

Willy Wilkinson
Interviewed by Alexis Hall
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Transcribed: Nikiko Masumoto

Alexis Hall: I'm here with Willy Wilkinson on August 25, 2006. Can you start out just starting out telling when and where you were born?

Willy Wilkinson: When and where? Ok. I was born in the year of the Tiger, 1962 in San Mateo.

AH: Ok, and can you tell me a little bit about your family and your family's background.

WW: Oh you mean ethnically and so forth, or...

AH: Both, and if you have any siblings and things like that.

WW: Oh, ok. Yeah, my mom is Chinese from Hawai'i and my dad is English, Irish, and Scottish from California and – they're actually -- you know I actually wrote an article, I don't know if you've seen this or heard about it, but I wrote an article about their interracial marriage and how they got married just a few years after the Anti-Miscegenation Law was repealed in the state of California and --sort of -- I paralleled my experience of getting a same-sex marriage at City Hall in San Francisco and you know their whole experience of breaking barriers or whatever in this sort of family legacy. But --we have four kids in the family so I have three siblings and born and raised San Mateo in the 'burbs'; I hated it. But I'm actually very glad I grew up in the Bay Area.

AH: What was your relationship with your parents like when you were growing up?

WW: Well my dad is kind of a mellow guy. I know a lot of people who have fathers who just weren't there or weren't really cool or whatever. But he's a really – he's a really thoughtful guy who is not your typical white-guy, not your typical father, he was, you know, a really good guy. My mother is a more complex personality let's just say. And she's a fantastic woman she's really smart and she's been a pioneer in her own way and everything and she's really great I learned a lot from her. But she also kind of rode me for being different, so there was that tension between us. It took her a while to get over and now she's really cool and totally accepts me and loves me for who I am. But I went through some changes around that when I was growing up. I mean – you know – when I was four years old I decided I wanted to be white and male. So you know, like I had this issue happening about being mixed heritage and also just around gender where I decided I wanted to be a guy and I thought if I could just work on that I could become that since the age I was four – that I remember – I wanted to do that. So my mother really struggled with me being a like a little boy, whereas my dad was kind of – you know, he finally just said ok, well let's go to the boy's department and get you some boy's clothes and that was really exciting for me. So he was kind of more accepting in that way.

AH: Can you talk a little more about how that process worked through your childhood? Like with gender identity.

WW: Well, I change my name to Willy when I was nine cuz I didn't like the girl-name that they had given me. So I was actively looking for a name to change it to – you know when I was nine or before that, I don't know. But I know I didn't like it for a long time and I decided to change it. So, people called us “Wilkey” (sp?) –there was like a P.E. teacher that called all my siblings “Wilkey” and my siblings are all older than me. So they got called “Wilkey” before me and that was a nickname that we had, but finally I decided, ok Willy is kind of close to that and part of my last name. So, I change my name. My mother did not – my mother refused to call me Willy until I was 24 years old. My dad actually – he kind of tried, he tried when I was in Junior High or whatever, when I was young. But it was never consistent until finally I had to tell them when I was in my 20's, ok look this is not going away, this is my name, I need you to call me that. I need you to you know honor that that's who I feel that I am. So that was one issue, was my name change. I had siblings that you know, kind of got with it sooner than my parents and cousins and so forth. And I got called that throughout Junior High and High School. But you know, my official records had to be in my girl-name. But then, when I was 24 I officially changed my name – legally. So that was one struggle there. What else? You're asking me, what my relationship was with my parents around the whole gender issue? Or just...

AH: Your issues around the whole gender issue or the sexuality issue. I mean just as much as you want to talk about.

WW: When I was 15, I had an urge to kiss my best friend and that really freaked me out. [chuckle] And I did not grow up in an environment that was very supportive around gay issues. Even though you know that was the 70's, there was this whole revolution happening in San Francisco. I was in the suburbs which felt like a whole world away. But I realized later there were young people in my high school who were coming out, but very quietly. It wasn't like people were “out in proud” or anything. It was very you know closeted. I didn't realize at the time that you know, ok well other people are coming out, maybe I could do this. It just felt so unsafe. That was I think when I was really questioning if I was a lesbian or not. But it was just – there weren't any avenues of support for me. My friends said, “Oh, you're not a lesbian” you know, and that was that. But it was like, no, but I want to kiss like *every* woman I see. [chuckle] And I was telling my sister that and she was like, “Oh, that's cute.” No one was really getting that this is freaking me out. So – yeah I mean – things have changed a lot since then! Now, I'm worried about people doing youth groups and 12 year olds are just “out and proud” and all this stuff. But, yeah, -- there was no such thing as a youth program or whatever, that I could turn to. That was probably my mother's biggest fear too. But when I was 18, ok I went to college and it was like wow, you know there were all these lesbians and everything – and that freaked me out – you know I was playing rugby with all these dykes and that kind of freaked me out. But it didn't take me long before I was just sort of, “wow, I'm coming out!” So that was pretty exciting you know having experience in school, in a college environment to come out. But, I told my parents that I was that I was

a lesbian when I was 22. So I wrote an article about Asian lesbian issues, 1984. No one was talking about – not that many people were talking about Asian lesbian issues, but no one was really talking about the politics of being an Asian lesbian. I wanted to look at what the – you know – sort of the pressures of family and community were on being this delicate lotus blossom versus the reality: I was out organizing Asian lesbians. This was – I was on the East coast at the time and I – I was you know, I just really wanted to talk about these dynamics and sort of how this all fits together socially and politically. So, I knew I had this article coming out, so I thought well, I better – not that I thought – not that you know they would necessarily see it in a woman's paper – but I just wanted to tell them before it went to print. I was totally terrified and my dad was actually, "this is something I've known for along time." Whoa! The dad was great, you know. The mom was like "Is this a phase or whatever?" But she actually said that she had thought she had read you know *The Well of No Loneliness* (?) in her era and had thought maybe she was a lesbian at the time.

AH: Wow.

WW: So she actually revealed this thing and she struggled with me for a little bit. But she had this thing that, you know, she was going to buy everyone in the family, all the kids, a Mahjong set when they got married. So I told my mom, "You know what, I'm never getting married." And I said, "Can I have my Mahjong set?" And she said, "No, no no." Just kind of, you know, didn't address it. Well, three months later was my birthday and I was living in Boston at the time and they shipped this thing – and these things are – they weigh like a hundred thousand pounds, I mean they're just really heavy. And there it was on my door step, and so I thought "wow, this is cool." That felt like for me like this first gesture of acceptance, particularly from my mother. Little did I know, you know, I was not a married woman.

AH: So, when you were growing up, did you have any, sort of connection to the general API community, like through your family?

WW: My mom had this group of Chinese women that she hung out with, who kind of bugged her, but also kind of gave her this cultural sense that she enjoyed, sort of a dual experience and they're called the "Chi-mateans." (sp?) So they were San Mateo-Chinese ladies and I actually hated them for their – for their, I don't know, they're sort of teetering wew-who-who-ways that they had about them that really spoke to my internalized racism and my frustrations with being born female and not being totally comfortable with that. And you know, they played Mahjong with them, but she didn't really enjoy it so much because they were more gamblers whereas we were more just like – we played Mahjong just to eat and hang out kind of thing. So that was the main connection that was you know through my mother. There was a number of Asians in my school growing up, so I had a lot of peers who were mostly Chinese and Japanese; there weren't very many Southeast Asian folks - that was when Southeast Asian - Vietnamese folks started to arrive in the 70's. It was mainly Chinese and Japanese. Yeah, well, the only other connection to community was through my mother's side of the family but they were all for the most part in Hawai'i. So that was a limited experience because we didn't

go to Hawaii to visit them that often and also they would come and visit us but it was sort of just once in a while.

AH: Can you talk about - you mentioned before that when you were 4 you had this urge to be a white boy - can you talk about the racial issues that go along with mixed heritage?

WW: Oh yeah! I mean, I think that my parents were wonderful parents, but they really did not understand what I was going through as a mixed heritage child. I think that they weren't able to give me the tools to handle that. And my mother was also a character - it's hard to kind of describe her character - but she would say, sort of ... she would do a lot of playful but weirdly complicated on the psychological level - sorts of things. [chuckle] How to articulate this? She would say, "Oh, I am just a concubine I walk behind the first wife." And she would like play these little things like, "Oh, you know your father is the great White husband - great white father." She would do these sorts of things - that would sort of...you know that she's full of shit, she's an educated woman but she needed to reinforce her self issues and her self-esteem issues around the race dynamic in our own home. She's a joker - she's a big joker, but there is an element to that...it made the race issue very clear to me at a very young age. I've told this story to other people and they were like, I was four years old and I was twirling around in my pretty dress I wasn't thinking about race and gender. But for me it was very clear that, you know I really felt like if I wanted to be president one day, I really needed to be a white male. So I asked my father, I looked at all the money, and he said these were all presidents and I was like, oh, well so they're all white men. So then I thought, well that's the way to get anywhere in the world, so I want to do that. My mom would kind of...I think it was also part of her struggle because you know, a lot of people were not understanding who she was and what her culture was all about. Like with my father's family they really did not understand her culture and they rejected it: her food and her ways in a certain way. So, I think she had to reinforce this dynamic by talking about it in this very round about way because she's this very indirect person and that's cultural and she wasn't just going to come out and say "I'm really frustrated because I don't feel like your family is getting me," you know what I mean? So, yeah, I guess - oh you were asking me about the mixed heritage issue. Well, I'm the lightest one in my family and my mom treated that like that was a deficiency. She would often say, "When you were born you had auburn hair, and I said well that's not my baby; all my babies have black hair. This isn't my baby." That's one of those stories that she repeated over and over throughout the years. I was also the "surprise child" - quote-unquote. There was three kids then six years later they had me and my mother kind of laid into me about it for a long time; she was like 40 when she had me and she was like "It's cuz of you I got fat!" And you know, whatever, and we had given away all the baby clothes. So there was kind of this combination between you know, when you're the baby you get a certain amount of attention, but at the same time I think my mother was frustrated that she had another kid. So, there was that and also because I was more likely to burn in the sun than my siblings. My mom and also her family in Hawaii sort of treated that as this deficiency that I was lighter. So that really made me feel bad about being mixed. My mother, despite the fact that she married a white man and had four kids, I think she had - and still has - this real intense attitude that full-blooded is better. Like for instance my brother and his wife

adopted a girl from China so you know my mother loves to talk about how this is her only full-blooded grandchild. Even now, laying into my nephews too and people around. She kind of has this issue that she really hammers into the ground about mixed not being as good. And then definitely within the larger Asian community there can be that attitude. In fact I just had an experience yesterday, [chuckle] which was a reminder. Although this time the mixed heritage attitude was being directed at my son, but it's the same thing I've gone through a thousand times. So it's kind of hard to experience that because he's Chinese and Greek. He was an immigrant - full-blooded - person from Taiwan who was sort of unwilling to see him [WW's son] as Asian because he was mixed. So I've experienced a lot on a lot of different levels from my mother my family and also my siblings and their own issues where I think a lot of them wanted to have some parts that were interesting about what was - about Chinese culture but at the same time identify as very white. So as my family issues, there is the people I grew up around, and as I grew up into adulthood and working a lot in the API community I experienced a lot of flack. But in more recent years since there's been such an explosion of mixed-heritage people on the scene - people are coming out more and stuff. I feel less stressed around that. I don't feel quite as unique. But I came up in a time when there were a lot fewer mixed heritage people.

AH: I guess kind of coming off from that, how did you first get involved in the queer API organizing?

WW: Well, I went to school at UC Santa Cruz and that's when I came out as a lesbian. So, uh, I was going through a process but at the same time it was very white and it was feeling really uncomfortable for me and I also didn't quite know how to process all the issues that I had culturally and the issues of and pressure I had from my mother. Also the stupid shit that people were saying to me, [chuckle]. So a lot people were up in my face making me feel really uncomfortable and in hippie culture there can be this um... weird fascination and interest in things eastern. So yeah - tofu - people told me like "Tofu was invented in Santa Cruz." [chuckle] And you know eastern philosophy and you know like, "oh you should really know this, how come you don't know about eastern philosophy?" And I mean, I knew some things but I didn't know the things they were reading about or whatever. That kind of stuff. Or there was this sort of tokenizing thing when I went to a meeting and I didn't say anything at all and they were like, "Oh, I'm so glad you came." And I felt like, well what does that mean? Because I realized I was the only person that wasn't white, only white, in this environment and I found one African American woman who was also coming out and we connected because there were so few women of color at the time in this environment. So, before I left Santa Cruz - and I ended up leaving after two and a half years of school, going off to Boston for a couple of years then coming back and finishing - but before I left, I grabbed these two Asian dykes that I ran into at this International Women's Day event, and I said "Hey, so-and-so this is so-and-so." And I said wow, now we are three. And it was like this exciting moment because we realized wow there is so much work we needed to do. There are a lot of things that we can take for granted now, about the kinds of conversations people are having. But at the time, just no one was talking about what it meant to be an Asian dyke, how do you put it all together about being a lesbian and our cultural history and all of that stuff? So they went

on to do some interesting work themselves and I then, I ran away basically - went off to Mexico for six months and then I wasn't ready to come home and I ended up in Boston and I saw - and in Mexico it was also brought to my attention that I was Asian in ways that were kind of ignorant. So I was experiencing racism in Mexico too. I was very confused about what I looked like because I really didn't know what I looked like because so many people had told me so many different things. And that's one of the experiences of mixed heritage is that people are constantly evaluating you and picking apart your body and all this kind of stuff and your features. So you know I had a lot of people who said I looked totally white and I had a lot of people who were saying I looked totally Asian and I had people telling me something else all together. So when I was in Mexico, I was kind of shocked that so many people were referring to me as the "little Japanese girl" because that's what they thought I was. And you know I actually had this guy sit me down and ask me very seriously if my cunt went sideways. [chuckle] So there was a lot of ignorance - you know Bruce Lee, yeah, that was kind of the context people would say. So after the experience of struggling with racism in Santa Cruz and not knowing really how to articulate all that and in Mexico - I went to Boston. And I really felt like I needed to connect with Asians. And I had had my own internalized racism issues about that, but I knew that I needed to work through my issues and I needed to connect with Asians and start talking about stuff. So, I connected with this organization called "Asia" - Asian Sisters In Action which I think is still around in Boston. And it was a small group of women, they were straight for the most part except for there was one woman who was a lesbian and they were just trying to talk about Asian women's issues. You know the issues of Asian women dating white men you know different stuff, but it was mostly straight. And then I also connected with a lesbian of color grouped called "Woza" (sp?) - Women of Color Rising up for Action. And Woza is a word in Soata (sp?) that means "Rise up!" And so this was mostly Black dykes, one Puerto Rican woman, and one straight Asian woman and me. So, it was kind of like I got support around being a lesbian with the lesbians of color that weren't Asian, I got support around being an Asian woman with the straight women, the straight Asian woman. So that's where I started to connect with folks and talk about issues and then I started organizing Asian dykes in Boston. And then I connected with Asian dykes in New York, Asian lesbians of the East Coast (*Transcription note: I'm not sure if this is an actual group or just a description). And they were doing exciting stuff and putting out newsletters and that was just an incredible experience because there were all these, you know they were Hapa, mixed heritage folks, there were you know, just totally different edgy kind of people that I wanted to connect with and was - so that was cool. They were talking about a lot important issues and you know, we started doing some writing. So that was 1983, that I left Santa Cruz and something like 1984 that I connected with Asian lesbians of the East Coast.

AH: So, and then what was your feelings about - you briefly touched on this, but can you elaborate on connecting with all these other Asian queer women?

WW: Well, there was this one amazing experience and I actually wrote about this, so I can find the article, I wrote about this. There were these two Hapa women - you know the word 'Hapa' right? Mixed heritage. There were these two other Hapa dykes who were

really different people, really individual. And, this was in New York City, and I think I went down to New York because someone was having a party and there were all these Asian dykes. So for one, it was like "Wow!" I couldn't believe there were all these Asian dykes you know making out in the bathroom, hanging out, you know all this stuff that was going on. I hadn't seen that many Asian dykes in one place, so that in itself was really powerful and then at the end of the night - you know like 5 o'clock in the morning because New York-style parties just went on and on, right [chuckle] - we get home, I mean we're home to where I was staying, I was crashing with these two folks, I guess they lived together at the time. And it was 5 o'clock in the morning and we kind of just did this group hug and we put our feet together and our hands together and we're like "Oo, Hapa-hands, Hapa-feet!" It was like this moment of like seeing ourselves in each other and feeling really powerful and empowered and proud and it was you know very touching because I had never met people that I could connect with on all those levels - mixed heritage, female lesbian - just being different, not being the norm, not really fitting-in in a lot of places. So, they were really creative smart people. So it was just this really powerful experience.

AH: Now, when did you leave Boston and return, did you return directly to the Bay Area?

WW: Yeah, I left in 85' and came back and started living in San Francisco.

AH: Ok, and how did you connect once you were back in San Francisco?

WW: Yeah, I mean. Let me just back up. During the time when I was in Boston, I basically ran around all the women's festivals and connected with people in the Mid-west and Canada, and the East Coast and kind of - in Boston, New England, and just were really trying to organize and meet every Asian dyke I could and talk about issues. So I had some connections and I also had connections with this woman in San Francisco who was publishing this little tiny newsletter, I don't know if you've seen it: *Phoenix Rising*. At the time it was this little tiny, copied, few pages stapled together that was basically like softball news and recipes- you know nothing political, right. But it was this social thing. So I had connected, during the time I was in Boston I had made the connections with those folks that were out here in San Francisco. So, when I came back, you know I was kind of eager to connect with that community, although I didn't feel like I totally could relate to what they were doing and what they were talking about. But there was also this Lesbian of color support group at the Women's Building so - did you hear about that?

AH: I actually just talked to Donna Ozawa yesterday.

WW: Oh you did!

AH: She told me that you would have something to say about that.

WW: Oh, that's so funny; I ran into her like a month ago and I hadn't seen her in years. It's so funny you know when you come up with people and then you don't see them for a while and you just kind of see where they're at. She was something that was going through a lot, we were about the same age, we were going through the same stuff. Yeah, I mean, there was this lesbians of color support group at the Women's Building, it was a fairly diverse group of women and it was pretty exciting just to hang out and talk about what we were going through. So yeah, I have connections with folks from that time. We also started a lesbian of color support group that met in each other's homes. So I think this one, that one either ended or we just needed more or something. But it was like a different day of the week or something and we just met every Sunday, every week and it was, at the time there was probably like fifteen - twenty people would show up every week.

AH: Wow.

WW: Yeah. So that was a really great community of folks you know from Oakland and San Francisco. So that was happening, but then, you know Trinity Ordone. Did you talk to her?

AH: Not yet. I don't know if I'm going to have time to...but she definitely needs to be talked to.

WW: Yeah! She was you know, saying ok, let's get together and talk about what we want to do. So we got together, and Donna was at this meeting, and Trinity, and you know about 8 or 10 people were there. This was 80...I think this was 86. And she was saying, "What shall we do?" And she asked everybody to bring up their idea. And I said I think we should write, you know we gotta have our stories - you know write and all this stuff. And she looked at everyone...

[End of tape 1, side 1]

[Tape 1, side 2, Willy Wilkinson]

WW: So, Trinity said, yeah, we should have a retreat. This is how we should do it: I think you should do this and you should do this and you this. But it was this really exciting thing because this was, I believe it was May 1987 at the Valley of the Moon camp sit in Sonoma County. We got something like 80 Asian dykes there, so we had this organizers retreat and it was the first one really that was on that scale. So that was a very exciting experience, we brought everybody together you know, American, _?_, immigrant, mixed, full-blooded, various ethnicities, to talk about what it was all about for us.

AH: Can you talk a little bit more about what went on in that retreat and how you felt about it while you were there?

WW: Well, [chuckle], I met the woman that would be my lover next, although I was involved in a relationship so there was a little bit of messiness. [laughter] So there was all that going on, but it was also very powerful to see that many people all together and how everyone was so touched. You know there were people crying, there were people who were like going "Wow, I've never been around this many Asian dykes before." You know, it was just - it was very touching. And it was touching for people in so many different ways because there were people, there were newly arrived people - immigrant folks, there were people who were what, third generation or whatever. It was this real range of experience and I think it was the first time we had to look at how do we bridge all these differences. There was this mixed heritage woman who was Filipino and African American and she was feeling a little bit like, well, I don't relate to all these people, you know my experience is different. How do we bridge all these different things? And this was I think the first time we were looking at so many issues and how we could really create an inclusive environment. Even the whole concept of "Asian Pacific" was new. I think for a lot of ways the lesbian community was kind of on the forefront of saying "Asian Pacific." We said we were "APLs" - Asian Pacific Lesbians and that was still very new. In the beginning we said we were "Asian Lesbians" but then we had to really look at what does it mean; well it's pacific. And a lot of us have roots in the Pacific. Although it took awhile to really truly be inclusive - and some would say it never really was - of Pacific Islander experience. That has never been perfect. And then you know later, much later it came more inclusive of the South Asian experience but at the time there weren't that many South Asians. So I think there was you know all of that inclusive issue and sort of the demographics of who was there at the time. And you know, over time different people have arrived on the scene based on their family histories and stuff. So that was an interesting element. I think that this retreat was really very...it touched people on so many levels because there was this heartfelt experience by going to a writer's workshop and just expressing ourselves. There was this entertainment experience where there was the you know, obligatory talent show or whatever in the evening [chuckle]. There was all that, but it was also really amazing - wow, look at all the cool stuff that people can do in the community. There was this intellectual thing where we were really trying to grapple with what were the issues that most important in this organization, that we needed to be discussing. And then there were you know the people who got it on, right. So [laughter], you know and there was always that right. And it was also really like, half of the group had really bad allergies because it was spring and everything was in bloom so it was like are they crying or are they sneezing? [laughter] I think you know, the experience continues to occur for so many people in so many different ways as more and more people come out and have these experiences and have these retreats and events. But for me, and I know definitely for so many of those people it was just the first time we had any kind of experience like that.

AH: Now, can you talk a little more about your involvement with *Phoenix Rising*. I know you were the co-editor at some point.

WW: Yeah. Ok, so right after that retreat in 87' Katie Sway (sp?) and I took over the reigns of *Phoenix Rising* and I really wanted to transform this paper from you know, kind of the baseball notes and kind of the social gossip thing that it was to something that

really looked at what are our issues. What does it mean for us to be who we are? What are our stories? Let's talk a little bit more in depth about that. So that was an exciting time although it was also really hard, like on a technological level, I mean this was first time this newsletter had been put on computer. So somebody had a Mac with PageMaker and there was somebody whose job it was - you know like long hours all weekend long or whatever. We'd spend long hours to just lay this thing out. And there were all these glitches so it became this real headache just even trying to put it together you know technically. For me it was very exciting to just call people up and encourage them to write because at the time very few Asian women wrote and very few people considered themselves writers. And I say Asians - you know there were still very few Pacific Islander folks or folks with pasts in the Pacific. But, you know, it was really hard to get people to write. Some people say, you know I'm a visual person, I don't write or I don't feel comfortable with English, I don't want to write. So that was like pulling teeth. But we did get some really interesting stories, it was just that process that took awhile of encouragement and stuff. And then the March on Washington happened in 1987. So we took our newsletter and ran around - I mean I know I ran around like a crazy person talking to every single Asian person I saw, I was like "Here take my newsletter!" So that was really exciting because we went national and we were spreading the word about what we were doing, handing people our newsletter and trying to sell subscriptions or just you know connect with people. So we were meeting people from the East Coast and wherever. I hear a baby crying. [chuckle] So yeah, that was an exciting time. I think it was hard and we spent long hours, not just getting on people who wrote, but the people who were really trying to grapple with the computer which was new. But I think we really did change the way - the look of the newsletter and the way - what we were talking about. And that was really exciting for me and that really was part of my vision that people would really take themselves seriously and look at some of the more complex and challenging issues were in our lives.

AH: And did that have a strong role in the community in general - that newsletter, do you think?

WW: Oh definitely. I think it was really this place of connection for people. Because back in the day - before the Internet and all that - it was either you got this thing in the mail, someone called you up, or you went to some event and would run into people at the Women's building or maybe at the bar. But that was the only way that people really connected. So it served a purpose of, not only discussing stuff that was going on for people, it was also letting people know what was happening. So, this events coming up, it's in the newsletter. Even though - I don't know how often we got it out - it was probably, well, it was probably like every couple months I guess, so it wasn't that bad. So it was that kind of connection that was going on. We didn't get an e-mail, you know? [chuckle]

AH: When did you eventually leave the publication or stop being an editor of it?

WW: I think it was...I think it was only like a little over a year. I don't know. OH yeah! Oh my god, yeah. There was this major blow up! [laughter] You know, what would oral

history be without the dyke drama, right? No, I mean people just got so fristed (?). I think part of it was, you know like I said there was this intensity to the work we were doing, it just took forever. And there were these long hours that got spent and it was frustrating I think with this whole computer thing and there was also this difference of opinion. So, Lorali (sp?) who had this really - had the reigns on this *Phoenix Rising* and really felt it was her baby. She was the one who had been editor prior to you know us coming on. She was the one who had the computer. She was the one who really was in a way overseeing what we were doing and overseeing the budget and what the community was all about. She got really pissed off because Barbara Brits (sp?) who was the one who was doing all this tedious work on the computer really just thought, we really need to look at what it means to be Asian and Pacific Islander. So she looked at the map and she said, Ok, it's this many ethnicities. There's all these Asian ethnicities and there's all these Pacific Islander ethnicities and we really need to look at who are all our people. Lorali got really upset. I mean, her world - the community she was organizing was pretty much almost entirely Chinese American and you know some Japanese American. So she was willing to open up to other ethnicities, but I think she got really upset because Barbara was saying, "Oh, Iran and Iraq are part of Asia too." And Lorali was like "No way!" And so there was this meeting at Café Picaro (sp?) which is now a Spanish Tapas restaurant on 16th and Mission. It was me and Katie Sway (sp?), Lorali (sp?), and Barbara Britz (sp?) and it just turned into this big blowout and Lorali at one point took the napkin holder and just sssslammed it down [chuckle], and just was so upset. And I think that big fight - I don't know if that's when we stopped being editors or not, but I just remember that was one of the big dramas of the time. But I think that's when Barbara stopped working on it. So that was going to be harder for us to put out the newsletter because she had been doing all work and stuff on laying it out and everything. So I don't know. I think we might have edited for a year and a half at the most.

AH: And once you stopped doing that, what kind of work, what were you working on?

WW: Well, so in 1988 I rode my bicycle across the country from Boston to San Francisco. I also broke up with the woman I had been with who was white and then got with a Filipina woman that I had met at the retreat. [chuckle] So I was going through changes. I came back and I started doing street-based outreach with injection drug users and sex workers, folks on the street, homeless folks in the Tenderloin. So, I really started working on public health at the time. It was a real exciting times, early times in terms of HIV prevention, the early, the first organization that did the so called "bleach and teach method" (sp?) going out with ___?___ and condoms and so forth and going out and talking to injection drug users. So I worked with an organization with quite a few people of color though I was the only Asian and I basically said 53% of the population of the Tenderloin is Asian, you know are they getting this message too? Because the organization was primarily working with African American folks on the street so, I really started to get very involved in working in HIV prevention. I was a "CHOW", although I don't usually use this term anymore, but - "Community Health Outreach Worker." Oh I was the first Asian Community Health Outreach Worker in San Francisco and the West Coast. And, you know, kind of had to create different ways of approach because no one had worked with the Asian community and you know it just wasn't the same as working

with other communities. You couldn't just come up and start talking about sex. You couldn't talk about AIDS. There was so much superstition; if you talked about it you would bring it on, you know death being a taboo topic and people were afraid of me, that I had AIDS, if I talked to them about it. So there was a lot of work that needed to be done so I started - I really tried to access the Asian and Pacific Islander communities in the Tenderloin and Chinatown and south of Market and develop some outreach strategies. I trained other organizations and providers on this, so that's kind of where my energy shifted. Although I was still very much involved in the community, but I wasn't working on the newsletter. That was 1988.

AH: Ok, so, this might be going back a little bit. But I heard you were involved with the anthology *The Very Inside*.

WW: Oh. Well, um, not really - (excuse me). Uh originally some years before, somewhere around 86' maybe, or [8]7', Trinity and Katie and I were meeting and going to be editing this Asian dyke or API dyke anthology but like I said it was really hard to get people to write. We only had three submissions and we had been working at it for a while. So, it kind of died. So that was - I don't know, 87' somewhere around 87'-88'. So, *The Very Inside*, different people sort of took that on: Sharman Hing (sp?), she's the one whose listed as the editor in the final version, Mio ___?___ was also part of that in Boston. So they were working on for about a few years before that finally got out. So, at that time I wasn't involved. I mean I just barely submitted a poem so I didn't really like have that much ___?___

AH: Ok. Have you organized at all about transgender issues within the API community?

WW: Oh yeah - much more recently though - well, relatively. I came out as transgender in about 94'-95', I had always felt a connection to transgendered people and finally once I started to meet more FTM folks it made more sense for me. I really think that if I had lived in this time, I would have transitioned. But I struggled for many years with whether or not to transition and I think because of the journey I went through sort of, defining — you know becoming the woman I wanted to be or whatever, I think it made sense for me to ultimately decide not to transition. So that's another story, but when I came to the FTM community I was coming from the lesbian of color community; so I was API organizing and you know lot of partying with the African American folks and the Latinos and you know the Salsa-Dance parties were like every weekend. I was just doing a lot of hanging out lesbians of color and it was a very different vibe. And I came into the FTM community, which was overwhelmingly white, I was very confused. On the one hand no one gave me any shit about my name. You know, first or last. The fact that my name was Willy - I didn't have to always, you know around women I always had to you know emphasize that I was female. And Wilkinson, you know people gave me a lot of flack because I was mixed. So, but when I came into the FTM community nobody tripped; they were just like, "Oh, ok." They recognized me and I felt like I got seen for my struggle around gender, but at the same time culturally I wasn't connecting. So it was a struggle because I was feeling like lesbians - and there had been some wonderful lesbians of color in my life - didn't really understand the struggle I was going through around gender. So I

started organizing, I think it was 95' - yeah from 95' to 98' what is now Asian Pacific Islander Wellness Center was - and I had worked at Asian AIDS Project earlier. It became Asian AIDS Project ended up merging with Living Well Project to become Asian Pacific Islander Wellness Center. There was a transgender program that had started in 93' and in 95' there was a small amount of funds, pretty much because of the advocacy of Kiki ___?___ was the director at the time - who was the program director of the transgender program - that [the transgender program] was directed towards butch and FTM folks. At the time we didn't say "FTM spectrum." We just said butch and FTM. And so I started organizing and working with a very small groups of butches and FTMs - numbers there were only about 5 or 6 people that came on a regular basis; it was pretty small. But we were meeting together and just sort of getting support and you know just kind of talking about what our struggles were. And that went on till about 88' - I mean 98', I'm sorry. Then the money dried up and people kind of lost interest too. So that was the early one. Later in 2000, I still was feeling like I wasn't getting support. There weren't enough people of color that were out there. I started organizing at the Pacific Center - a support group for people of color on the FTM spectrum. So that's 2000. And that was well received in the beginning, and there were all kinds of folks that came ethnically and also just you know different stages of were they already transitioning, had they already transitioned, or were they really thinking about it, or were they really not thinking about it they identified as "butch" and wanted to connect. So it was kind of nice in that, it was one of the first groups that also opened up the door to like wherever you're at with your gender is cool. But it was also a real space where people would come and hang and talk about were there trans people of color issues. But you know it was only once a month; it was like, I don't know when, the first Tuesday of the month or something. And it was hard for people to remember when that was and it was also at the Pacific Center in Berkeley which is kind of hard to get to like if you live in the City and you don't have a car it's hard to get to. It had the energy for a while and after a while the energy kind of mellowed and we were really trying to figure out, do people want this? We had an e-mail list and it became kind of more a way that people connected on e-mail. After about three years we decided we'll just keep this an e-mail list. So you know, that continues. So, that was another thing, at that time I did also try to organize Asian folks on the FTM spectrum, I think it was 2000. I had an event here at my house and just try to bring people together. And this time around there were a lot more people - like maybe 12 -15 people, so there was some energy around that. But I really felt like I didn't really have the energy to do it, and then other people really didn't either, so it kind of died down.

AH: What has been your experience with reactions to transgender issues in the non-trans queer API community?

WW: Well, I pretty much can really only speak to the dyke side of that. Well we have an organization called API - or...API QTC - Asian Pacific Islander Queer Woman and Transgender Coalition. So there was a process of just even working with people to come up with that name. So there was a group of people within the organization who were working to bring it together that wanted to be transgender inclusive and wanted to know from those of us who identified as transgender how best to do that and how even to name it. Because people wanted to say "transgender woman," but it was like well no, we can't

really say that because that's not totally inclusive, and you know those kinds of questions about language. I went through some struggles because there were some people who really were not hip-to-the-trip and really did not want to have trans-folks part - whether it was part of the organization or just part of things that they were organizing. And I signed up to do, to learn how to make video workshop or whatever - the organizer called me up and said, "Well, do you identify as male, because we don't have any men in our.." You know. And I'm like, "Well, no. I'm a third gendered person" - You know it was like, it was interesting, even though I had not transitioned during this time; and I spent a number of years with whether or not to transition. But during the time I was really struggling with that I think people started treating me as if I had already transitioned and that I was asked in a couple different situations, you know in a confrontational way, whether or not I was male or female, was I allowed to come to the event. There was a self defense workshop and a person who I did not know at all called me up and said, "Well, don't you identify as male?" And I'm thinking how the hell, I don't even know you, how did you know that? Is it just from my name, or what? Because nobody ever asked me that before? But people I think, because I was talking about transgender issues, you know people were really questioning me. And I think that was kind of fear based. And I totally understand I mean, at the time when I was organizing with women's issues long before there was any question about gender, it was really important for people to be in women's space, and I really respected that and you know that's why I decided not to transition. I really like being in women's space with women. So, but I can understand you know people were really concerned. But at the time it felt really hard to deal with. I think that's just part of the complicated you know thing that we're at now. The place that we're at now with gender. Whereas its really hard to just, you know, it takes work to really define who is invited or whatever to these things and how do you describe that and how and - and are some people going to police that or how are you going to do that? So, I think you know that was part of the growing pains. Sorry am I being too long winded? [chuckle]

AH: No you're perfect. Now, I guess this is kind of jumping back to something you said at the very beginning, but, you're married, is that right?

WW: Mh, huh.

AH: Do you want to talk about that at all?

WW: Sure!

AH: And why you decided to get married and what your life has been like since you've gotten married?

WW: Ok! Yes, a good one. I can talk about marriage and everything...but, no, it's a funny thing. It's just a hot topic. But Georgia and I have been together 11 and a half years now. And we actually got married in 1998 with family friends, we had this wedding. We called it a wedding, we didn't call it a commitment ceremony. We had our wedding you know in a rose garden and we had Moroccan food and belly dancers and stuff. So, we did that and then in 2004 when all the stuff happened with Gavin Newsom and City Hall, I

actually knew somebody who was involved in you know the hush hush process of that happening and gave me a heads up the night before...

AH: Oh, wow.

WW: "Something exciting is happening, come check it out, don't tell a soul!" But we were dying to tell people, but we went by ourselves. And this is the article that I told you about, so I want to give that to you to check out. But you know, I was talking about paralleling my parents experience and our experience. You know we went down there - this whole process - so you know, that was, we were one of the first couples to get married. It was actually right after they did some private ceremonies, when they did the first public ceremony, we ended up getting married on TV and just the whole media thing, we really weren't prepared for at all. And even just the feeling of being at an government building and having people treat you like your relationship matters and you're equal. You know I mean, we realize, wow, we've been internalizing this all along, we hadn't even realized...like we weren't prepared for the emotion of being treated as equal because we were so — we just never thought that was going to happen. So that was an interesting experience and fantastic. I mean it was like "Wow!" You know, [chuckle] so it was really exciting and then you know, then they played that over and over again and whenever they talk about same sex marriage a lot of time they put us on TV you know as one of the shots of lots of different couples. And so we weren't prepared for that either, sort of this after-effect of like being on TV and now I'm having conversations with you know people in the neighborhood or, you know at the Post Office or just my mechanic or people on the street that I wouldn't necessarily be talking to about same-sex marriage or you know whatever people were like "Oh, hey I saw you on TV." So that was interesting and you know just that whole, I loved that whole time when we were the top of the news for a month. And all it was, was Queer folks kissing on TV. You know, that was just an amazing thing and I really think that the visibility has made a huge difference and I feel like my experience gets a little easier every year and that's one of those things that helps. So yeah, that was really really exciting and then - so that was 2004. See, we're like marriage addicts because we got married three times actually. Because this year in 2006 right before our son was born, we were like oh, we better register for Domestic Partnership because we hadn't done that yet. So we did that and we were like ok that's number three. And you know, so he was born and my name is on the birth certificate, so that's part of what changed in January 2005 is that your registered domestic partner, you can be on the birth certificate. So that's pretty exciting and you know I think lots getting said about marriage and I know that there's people who feel like oh, this is not the most important issue and whatever, but there is something very profound about being treated as an equal and there is something very profound about working your hardest to get your children to have the rights, it's about his right too, to us as equal parents.

[End tape 1, side 2]

[Tape 2, side 1, Willy Wilkinson]

AH: Ok, now you were just talking about your son, do you want to talk about what your life has been like since you decided to have a child or that process...

WW: Oh ok, sure! Well, we have this wonderful group called "Baby Buds", have you heard of it?

AH: I talked to Coco Lynn (sp?) last weekend.

WW: Oh you did!

AH: She talked little bit about that.

WW: Oh ok, great...

AH: So you can tell more if you want.

WW: So, we started organizing this group about three years ago, now - September 2003. It's this wonderful group of queer women and trans identified folks who are - it's a primarily people of color - there's a lot of people in interracial relationships. There's a fair number of butch/femme folks and a lot of children now of mixed heritage. At the time we were a prospective parents group so no one had a child yet and then there was this whole class of 2004 where a number of kids were born, about I think 6 kids were born. None were born in 2005, and then three were born in this year 2006. So we are part of this next generation where our little babies are looking up to this two year old. It's been this great support. We went through a long journey which was difficult - in terms of getting pregnant. So, while others were getting pregnant and having kids we were still struggling with the whole insemination process. You know, it can be very very hard and a lot of trouble-shooting trying to figure out what's not working and you know it's just not this easy thing. You have to rely on the magic and the science and the luck of getting pregnant. You can't just say, "Ok let's do that next month." It takes a while, I mean some people - and there was one couple who got pregnant on the first time and everything - but it took us a couple of years of ups and downs and stuff. So, that was wonderful support to have this group and now that we did finally get pregnant and have a child, we're still able to say, "So, did you go through this?" or whatever, you know, "Georgia is having some struggles around breast feeding or whatever," she can say, "Hey, did you guys go through this?" So that's been really wonderful because I think, having a child in a community makes all the difference. We get together and we're with all these other families, we just feel so regular. The rest of the world treats us like we're *not* normal. Even if people can be very accepting in the Bay Area, I still have to deal with that thing that hangs on - that thing that says I'm not equal. I'm not equal because people look at me funny because I'm whatever they're looking at - whether they're looking at me funny because I'm mixed, or because I'm butch, because I'm gender variant, because I'm not the biological parent, because I'm in a dyke relationship with a child because, whatever. There's sort of like a lot of elements to our lives that - You know I'm just used to people being puzzled or not being treated me the same way necessarily. So it kind of magnifies what some of those issues are but then having this community it's like, Oh, we're *all* struggling with so many

of the same issues. And it's so powerful to have that understanding. I think that it's the best way to do it because having a queer family there is just so many complicated things and all those issues that you have as an individual or maybe as a couple become magnified so much more because you have child. You have to be more out you have to be more matter-of-fact, you have to model behavior that's you know, proud, not shameful for your child. There's so many things to think about. And also, as I mentioned earlier, there's this interesting dynamic around, you know, watching people face a lot of the crap out of a place ignorance or curiosity about mixed heritage, with our mixed heritage child, that I've experience myself. And that's hard cuz' experience and re-experience and still be kind of at a loss as to how to handle situations.

AH: What are some of those issues? Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

WW: Well, I think that - I think with any child people will often say what they think they look like. I think that happens you know with everyone. In queer families usually there's kind of this unwritten etiquette about how to handle that. Although, certainly people blow it all the time. In fact, you know a couple I know who have a known donor who is not the father, but the donor, you know people will say, "Oh, you know this child looks like her father." And that really is upsetting to the people of the couple because that's not what they're trying to do. That's not the way that they envision their family. You know people envision their families in so many different ways and - so that's one element of navigating that and trying to help people understand the ways that we're creating our family. So, what's interesting is that people will say different things. And people will say our baby looks like both of us. Which is really exciting because, you know, maybe he does because people keep saying that. But then other people will say, "Oh, you know, he looks totally looks like Georgia" or "He totally looks Chinese," or something. And so it's really kind of like interesting to see that. You know, and yesterday in this experience I had this woman who - we just walked into this Taiwanese-owned café and this woman was really insistent on holding him and that is a little awkward too when people you don't even know want to hold your baby. [chuckle] But I want to be flexible, but you know, it was a little bit awkward there. And then she said, "Oh, American baby" and I said, "Well, he's half Chinese." And then she refused to acknowledge that and she says, "Oh, I don't see that." And I think, well when you look at him, you know clearly to me - he has Chinese eyes, Chinese features, and his color, his nose; but, I think for her, she just didn't want to recognize that and for me that felt - I've experienced that so many times from people who are full-blooded or immigrants that you know - I'm not Chinese because I don't look Chinese to them, but also because I'm mixed or because I'm American-born or whatever. So, I don't know - that's some of the dynamics. I think that people can be very insistent on their vision of things. And I feel like I've had to learn for myself, ok everybody has their own opinion. But a lot of times, on the one hand the opinion is about what they - I've been evaluated as to what *they* think I look like. But sometimes it goes much further than what they think I look like. It's also what they feel that my cultural experience must be based on what they think I look like or who they think I am as a person. That feels hard because there's a whole lot of assumption and weird stuff that people are kind of expressing on me. And so that happened in that environment and still this woman was insisting on holding him and afterwards I was like,

now this woman is dissing my baby, why am I letting her hold him? [chuckles] You know, so I thought, ok I need to figure out how to deal with these situations better. And I think you know, I should be a seasoned veteran - and I am - on these weird situations and yet I still feel kind of a little bit caught in hem lax (?) when people act out like that, you know I'm saying? [chuckle] So, that's some of the interesting things that are happening. But, you know a lot of people have been really really wonderful and he's like this little charmer and people are like, "Oh, he's a pretty boy," or "He's charming all the ladies." You know all this kind of - there's just a lot of positive stuff you know. I don't want to just harp the negative. And I think we've come a long way in our society where people - a lot of straight people - when we go out into the world will just see and accept us for who we are and not ask a lot of questions and see us as two dykes with a baby or a queer family or however you want to describe it. And that feels really wonderful to me when I don't get a lot of flack or a lot of questions. But its those challenging times when someone asks a question and trying to figure out how to navigate answering because I don't owe that person anything. It's like when someone gets up in my face and is like "What are you?" and you know about mixed heritage or whatever. I really don't owe them anything, but how to navigate that and share only what I feel comfortable sharing.

AH: Is there anything else you want to talk about? Anything...

WW: [chuckle]

AH: ...that you think is important or interesting or fun or...[chuckle]

WW: Um, well I think you know on this whole thing of Asian Pacific Islander, we used to say Lesbians and Bisexual women but you know queer women which you know is more encompassing and transgendered folks and just looking at the journey of where we've been, you know I think, wow, we have come a long way. I mean the things that were so important to me in the 80's - like we've got to talk about these issues - after a while I thought, wow, you know, we've been talking about these issues and I don't need to worry about that. And to see so many younger people coming up on the scene and carrying the banner and bringing up more issues and you know, really just creating this vibrant community that has become much more diverse and creative and super smart, I mean it's just amazing to me to see you know, even just the way that a lot of young people can articulate their experience. Because we didn't have the words to even describe what we were about or what we were going through. So, that's amazing to me. And I think *that* has made - you know just the forces of community - has made my experience better overtime. You know maybe it's helped me shape the shame that I had to work through over the years, but also just - you know like I said just being in the world, you know, like sometimes, people stare me down; I get flack in the world; I can get a lot of shit in the bathroom; I can experience a lot of weird things. But at the same time I also have a lot of very positive experiences. For me, what's really important is that my family is supported because that's my home. You know, it's like my wife, my child: we need to be able to go out in the world and get treated with respect. So, that's exciting to feel like that's happening, you know in a lot of situations. [chuckle]

AH: Well, great, thank you so much!

WW: [chuckle]