist ground. Although I must say, I think it was for associate, Dean Schmuckler—that was his name, Nathan Schmuckler. I knew it was challenged. There was another guy in my department who really had less publication by the time. By associate, I'd collected sufficient publication.

So we're sitting outside his office, not talking to each other. After a long silence, he turns to me—Sternstein, the other guy, turns to me—and says, "You know, Renate, I have a family to support." In fact, he was very rich. He had investments. He was—that was bullshit in itself. Anyway, so, he goes in to Schmuckler, and then he comes out; and I go in to Schmuckler, and Schmuckler leans back. "So, Renate, do you really think you deserve this promotion?" I said, "Nat, I wouldn't be here if I didn't deserve this promotion." But they try to intimidate you. So they intimidated some other people, but that wasn't going to happen. So anyway, I did get—each level was a struggle, but I finally did get full professor and tenure.

Andrea: So tell us about the moment you did the flier; when you did it, where you did it, and what happened?

Bridenthal: So I came out of the radical consciousness-raising group like, ah! It was a social moment.

Calou: Can I ask you, were any of the other faculty at Brooklyn College that were involved with either the Women's Center or the Women's Studies program, or in the CR group that you went to?

Bridenthal: Not that I knew. I never met anyone that had this—there were other groups. This was New York Radical Feminists, and they had several groups all over.

Calou: Okay, but the other faculty were not there?

Bridenthal: Well, they might—I don't know. I just don't know. Nobody that I knew was in that particular group. Some others said that they had been through CR, but I never... This group, the New York Radical Feminists, deliberately found people by neighborhood. It did turn out I knew one person in that group, but she wasn't from City University. I knew her as a historian, and now I know more about her husband than I should.

Vasquez: Okay. But anyway, you were telling us about your first—doing the flier and your first ...

Bridenthal: So then I'm typing up the flier. So—I can't have this on the record, but I was doing it ...

Vasquez: Don't say it.

Bridenthal: Yes. I was typing this up at home, with a little negative backdrop. But I'm typing it up at home; and just ran around and stuffed it in people's mailboxes.

Vasquez: And how did you reproduce it? Did you do that at school?

Bridenthal: We had these—what was it at the time? It was either a Xerox or probably a mimeo.

Vasquez: A mimeo. Right.

Bridenthal: Purple memo. I don't remember how I did it.

Vasquez: You stuffed it in all their mailboxes.

Bridenthal: I stuffed it in people's mailboxes. I think I may have stuffed it into a few – because I see here that there is something that says "distribution committee," so there might have been a few that came together that stuffed more; because the hundred people then came together from many different departments. Now, they did winnow down to much fewer people who were actually ready to do work. That happens in every organization, right? So then we'd develop taskforces. We decided that there were particular things to get done: Women's Studies, a women's center, daycare, and the discrimination issue.

Vasquez: Did you do all of that deciding at the first meeting?

Bridenthal: I don't think so. I think it took a couple of meetings. There's more in the documents.

Vasquez: So were you surprised at the turnout when you stuffed these?

Bridenthal: Thrilled! Thrilled that so many people were interested. We did develop these taskforces, and in the documents and probably in the library archive, there are the names of people who signed up to work on Women's Studies, to work on a women's center, to work on daycare. The daycare was not negligible. We did have a separate fight about that, a real big fight. Then the discrimination thing is Lilia, because she said, "this is not a Brooklyn College issue; this is a City University wide issue." She went on to found CUNY Women's Coalition, which is why I think it's so important to get her. She is about to – I spoke with her. She is about to put the CUNY Women's Coalition archive at Brooklyn College, too; and that's going to be huge, because that has other campuses, women from other campuses, involved. It was a legal fight.

Vasquez: So just to get the structure down: You called the first meeting, and you were inspired to do that just coming out of consciousness-raising groups and thinking,

what can I do. You wanted to do something around women's issues on campus. So was that originally just called the women's—

Bridenthal: We called ourselves Brooklyn College Women's Organization. That's all we had to start with.

Vasquez: Okay, and then you split up into groups based on these different things you wanted to take on.

Bridenthal: Yes. Then the taskforces emerged, and then more people, more or less, were either supportive or—a lot of people put their names on the discrimination suit, which had, as a leading name, Anna Babey-Brooke, which is on the list. She became the leading name on the—but there were many others. That was 10 years in the court. Then we won after 10 years. We got something like, I think, \$7 million, which, divided among all CUNY women, wasn't very much but significantly, we got – this is all Lilia's credit – and her people, she had a team.

We got a special prosecutor in the court for three years, such that you didn't have to be in there 10 years. You could go directly to the special prosecutor and get attention if you felt you had a case, and you had the right of subpoena. Before that we didn't. You had to sneak around and get your information. If you thought you were in a better positioned than, say, some man in the department or in the school, you had to sneak ways to get the information to prove it.

[00:21:06]

Vasquez: And so you were one of the people in the case.

Bridenthal: I was in the case, but it was just another name.

Vasquez: Right. So, what other taskforces—

Bridenthal: I used it for Associate [Professor]. So actually maybe the—Nat Schmuckler might have been around tenure. That might have been around tenure. I'm not clear now. It might be in the archive or in my personal papers. I did use it for Associate because then there was a guy I knew who was being put forward ahead of me, so I felt, well, this is not fair. So I went to—by then we had an affirmative action officer—and I went to the affirmative action officer, and I said, I do know someone who is not as qualified as I am and who is being considered ahead of me. So this is a complaint. She said, "Oh,"— and she smiled— "You mean so and so?" I said, "No, that would make two." So I got it. But knowing that we could subpoena the information made the difference. In other words, it was only good for three years; but you could use it for three years. I don't know what the process is now, but I think probably more people are chastened after all of this, I hope.

Vasquez: So you mentioned daycare was another one...

Bridenthal: So daycare was a big thing, and there's ...

Vasquez: What were the other ways that you broke up originally, what taskforces?

Bridenthal: That was it, as far as I recall and as far as the documents support. There were four things.

Calou: There's the program, the daycare, the Women's Center, and the discrimination ...?

Bridenthal: Yes, those were the four main issues. The thing about daycare: I was glad to see there is an exchange of letters, because what they had done—when exactly was open admissions?

Vasquez: '70.

Bridenthal: '70. Okay. So the campuses were very crowded, and at Brooklyn College, we had temp buildings for classes for all these extra people. What the administration had done was, they had put a daycare center, because we had pressed, in the basement of Whitman, which is a theater; and they had put part of the art department in one of the temp buildings. Well, the daycare people came and told us that there were vermin. There were roaches and mice, for the kids! And they were in a basement. Meanwhile the sculptors from the art department were in a temp building with a lawn.

So we went to the art department people and asked them if they would be willing to trade; and they said, sure, no problem, we can sculpt. "Mice don't bother us." We wanted the kids to have the daylight. So we had their agreement. So then we went to Dean Gold, and there's an exchange of letters with the president with the dean; and when I say "we", this was my advice now to the students who just had the anniversary, the 40th anniversary—there were some kids there, students: "You really need to go as a gang. You really need to have a lot of you." We confronted Dean Gold first, who was saying, no, we can't; it's all set bureaucratically, and this is how it is; just too bad. So we ganged up on him and really moved very close to the desk; and he was like, all right, all right, and made the change. It really was confrontational. I have to say, they were the best years of my life. It was very empowering to know that, if you're a collective, rather than an individual if you really, as a group, are on the same page, if you're really determined; that's going to work. So that issue was really big.

Vasquez: Do you want to talk a little bit about the program? I guess the other thing is, what we're interested in, and you have other ways to phrase this, is the dynamics of the group. Were there certain individuals who went in these different directions, both in

terms of what your focus was but also how everybody worked together? Who were the different people involved? Maybe tell us a little bit about—you don't have to name anybody if you don't want, but—what were some of the interpersonal relationships in making this progress in the center, in building the center?

Calou: Or it could be political in this way, if there are disagreements about feminist pedagogy or feminist theory and different approaches to tackling women's issues that made certain decisions happen a certain way, or that there were conflicts in the way that ...

Bridenthal: I would say that, in the first few years, we were pretty much on one page on most things. Tucker Farley was actually very important and helpful. We worked together a lot on the curriculum. Freddie Wachsberger was present. She was in the Art Department, Anthropology. She helped design the first brochure that we had, and it was beautiful. Pat Lander in anthropology came in pretty early, and she's in this picture. This is Pat Lander. This is Claudette Charbonneau. They got married. This is me in the background, and this is Pat Quercia, who was our college assistant for a while and then eventually became secretary to the president of the college—

Calou: I have a photo of this that I got at the archive, but that is a better copy.

Vasquez: This is better. Maybe we can scan this and put this in. That would be great.

Calou: They have the negative, actually.

Bridenthal: Oh, good; even better. So at that point, we had a tiny office, I think in Boylan.

Calou: That was the first office, housed at Boylan, of the program.

Bridenthal: I think so. They gave us a little space there with Pat Quercia. Yes. Then later, much later—I'm really sorry; the years have merged [*laughing*]. So documents are better than this. I think much, much later—maybe in the '80s or even '90s—we were put closer to the Women's Center and forced to share a college assistant. I say forced because it was really hard. There was competition for her time and her energy, and that was unfortunate; but that's when they were cutting back. But for a while we had our own college assistant, and we had two small rooms and a small reception.

Students were very important. I have to say, I think Tucker was closer to the students. My energies were divided between Brooklyn College and the History Association, where I was working also to organize there. Anyway, it's a separate story but I was a little bit divided; plus, here's how anti-war worked together with women's history, for example. One of the things that a bunch of us were doing, faculty were

doing—Joe Murphy from Queens helped to bring Queens—we were sitting in front of Honeywell, which was manufacturing these cluster bombs. We had seen pictures. Cluster bombs release fragments. We'd seen pictures that were televised of babies full of fragments. The idea of those cluster bombs was to immobilize the enemy so they would be more taken up with caring for their wounded rather than just burying the dead. It was like, stop —so anyway, we were demonstrating in front of Honeywell. By the time there had been so many demonstrations the police stopped arresting us. They just let us sit.

So I'm sitting there for hours, and sitting next to a woman from Queens who also taught history; and we started talking about women's history and [how] there's no material, and how are we going to make a course. This was a problem for Women's Studies. There was very little. Now there's more than anybody can handle; but at the time, it was like, how do you teach when there are so few texts? For the literature people, they could parse the texts they had. But history—so just blabbing, I said, "Yes, we really need a book. Maybe I should organize a book or something..." I went home and forgot about it, and before the week was out, she called me, and she said, "I have a publisher for you." I said, "for what?" She said, "You were talking about a book and women's hist—..."—oh my God!

I called my friend Claudia, and we started organizing to create this book called, "Becoming Visible: Women in European History." So I was busy. In other words, I was writing; I was organizing in the History department and at Brooklyn College. So I wasn't clued into everything that was happening at the college. Tucker took much more responsibility for the Women's Center, for example; and I think she probably chose Barbara Gaines, who was the first head of it, and then deplored that choice. So the differences, which you asked about, emerged later. We were fighting so hard to get things done. Then once they were there, differences emerged, for example, about— I don't know. I don't want to—differences emerged as to how it should be run and who should run it.

Vasquez: Back to the forming of the program: How did you manage to establish that program? It must have been one of the first in the country.

Bridenthal: I never checked about the country, but I think it was the first at CUNY. For a while there was some debate about it because Hunter developed a text; and they claimed they had been doing things. So ...

Calou: Did Richmond College also have ...?

Bridenthal: They might have had something. I didn't compare.

Vasquez: It was certainly one of the first ...

Bridenthal: It was one of the first.

Vasquez: ... especially in that—you had a lot of departments to deal with then. Presumably this is interdisciplinary. It wasn't just the history department, right?

Bridenthal: It wasn't at all, at first, the History department. There are documents I saw even here. The English department was willing. I think sociology was probably willing, because they already had society in mind. History was quite recalcitrant. As I said, they were really conservative. They didn't believe in women's history. I couldn't get it through as a permanent course for a long time. It was taught as a special course. So the first part of the program is quite limited. But we did build in that there be interdisciplinary introductory courses; and for that, because there was enough money at the time, we could co-teach. So a lot of us co-taught, and I remember co-teaching with someone from psych and someone from soc, and someone from anthro, so that it would be a different approach. But they specifically were in the documents.

We were late with history. That History department was very conservative. They're late with everything. They didn't want to do world history. Years later, before I left, I thought, you know, it's time to do global. Oh, no! Impossible. I tried to get them to work with the physics department on environment, and they were willing in physical history. They would do that. It's a conservative field, by and large, as you know from Jerry.

Vasquez: So were those political debates about valid scholarship and what should be taught?

Bridenthal: Right.

Vasquez: What about other things like funding or support? You mentioned fighting for administrative help. Were there other factors in the success of the program?

Bridenthal: Well, there's always a problem, if you want to co-teach, getting another department to release somebody to do that, so those were budgetary issues. I have to tell you: I'm not an administrator. There was one summer I had to administer a grant that we got. It was a very good program we got, Project Chance, which was for returning women, people who had been on welfare, and who could get some support for getting an education. It was a good program, and it was really well taught.

There was one summer where nobody was around, and I had to do it and I loathed it. I'm not good with budget. I can't fire people. There was somebody who needed to be fired, as everybody agreed. I can't do that. So I have never aspired to the position where you might have some power over such things. I can't do it. I can help set up things, but somebody else has to run them. I can break down walls, but I can't deal with what comes next.*[laughing]*

Vasquez: So you described, next, you're building this at the same time there's a fiscal crisis coming. It's also the height of the women's movement nationally, right?

Bridenthal: Yes.

Vasquez: So I'm wondering how you see all of that, these things that were going on around gender, identity, work, all of these things that were being raised. What were some other ways you feel they manifested themselves locally in your group? Was it a growing group? Were you feeling like you had growing influence on your campus with other faculty members and students, or was it pretty much the same core group of people? I guess, as all these things were happening around different consciousness raising—

Bridenthal: Well, as these things become accepted, more people were willing to identify— People who might have been more fearful in the beginning... once something is established, they feel safer. So more people started joining... it spread by becoming legitimate and respectable.

The program, yes. So that's a good thing. You become—that's what you wanted. You wanted to be like everything else. So in that sense, more people were willing to teach it; more people were willing to write it.

Vasquez: Were the male professors getting involved with it, or it was really ...?

Bridenthal: Well, to tell you the truth ...

... that was actually a problem. What was his name? I have something on that somewhere else, or maybe that's in the archive. There was a guy in psychology, whose name I forget, who wanted to teach it. To be honest, we didn't want them there. We didn't want men telling us what women were about. I stand by that now, although I'm sorry in a way because there were some well-intentioned people there. I know a friend of mine in German history was sorely wounded. He wrote women's history. His heart was in the right place. We wouldn't let him join our German Women's History group. I have a German Women's History group that's 37 years old and still meeting, *[laughter]* out of that time. He really wanted to join it, and we didn't want men in it on the grounds that we couldn't speak freely; which is true. You say snide things to each other that – you wouldn't want to hurt somebody's feelings if they're a good person. So we really didn't want to.

Then there was a case, I think, out of psychology. I was co coordinating with Katherine Silver at the time. She might remember. She lives just two houses away. She was in the soc department, and I do have documentation about that; but either it's in the library already, because I don't know that – I tried to give everything away, and I just

don't remember his name. We did some bad things to him, made him very uncomfortable. So ...

[00:38:25]

Calou: Would you be able to talk a little bit about the student response and enrollment, and the ways— I saw a lot about the ways in which the course, the faculty, designing the courses, were wanting input from students for things like reading lists and course materials and what they wanted, and how that affected, maybe, student enrollment and responses that you got from rewarding or otherwise from students who took some of the first Women's Studies courses in the program, or received services from the center.

Bridenthal: I don't know about the center, but I think it was a very lively place and a place that people then, and I think I'm noticing now, there seems to be a lot of continued vibrant work in the center. It was a great turnout at this anniversary, 40th anniversary thing. A lot of students, including some real activist students; so I think that's continuing. But I didn't pay that much attention to the center, but they were very lively. For Women's Studies, I don't remember hearing that much input about curriculum, but I do remember the classes being very lively. We really wanted to hear from them, hear from their experiences; in a sense to recreate. Oh, yes, we got in trouble for this, too. I told them about – in one of my classes I got hauled before this dean of students or Birkenhead 00:42:00] – I guess he was Dean of Students – for even showing them how to make a consciousness raising group because that was considered interfering with their psychological—somehow imposition, and told not to do it again. But students were very lively and wanting to— they were very much themselves in this atmosphere of wanting to learn; and they told a lot of personal stories, and there were some very heartwarming results.

I remember one student coming back into class one time and saying she'd had a major success at home, and that was that she refused to make her brother's bed anymore. She told him he could make it himself. That was a big deal for her. Other people came in talking about their personal experiences. So we encouraged—because we had come out of CR—them to relate their personal experiences to a general social condition; and then work into it in whatever discipline we were teaching at that time. But that was considered a little subversive and maybe even not a good idea to do to students, messing with their minds.

Vasquez: And when –were you teaching gender and sexuality or anything like that about reproductive rights in that period?

Bridenthal: Yes. Well, I taught history; so ...

Vasquez: But didn't you co-teach? I don't know ...

Bridenthal: Yes, we co-taught.

Vasquez: ... what—yes, I guess I'm interested in what students and your colleagues were discussing, opening up, and discussing at that time when those were some of the big issues in the women's movement, right ...

Bridenthal: Right.

Vasquez: ... about the role of lesbians in the women's movement and... sexuality and health issues, women's health issues...

Bridenthal: Well, some brought it up more, but we were all open to the issues. Some people, like Pat Lander, put more emphasis on lesbian; but we all taught about some aspects of sexuality. Historically—it's so hard to remember. It seems to me that almost everything was open, all kinds of relationships: personal, work related, student related, harassment, professor harassment, things like that ... were discussed, and people were encouraged to relate their individual lives to the material so that there wasn't this top-down, here's what you have to know about this, and here's what you have to know about that. They were very interactive classes, more than most; because the kids who came—that was a self selected group. They would pick this because, for some reason, they wanted to be more involved or learn more. They were among the liveliest classes I remember.

Calou: Can I ask a little bit about the demographic makeup of both the faculty that were putting together—or the organization that first put together the program in the center, and also the students in terms of race, gender, sexuality?

Bridenthal: Yes. So, race: We've been faulted for being pretty much white; although among the students, that was a little bit more diverse. The faculty was pretty much white. We've been faulted for not integrating the issue of race sufficiently into the issue of feminism. I do remember some important conversations that we had with organized African American women students who – the part that I remember is a conversation that I had with someone who said, look, we agree with each other about a lot of things. The thing is, I can't be in two meetings. How much can I do? So it's not just the logistics of being at two meetings. It's also, what are your priorities. Yes, we have trouble with our men; but we have even more trouble with race and with racism. Yes, we have a problem with sexism; but is this the moment to bring up sexism when the brothers are being killed?

So I really understood the tension they were under; but I also feel it wasn't entirely our fault that they couldn't be doing everything. The whole women's movement was accused of this, and we were part of it in that regard. But from where I was sitting, it was both understandable as well as deplorable. But I don't know. What were the other parts to that?

Calou: I suppose in terms of—certainly I think this is a self identification that is not always something that you’re going to know, hear about from students or necessarily other faculty, around any openly lesbian students and those sorts of issues; certainly lesbian faculty. If there was any sort of interpersonal or structural homophobia that ended up happening, or if you can think of structural racism or interpersonal racism that you ended up seeing, aside from the story that you said about—

Bridenthal: You know who would give you a better answer on that are the lesbian faculty who were teaching. Tucker would be one. Pat Lander would be another. I didn’t see a problem, but I’m not there. I think it was a topic that we thought was important. It was a question of how you identify your sexuality. I don’t remember open fights. I don’t remember feeling negatively, but that might have been perceived differently by people who were more directly involved. I do understand that perceptions vary, and why. So Freddie Wachsberger was lesbian. We had a lot of lesbian women on the faculty, shaping the program, teaching in the program. I think maybe more students came out to them if they were more direct about it.

I did have a transgender student—we didn’t have the word for it then – in one of my classes, who went from being Charles to being Carla. I do remember saying to—well, he/she was in transition, so I don’t know what pronoun to use. But it was a transitional period for that person. I do remember saying, “Why would you want to spend the rest of your life earning less?”; and he said—at that time— “Because it’s just more important.” I had this really – I didn’t have a problem with the gender thing; but I’m thinking, isn’t he thinking, or she thinking, ahead as to what that life is? Because we’re teaching feminism, sexism, and how you earn less and how you’re treated differently – not better, usually. I’m thinking, he’s heading into another kind of discrimination; but it was more important for him to then change.

So maybe, you see, I’m saying, that could have been seen as insensitivity on my part; but from my end, I was really trying to explain [*laughing*] what I saw as a problem; not by changing, but what happens to you then. But maybe that person saw it differently. That’s what I mean. I understand that perceptions can be different from what you intend.

Vasquez: So Yana was talking about the documents that we’re looking at, spanning these 10 years especially, from just this moment of you having a leaflet and finding 100 people immediately interested in doing something—a core group of people who actually take on tasks... that moment of conception, the introduction to all of these different outgrowths of that first meeting. If you looked to 10 years later, were you surprised at how it developed, or did you ...?

Bridenthal: You mean in the ‘80s. Well, here’s the thing. In the Clarion – which, actually, I didn’t remember; that’s an interview – and ...

Vasquez: With you.

Bridenthal: Yes, with me. So ...

Vasquez: You're going to find out how you felt.

Bridenthal: No, no. Yes, well—*[laughing]*it's actually 1983. We were accused of expecting super women; we can do everything. I'm saying, we never said we could do everything. The image presents as a feminist goal the super woman who can do everything, job, marriage, child raising, with relative ease. I'm quoted as saying, "The women's movement as I saw it never said that,' protested Professor Bridenthal." We had been saying that we need such things as daycare so that a woman can realize her goals, not that she should kill herself under existing conditions without a good infrastructure for support. So 10 years later, people are saying, "What have you done? You expect women to just charge out?" They're still saying that... because a lot of us were leftists of a sort, on a spectrum; left meaning there were other structures out here that also need to be changed. It's not just a question of daycare. There's a whole job structure. What kind of jobs can you apply – it's capitalism. Let's face it. So that's not – I didn't say that out loud. There are times when you can say that and times when you can't.

Vasquez: You just did.

Bridenthal: Well, here and now, I'm 81. What are they going to do to me now, right? So, yes; but that's what happened later. The whole movement was, in a sense, accused of creating this super woman and who can do that? Even some young women now are claiming that that was a terrible idea. They wouldn't call themselves feminists, because that's how the press finally—the public version of this came out. But we, at the time, never said that. We were criticizing the structures; the job structure, the daycare structure; even the family structure.

Vasquez: By this time, though, were they all pretty secure?

Bridenthal: Patriarchy.

Vasquez: No, secure – what you had built, what you had envisioned.

Bridenthal: Yes. The programs were secure.

Vasquez: The programs and the daycare center and ...

Bridenthal: They're still here. It's all still here.

Vasquez: It's really—so, yes, you felt, after 10 years—you must have felt that you really accomplished some important things.

Bridenthal: Oh, I do, I do. I feel very good about my part in all these things, because I feel we were a *we*. None of us could have done it individually. It really was a collective enterprise, with all—whatever differences emerged. It was a *we*, and for my part in that at Brooklyn College, and the history profession, I feel like we accomplished an enormous amount. What people are deploring now – I just had a conversation with someone else about this—they're deploring the way the curriculum has gone; which is, it's gone so abstract and so academic and so unpolitical... and a lot of young women are going in it just to make a career and not because they have any passion. But the passion has changed, because a lot has been accomplished. The same degree of rage isn't going to be there.

Vasquez: So, how did you see it changing? In other words, what were the '80s like? Obviously you stayed there. So what were—rolling her eyes. Once you felt like you'd established all these things, they were not getting rid of you, you had tenure presumably—a bunch of you probably had tenure and stayed. How did it change in the '80s? Did it? And did the school provide more—and I don't know if it was CUNY-wide—more services, for women or wellness centers; any things like that that came out; other things outside of your own center that you think you influenced?

Bridenthal: No. I didn't. But things were up and running, and I didn't feel—as I said, I'm not into running things. So I didn't personally do much more; but no, because CUNY was always under pressure and, if anything, resources were less. It was harder to get people for co-teaching, and I don't think there's any co-teaching anymore. I think they're individually—there was no money for co-coordinating, so that's not happening. We had to share the college assistant.

Vasquez: That happened at the fiscal crisis, that early? in the '70s and '80s? And the cuts kept coming?

Bridenthal: I don't know when we moved to the Women's Center, but that could have been in the late '70s. I'm not sure. That's got to be in the documents. Daycare had to move off campus. I don't know if they *had* to, but they did. They found some adjoining – some building nearby where they had daycare. I don't think it was ever sufficient for both faculty and students. It was an ongoing problem, and then it moved several times. I'm not even sure if it exists now. But the Women's Studies continues. The Women's Center is very lively. So, no; we felt more defensive. It wasn't expansive. It was defensive, and CUNY Women's Coalition was 10 years in the courts; so it would have been early '80s that we finally won the case. So that was a win. It was a win for discrimination, because as I said, we got three years of this special prosecutor.

Vasquez: When students' tuition was going up, Did students around your center and in your program involve the program and the center at all in those struggles? Because I know students were protesting around tuition increases, around the end to remediation, in the '80s, in the senior colleges...

Bridenthal: I don't remember them organizing around feminist goals. There were general protests about—I do remember; it must have been around the '80s with all the shrinkage—when the administration was considering throwing all these interdisciplinary programs like Women's Studies and Puerto Rican Studies, African—they were thinking of throwing them all into one interdisciplinary thing where we would have been fighting each other over faculty lines and budgets. So we all resisted that. We each wanted to keep our own separate little thing, and we did succeed in that. But I don't remember that much student involvement around women's issues at that time. I think tuition was a bigger one.

Calou: I'm thinking now just that the Supreme Court Roe v. Wade decision happening in '72, at the same time the program, also with its first couple of legs. Is there anything about that happening at the same time that you want to speak about, or ...?

Bridenthal: I do remember some discussions about what the Women's Center could legally do. What they wanted to do, and I think they've managed to do, at least indirectly, was to direct young women who needed reproductive rights care—needed an abortion or something—to the right place. But I think they had to be a little covert about that. But it's one of the things the Women's Center was; to help young women who were in trouble one way or another; many other issues, with family problems or just getting together and talking to each other; a safe place to be together. But I dimly remember that it was a question of, how much could the Women's Center get away with in terms of helping young women who needed that kind of help.

Maybe it was also a place—the woman who ran it at first, Barbara Gaines, was herself a lesbian; and I think she also made it a safe place for lesbian women to congregate. I do remember some straight students feeling pressured, but that wasn't just us. There was a little bit of pressure at the time. If you're a feminist, you've got to be gay ...

[00:58:21]

Vasquez: Or at least give it a whirl. *[laughing]*

Bridenthal: ... or at least give it a whirl. Are you serious, or are you not serious about this homosocial world? Most of us, homosocial—we were so angry at men; but that's not exactly the same, yet, as—or as some of the lesbians said, "sleeping with the enemy." Well, some of us were. I also had fights at home. Ultimately I was told that this whole

feminist thing was a big reason for the separation in my life, in my marriage. So eventually it got on his nerves.

But I think the Women's Center was a safe place for clearly lesbian women; and, as I said, sometimes straight women complained that *they* weren't entirely comfortable there, because they were getting pressured.

Calou: Do you, conversely—I know that you spoke a little bit about men on the faculty, but also, any feminist identified male students that you remember; or just the experience of teaching some of the first 10 years of classes and male students' response to Women's Studies classes when they enrolled ...

Bridenthal: Yes. The few who came were really genuinely trying to understand. They didn't talk a whole lot, because they felt like they shouldn't; but they did some. I remember—you remember some things very distinctly. There was a slightly older man, and I also taught evening sessions. I loved evening session, because they're already grownups, and really interested. There was a man there who was—I don't know, maybe in his 40s or something. He was very into it; because, he explained halfway through, he had a young daughter; and he wanted to know how to do right by her. It was very moving. So that's one that sort of stands out in my mind.

But then there's this—actually, I think Charles Carla was in a regular history class but then came to speak to me personally, because I would raise feminist issues also in regular history classes as part of history. I was writing women's history, and I was involved with women's history in the history profession. So I would bring it up there, too; so I think that's why he then came and talked to me. But they don't stand out much because they were such good boys. They just sat there and took it in and did their work, and seemed like well-intentioned young men who wanted to grow up right. I'm sorry. I don't have...

Calou: No, that's great. That's really ...

Bridenthal: I have more holes than Swiss cheese in my memory.

Calou: That's great.

Vasquez: I don't know if you have any more questions, but is there anything that we've missed, or anything else that you want—any other stories, or just thoughts, as you think back on that period?

Calou: Biggest achievements or proudest moments, or big picture; anything that we might not see in the archive?

Bridenthal: No. Big picture really was what I said. They were the best years of my life. I've never felt so energized and empowered as working *with* people. Mostly it was with the women at Brooklyn College for this, in the history profession. Most of the friends I have today were veterans of that time in both these places. It was just great to feel so empowered. I just wish that young people today could get that same sense of empowerment. It really means having an agreed upon goal to push for, and being organized about it. That's what I said—I really was sort of impressed. *How did we do that?*... break up into taskforces, and write notes to each other and letters, and letters to the president which were so daring; shocking. So just, they were the best years of my life; among the best years of my life. It's been a great life, but – yes.

Vasquez: Well, thank you so much for this interview.

Bridenthal: Gladly.

Vasquez: This was fabulous for us to hear these stories, and I'm glad to be able to put them in the archive for the rest of the world to hear. So, thanks so much, Renate.

Bridenthal: Well, thank you for your interest.

[End of recorded material at 01:03:07]