

Mill Valley Public Library
Lucretia Little History Room
Oral History Program

Joan Glassheim

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Benja Thompson in 2023**

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Ombudsman for Marin County over the last two decades, Joan Glassheim shares her experiences in the communities of Marin. Joan left the East Coast for the West to further her career in the federal government's public housing department, as well as perhaps a fresh start in San Francisco's Castro District. Quickly, Joan felt drawn to Mill Valley, and greatly appreciated the dog-friendliness of nearby beaches and trails. Joan's recollection of the vibrant queer community speaks to the scope of the scene as an active place to gather and grow.

From meeting their spouse at a Bay Area Career Women conference to participating in multiple gay pride parades, Joan was at the forefront of many of the '80s and '90s LGBTQ movements in Marin. Her discussion of The Slant and Janie Spahr's influence further elevates these two pillars of Marin's queer history. Through this conversation, we can learn of a shifting cultural tide of acceptance: Joan speaks warmly of living 'out' without negativity after a young life spent unable to express their truth, and credits Marin for its welcoming nature.

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Oral History of Joan Glassheim

August 1, 2023

00:01 Benja Thompson: Today is August 1st, 2023. My name is Benja Thompson, and this interview is for the Mill Valley Public Library's Oral History Program. Today, I am speaking with Joan Glassheim at the Mill Valley Library. Thank you for joining me and for contributing your oral history to our community.

00:22 Joan Glassheim: You're welcome. It's a pleasure to be here.

00:27 Benja Thompson: What brought you to Marin County or Mill Valley?

00:31 Joan Glassheim: Well, I was working for HUD, the federal agency back east, after I graduated from college and was involved with the management of public housing, including developments in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire. And one of the geographical areas I covered was an Indian reservation in Maine. So in the mid-seventies, HUD decided to open an Office of Indian Housing in San Francisco, and it involved a promotion for me, and I thought it might precipitate a break-up of my marriage, which I was hoping for, thinking maybe my husband wouldn't follow me, but he did. But anyway, HUD relocated me to San Francisco and we found temporary housing on Dolores Street. I hung out in the Castro a lot, but I'm also a beach lover, so we would, on weekends, would drive to Stinson Beach and saw a house in Mill Valley, a sign for houses for sale and fell in love with it. With the high ceilings and bright lights and green hills of Marin. So I bought it back in 1976 and I'm still there ever since, fortunately.

01:47 Benja Thompson: Mm hmm. Wow. What was the West Coast like? Was this your first time on the West Coast?

01:54 Joan Glassheim: No, I had been on the West Coast for vacation and definitely was always drawn to San Francisco and Marin, even in the years prior.

02:08 Benja Thompson: Do you remember the, the first time you'd been to Marin, or Stinson, or an early memory from--

02:15 Joan Glassheim: Well, let's see. So it would have been in the '70s, part of a vacation with my husband. And I just found Stinson Beach just fabulous in its spaciousness and openness compared to the beaches of the East Coast, which were very, very crowded. Plus, Stinson Beach and a portion of it allowed dogs, which I absolutely love. And it was just terrific. I mean, I was also there one November and it was warm enough to walk on the beach, and back home, which was New York City, was snowed in, freezing cold. You know, all that. So the West Coast had a lot of appeal to me.

02:57 Benja Thompson: And then what was the Castro District like in the '70s?

03:04 Joan Glassheim: Well, because I actually knew I was gay but was living a conventional marriage. I found it very stimulating, interesting, fun to hang out in the Castro and just be surrounded by people that I felt comfortable with.

03:27 Benja Thompson: And then, did you feel comfortable then moving to Mill Valley, in terms of, did you feel like there was a community of people?

03:38 Joan Glassheim: Well, actually, at that point in time, I did not-- remember, I was not out. I was still a married woman. So I wasn't consciously thinking about that. I knew I loved Mill Valley. I just loved the location, geography of it. So I, and I was still married. Didn't know exactly what was, what direction my life was going to go. So I didn't think about that aspect of it. I was not aware of any-- I had no information about anything gay happening in Marin at that time.

04:13 Benja Thompson: But Mill Valley itself had drawn you.

04:15 Joan Glassheim: Yes. Yeah.

04:18 Benja Thompson: Do you have a favorite place or memory of Mill Valley?

04:23 Joan Glassheim: Well, probably Tennessee Valley Road, where I live, right above Tennessee Valley Road. And that was a really stunning place. I used to run there almost every other day, and I really was struck by that. I still love it, but now I'm walking and not as much as I did because it doesn't allow dogs. So I had to go to Stinson Beach, which is also terrific and then the third favorite place is the Mill Valley Dog Park, which has gatherings day and night. And Friday they have a happy hour. And it's a great fun, great fun.

05:06 Benja Thompson: That's cool. And then could you provide a sketch of your professional career? You've already touched on as part of the why--

05:15 Joan Glassheim: Right.

05:15 Benja Thompson: Yeah.

05:16 Joan Glassheim: Well, I worked for the federal government for 32 years, involved with public housing. And then retired. And when I retired here, I was just looking. Looking up information about trailheads for hikes in Marin and up popped something about jobs in Marin. So I just clicked on it for the heck of it. And there was this job that said 'ombudsman.' And without knowing specifically what the job was, I just knew the word 'ombudsman' meant 'neutral party' and I like that. So I applied right then and there without thinking very much about it and really never imagined I would get the job. But the irony is that one of the requirements was that you had been working in social work for a year and I had back in 1964 when I was doing graduate school work for the New York City Department of Welfare, and that qualified me for this job 38 years later.

06:23 Benja Thompson: Wow, yeah.

06:24 Joan Glassheim: In addition, they were looking for-- the office was several social workers who were very dedicated and excellent, but they were not computer literate or comfortable. And the state was threatening to shut down the office because they weren't

complying with computer reporting requirements. And I'm, you know, expert in that field. So I wound up getting this job pretty unexpectedly and I thought, "Oh, I'll do it for another year or two." And I'm still there 22 years later. I'm still at this second career, so to speak. And I love it.

07:03 Benja Thompson: Yeah, how has the experience been? And could you describe what an ombudsman is?

07:09 Joan Glassheim: I'm an ombudsman in the Office of Long-Term Care Program. So we are advocates for residents who are in residential care facilities or skilled nursing facilities, and we advocate for them, we take complaints and deal with concerns that their friends or family may have. And we just help to resolve any issues and try to make their lives better. Often they don't have anyone to help them. So it's a very, very rewarding job, challenging, frustrating, but. And so my friends often ask me, "Why are you still working? You're 80." I love it. And why should I stop? So here I am.

07:52 Benja Thompson: Yeah. Yeah. And it's helping other people, like, directly.

07:56 Joan Glassheim: Directly, directly, yeah.

00:07:59 Benja Thompson: What's something you've learned from that position? And from that experience?

08:05 Joan Glassheim: Probably a huge amount of patience. The importance of listening. The value of being helpful. I also learned a lot about doing research to find information because all kinds of, even after 20 years, questions come up that nobody has answers to. So I've enjoyed that part of it, too.

08:36 Benja Thompson: Mm hmm, thank you. And then you've been involved in the Marin Gay Pride parades that were held in the '90s. Could you describe what those were like, your involvement, and the 1993 contingent?

08:57 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. Well, I was very active in Marin and gay-lesbian events throughout the '80s. And so when we heard there was going to be a parade in the '90s, I was very excited about it. And at that time I was involved with Bay Area Career Women, which was an offshoot of the San Francisco office, and The Slant, which was the first gay newspaper. And so everybody got on board and wanted to participate in that parade. Even my partner wanted to, who was a closeted gay woman because she-- her career was portfolio management. And in those years, there were very few women in that career and very few gays were out as far as anybody knew. So she wanted to participate but couldn't, wasn't willing to walk in the parade. So she created a box, a big cardboard box in which she wrote "Gays in the Closet." And the irony of this is that my ex-husband provided us with this big refrigerator box. So a few people knew who she was, but people were wandering around looking at her feet, trying to figure out who it was. It was really a hoot.

Then we-- skipping to the 1993 March on Washington, a contingent of 15 of us went to Washington with a banner that read "Out On The Street Where We Live," and the Gannett newspaper found us. They were looking for local stories, and it wound up being put on the front page of the IJ. Oh, let's see. And so that's, in a way, actually how I wound up coming out in my

office at that time. Because when I got back from that parade, there were six copies of the IJ on my desk and all these people coming over to me, several of them telling me that they were bisexual, gay, which they had never said before.

11:17 Benja Thompson: Oh wow, yeah.

11:17 Joan Glassheim: So it started all these people coming out, because in that office, I mean, I was known-- I had been married and I was divorced. So people who I hadn't come out to just didn't, had no reason to think that I was gay. But it was perfectly fine and wonderful.

11:34 Benja Thompson: And so much, it says so much about the importance of, like, visibility and representation where as soon as it felt safe for people to have that discussion, people were coming to you--

11:46 Joan Glassheim: Coming to me.

11:47 Benja Thompson: --with their own identities.

11:48 Joan Glassheim: That's right. That's right. It was really, it was very exciting. And then in that parade, we wore the 1991 T-shirts that had been worn in the Marin 1991 parade. 'Alive and...' something about 'alive.' 'Rainbow Pride is Alive in Marin.' And then the theme of 'Out on the Street Where You Live' with the theme for the 1993 Marin Parade, where the T-shirts actually had a space that people could write their address if they wanted to on it. That was, you know, a fabulous, fabulous experience. Yeah.

12:30 Benja Thompson: And then had you said how the DC contingent came about, in terms of like, who decided who was going?

12:40 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. I mean, I was looking at the pictures, as I said, 15 of us. And, you know, so probably more than half were lesbians who, we were, who were friends. But, you know, I actually can't remember how we all-- somehow when we heard about this parade, a group of us just said, "Let's go." And we were asking everybody we knew to go and people who could go wound up going. And we kind of all stayed in different-- I had a friend who my partner I stayed with, the people stayed in different locations. And then we got together for gatherings and so on. Yeah, I can't remember exactly how we decided, but word got out that people were going. And my partner had special rainbow cookies made to take on the airplane. Because most of us were on the same plane and we, she handed them out to anybody who wanted them.

13:43 Benja Thompson: Oh, that's great. That's really cool.

13:44 Joan Glassheim: Yeah, rainbow cookies. Yeah.

13:53 Benja Thompson: Before moving on, I just wonder if there's any other, like, memories you have of the, the gay pride parades. And was '93 the last year?

14:05 Joan Glassheim: To my recollection, it was the last one, unfortunately. And I don't know if it was because Jane Fletcher, oh, not Jane Fletcher, but Janie Spahr was not involved

anymore because she was quite a organizer of that. I don't know why it didn't happen. And I have to-- I do remember there were occasional people on the sidewalk heckling us and so on, but there were also large numbers of people applauding. I mean, all in all, to me, it was a very happy experience. And we wound up in Albert Park, I think, picnicking and so on after it.

14:46 Benja Thompson: I'm glad that it was a positive experience.

14:49 Joan Glassheim: Yeah, absolutely.

14:52 Benja Thompson: And then could you describe your involvement with The Slant? The, the gay newspaper of the '90s for Marin County?

15:02 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. So Jane Fatcher is the one who asked me if I would participate in that. They were, you know, looking for people to help. And I became like an editor with the red pencil because I was very good at shortening very lengthy stories, and so on. And we, you know, went over the contacts monthly. We had meetings at Ed Wright's house, who was a former minister in Ross actually. And we also sold advertising. And I think that became problematic. I mean, it was difficult to get paid advertising, but we persevered for, you know, a while, almost ten years, I think. And, and my partner delivered papers throughout the county. She drove up to the Marin Civic Center, various grocery stores, the Depot in Mill Valley. Took it and we put it anywhere, you know, we could get people to, who were willing to have it. So I had a huge supply of them. And which after a period of time, I gave to the Gay Historical Society in San Francisco. Oh, and my partner actually did a column because she was a portfolio manager. She did a column, something like 'Money Matters,' in which she discussed that type of thing. And then there were all different columns in there about psychological health, issues, and book reviews, all kinds of topics. It was fun. Yeah.

16:44 Benja Thompson: Yeah. And do you feel like you saw or felt an impact of The Slant for the community?

16:56 Joan Glassheim: Yeah, I think it generated a certain excitement. People were, you know, would say, "When is it coming out?" You know, we tried to put it out at a certain time every month and... you know, it was picked up. It was used and activities were generated because of it. Yep, I think so. And there was a time that there was another newspaper in Sonoma called We The People, and they wanted to join with us, I remember. But there was some differences of opinion and we felt that, geographically, we were too far apart, so we never did join with them.

17:42 Benja Thompson: And how would you characterize the Marin County queer community either at that time or now?

17:52 Joan Glassheim: Oh, well, let's see. So in, at that time, because of all these events that were going on, it seemed like a very vibrant and active community. There were, there was another organization called the Other Side, which was a lesbian organization, very social, that was active for a while. And then there was BACW. But there was a lot going on in private homes. I mean, I had a football party, movie nights, people had swimming things, barbecue. So there were a lot of-- and hikes. There was a lot of activity going on in those years. Mm hmm. And at that time, I was also on the board of Frameline, which is the San Francisco Gay Lesbian

Film Festival. So I was very-- that took up a lot of time, although that was in San Francisco. It was pretty intense all year and especially in June. Yeah. So I was very actively involved at that time on many different levels.

19:02 Benja Thompson: When did you first get involved?

19:06 Joan Glassheim: Oh, well, yeah, that would take me the story of when I came out, which I can go through. I was almost 40 when I first came out and that was in 1981 or so. And at that time I joined the group that was called 'The Other Side.' and that's where I met my first female lover with whom I was madly in love. Anyway, that relationship did not last terribly long. And I, but I was like, kid out of-- on spring break, making up for lost time for a while. Until I met the love of my life, Elizabeth, in 1986. And we've been together ever since.

20:09 Benja Thompson: Oh, wow. Do you remember how you met?

20:13 Joan Glassheim: Oh, yes, of course. We met, actually, at a BACW event in San Francisco. They had monthly networking events, and, you know, they had little social hours before, then they had presentation lectures or whatever after. That is where I met...right.

20:35 Benja Thompson: Yeah, oh wow. And then you've mentioned "The Other Side." Can you explain what that was?

20:40 Joan Glassheim: Well, that was a social group only and it did hikes, but it also, it didn't-- I can't remember what year it ended, but it was in the '80s because that's when BACW kind of came in and BACW was more organized, I guess, more of a structured environment and had more support behind it. So we kind of picked up where "The Other Side" let go. But I met my first female partner through "The Other Side," so I have happy feelings about that.

21:22 Benja Thompson: And then after having met Elizabeth, was that when you started to get involved with The Slant and with the parade and more, like, community building?

21:32 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. Yeah. Right. I mean, we were very social, were very active.

21:41 Benja Thompson: And then when did you know, before coming out, when did you know yourself that you were gay?

21:49 Joan Glassheim: Oh, I knew I was gay as a youngster, as a teenager. I had crushes on, you know, girls in high school, girls in college. And I guess, though, in the '50s and '60s, it was not easy to be out, to be gay. And I often wonder if any of the girls I had crushes with, if they had reciprocated, maybe I would have started out and been gay from the beginning. But I took the conventional route and got married to a man. And... Elizabeth and I have been married-- we get married any chance we can get. We actually first got married in 1987.

22:38 Benja Thompson: Oh, wow.

22:39 Joan Glassheim: Right. But we met in '86, and we signed what we called a 'living together arrangement.' Then, which was kind of symbolic, like a marriage, so to speak. And then Washington held this wedding. A mass wedding in '87. And we went to that with some friends.

23:00 Benja Thompson: Oh, I didn't know about that.

23:01 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. Oh, I have some material about it I'll show you.

23:07 Benja Thompson: Growing up, then--

23:08 Joan Glassheim: So we were married there. And then, of course, we were married in San Francisco when Gavin Newsom, you know, made that possible. But that was then annulled. And so then we were married again in 2008 here in Marin. And actually, the tax collector of Marin married us, so I said, "I'll always be happy to pay my taxes to you."

23:34 Benja Thompson: When you were growing up and not quite feeling safe to express, like, that side of your identity, did you ever think that one day you'd be married to the same woman three times?

23:48 Joan Glassheim: Never. No. No, I never would have thought. And even, you know, even when I first got involved with Elizabeth, who I adored and still adore, I mean, I didn't necessarily think that we would survive all these years. She's significantly younger than I am. And so the joke is, 'catch them young and train them right.' But I never was able to train her at all. She was impossible. But we're incredibly happy. I mean, I'm just totally amazed, actually. And I remember, she always, she wanted to say, "Oh, I want to be married to you longer than you were married to your husband." Well, that's gone by already, you know, two times, so, yeah.

24:33 Benja Thompson: Yeah, yeah. That's lovely.

24:36 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. Yeah. It's just amazing. We really both evolved, you know? And it's amazing that it works. When it works, it works.

24:47 Benja Thompson: I'm just thinking of a conversation I had had with Jane Fatcher about using, like, 'wife' versus 'partner' versus 'spouse.' What do you think about those sort of language things?

25:02 Joan Glassheim: We have used the word spouse because we don't like, you know, the word 'wife' and 'partner' comes across as too businesslike. I mean, although I have used it. Yeah. But when we, now, nowadays, when we meet people, we use the word 'spouse' even if we're meeting people who don't know us, who don't know that we're gay, we're out and we use that word to be clear.

25:36 Benja Thompson: And what's your experience, what are your experiences like, being out in Marin County for decades now?

25:44 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. I have not ever had any problems. And this is quite interesting. I mean, I have a lot of straight friends. I played mahjong weekly with all straight

women who of course know all about me. And it's all fine. Everything's fine. In fact, I mean, I think some of them, you know, envy the relationship. But, you know, feel it's too late for them to now, you know, change or whatever.

26:19 Benja Thompson: I'm glad to hear that it's been, yeah, a positive experience.

26:22 Joan Glassheim: Yes, I have not, you know, had any problem in my... so, as I said, a lot of social straight friends. My office is primarily straight, but it's completely comfortable to be gay. There are a lot of gay activities and events and pictures are put on the wall with all of us. Well, Marin is in some way a bubble. I mean, for a lot of reasons. For a lot of reasons. And I feel very lucky to be here.

26:54 Benja Thompson: Oh, and then what would you say community means to you?

27:01 Joan Glassheim: Oh, it means being comfortable and accepted. And I do feel that way. I mean, I think in the '50s and '60s, I wouldn't have felt that way. But definitely now, I do. I mean, part of it perhaps has to do with getting older and not caring as much what other people think. But on the other hand, there is still that external input that you might want. But I'm not, you know-- meeting people at the dog park, for example, are primarily straight and we're out. Everybody is extremely accepting. So the community, the Marin community, to me, is accepting.

27:50 Benja Thompson: And how do you feel like things have changed either in Marin or in sort of the cultural, like, for the nation over the, over your lifetime, over the last decades?

28:08 Joan Glassheim: Well, I think things have really... the lesbian community particularly has become more normalized, I think, and less radical and almost more invisible. I mean, that might be partially my age group, but that's what I see. I mean, so that there's less need to create a separate identity, which is why I think organized groups are not particularly successful. I don't know if you're aware there was a new group that started in March of 2022 to meet at the Depot the first Sunday of the month, and it went on for about seven months and there was a large turnout at the beginning and then it kind of died off, which says to me, maybe there just is not a need for separate identities. There were pictures of Bob Harmon. You know him?

29:10 Benja Thompson: Yes.

29:10 Joan Glassheim: Bob and Bob. They were on The Slant and I knew them. And they were at that event, too. But they're even-- well, one of the Bobs is much older, but they didn't come back. I mean, this was a younger couple with children who wanted to create a community. And it, it looked like it was going to be successful, but then it didn't. I mean, people just stopped coming. So that says perhaps that there's not a need for...

29:41 Benja Thompson: That's interesting. Yeah. When the, like, wider culture is more accepting there's less of, there's less marginalization. So then the groups that form there are less needed because people can find community amongst anybody.

30:03 Joan Glassheim: Right, that's right.

30:04 Benja Thompson: That's interesting.

30:05 Joan Glassheim: Yeah. And yet there are still chapters of the Sierra Club, for example, they used to be called Gay-Lesbian Sierrans, now it's called Rainbow Sierrans. I mean, it's still very nice to, you know, to hike with gays and lesbians. So they are still functioning. And of course, the Spahr Center, you know, does all kinds of things with all types of groups. And they seem to be doing well. They started to do a hiking group called Trail Gayzers, which I love the name, and a bunch of my friends went, but it was only small. And so we decided-- and they were having very short hikes. And so I'm not sure what the thinking was, but that seems to have stopped. But they do many, many other events.

31:05 Benja Thompson: And then I guess what was it like to see-- I think it started as the Ministry of Light, and then Spectrum, and now Spahr.

31:16 Joan Glassheim: Right.

31:17 Benja Thompson: Had you seen, like, that shift change? Or what was that...?

31:24 Joan Glassheim: Well, you know, I wasn't that involved with that organization. Only Janie Spahr, I mean, I was a devoted follower of Janie Spahr. And, you know, I would have, that's how I started doing a number of things, because she asked. So since she left, which was quite a long time ago. I haven't been that involved. And they've been different leadership. And, you know, mostly my involvement is getting requests for donations.

32:06 Benja Thompson: And then might you have any advice to share for this new generation of queer folk?

32:16 Joan Glassheim: Well, I think the obvious is to, for them to be bold and fearless. But I don't think they need that. I think they are already. I mean, you know, obviously moreso than I was so that they don't waste many years of their life. But it just-- because it's so much more comfortable now. I don't think that people who are aware of, you know, being gay would choose not to. I mean, maybe in other parts of the country, but here I think they would feel comfortable. And I of course encourage that. We go down to Palm Springs, of course, Palm Springs is primarily gay men with a lot of women, too. And they have a Dinah Shore, which is a lesbian week, every year. And we went to a party there and I couldn't get over the fact that everybody was like 50 years younger than I was. And they came up to talk to us: "Thank you for all that you've done!" Oh, yeah. Yeah.

33:27 Benja Thompson: What did that feel like?

33:30 Joan Glassheim: It felt like being forced to recognize, you know, how old I am. Which is, which happened recently. And I grew up in New York and I was there very recently. And all of a sudden, people are standing up in the subway to give me their seats. That's never happened before. Never.

33:51 Benja Thompson: That's a new phenomenon.

33:51 Joan Glassheim: It's like, "Oh, my, I can stand! But okay, I'll sit." So that's a whole 'nother issue. But yeah, I still can't believe I'm 80. But anyway.

34:07 Benja Thompson: Do you remember the first gay person you met or first lesbian or first exposure to another, like, queer identity?

34:21 Joan Glassheim: Yes. In college. You know, I was aware that there was, there were a few women who were lesbian. But I don't know why I didn't feel comfortable with them, but they, that was the first. Yeah. And then, you know, once I got married, I never met, for many years really had no particular contact with anybody gay. It wasn't until the early '80s that I went to "The Other Side" and met roomfuls of gay people.

35:00 Benja Thompson: And then I think just one of the last questions is, was there a-- and sorry if you already said this but was there like a specific moment that you felt like, "Oh, like, it's time to come out." Like was there something that gave you courage, or when did that turn?

35:20 Joan Glassheim: Oh, well, it definitely happened, you know, when I was separated from my husband and he was no longer, you know, living in the house. That-- immediately one of the first things I did was go to a gay event. I mean, I've known. I've known all along, but, you know, just couldn't or didn't feel that I could do this while I was still married. So once I was separated, that was it. I, you know, reached out.

35:49 Benja Thompson: Yeah.

35:50 Joan Glassheim: Yeah.

35:50 Benja Thompson: And now it seems like you've been living like your truth for so long. It's so wonderful.

35:56 Joan Glassheim: Absolutely. Yeah, I feel very, it feels so authentic and comfortable and wonderful. Yeah. Yeah.

36:06 Benja Thompson: Is there anything you'd like to add, any questions I've missed?

36:10 Joan Glassheim: No, I think it's fine, no.

36:14 Benja Thompson: Well, thank you. Yeah. Thank you for joining and sharing your story.

36:17 Joan Glassheim: Thank you. Thank you. It's really been fun. It's been fun, you know, thinking about the past and looking, you know, at some of the pictures and the material. It's really been a lot of fun. So thank you for doing this.

36:32 Benja Thompson: Of course.