

UC Santa Cruz

Out in the Redwoods

Title

Ziesel Saunders: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965-2003

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ZIESEL SAUNDERS



Interviewer: Alana Chazan: *On February 22, 2002 I interviewed Ziesel Saunders at her home in Santa Cruz, California. I had never met Ziesel, and I had only briefly corresponded with her by email and telephone. Given that I identify as a feminist, an activist, a Jew, and as queer or a dyke, I felt that Ziesel and I shared some basic characteristics. Yet because each of these identities is so broad and fluid, and there is a generation gap between Ziesel and me, I did not expect us to be extremely similar in our outlooks on the world either. While in many respects my premonition was correct, during the interview I was also struck by how many things have not changed.*

Ziesel Saunders was a student at UCSC from 1972 to 1977. She was a founding member of the Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective and the co-author of Lesbian Health Matters! Saunders was an administrator at Merrill College from 1984 to the late-1990s—Editor.

Chazan: Ziesel, please tell me a little bit about your early life, like where you were born, where you grew up, and your family background.



Saunders: I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I'm forty-seven now. I was born in the 1950s and I'm Jewish. I grew up with two parents and eventually two brothers. I was very close to my grandparents and extended family and saw lots of relatives, if not every day, several times a week.

Chazan: When did you first come out? What was your coming out process like?

Saunders: I never thought about being a lesbian or straight or anything. When I was fifteen and a junior in high school, I had this best friend named Luita. I always had one really special friend while growing up. We had gotten to be really close friends, and we used to hug some, which was different for me because I wasn't really affectionate with my friends, and she was always complaining that she didn't have a boyfriend. I didn't have a boyfriend. I felt like I was supposed to care about it, but I didn't really care. There was this guy that she wanted to ask out. She finally asked him out, and somehow along the way some guy who was a friend asked me out. We all decided to go on a double date together. We went to the movies and we all held hands in a row. Luita and I sat together and we held hands, and we had our boyfriends on each side of us. It was like this totally bizarre weird date. After that we both decided to skip the boyfriends, and we started making out. Then one thing led to another.

Chazan: Were you open about it with your parents?

Saunders: No, because this was 1970. And this wasn't the kind of thing that you talk about with your parents. Plus, I didn't really consider myself... I mean, I didn't really know *lesbian* or *not lesbian* or anything. I didn't really think about it. I didn't consider myself anything, but that I had a big crush on my best friend and she had a big crush on me. We were secretive with our families, but we were involved the rest of our junior and senior year in high school. Eventually we were less secretive with our friends. We used to walk around school sometimes holding hands, and people yelled at us. But our friends, for whatever reason, were actually pretty cordial about the whole thing. We told one of our teachers who we were really good friends with. We wrote journals, and he



had given out some signals that we could tell him pretty much anything and that he would be fine.

Eventually we weren't really as careful as we thought we were, and we were making love one day when her mom came home. She walked in on us and it was totally horrible. Mom starts screaming. I think we all started screaming. She is screaming at me to get out, so I got my clothes on, and then I had to ride my bicycle home. While I was getting dressed and getting my bicycle ready I heard her calling my mother. I really didn't want to go home, but I was only sixteen and I didn't really feel like I had any choices, so I rode my bicycle home. My mom had locked my brothers out of the house so that she could scream at me. I walked in the door and she just started screaming and screaming and screaming at me about how it was the most disgusting thing in the whole world, and she always knew something was the matter with us, because she'd walked in once when we were hugging and she'd given me this horrible time about it. That was a bunch of months before. And that I was sick and I was going to make my brothers sick, and she didn't know what she'd done wrong, or what my father had done wrong. It was like every cliché you've ever heard in the whole world. But the worst part was she kept asking me what we did sexually. My mom and I had never talked about sex. I certainly wasn't going to talk to her about it, but she seemed pretty obsessed with it because she absolutely could not figure out what we would do, which gave me a big clue about her sex life.

She called my father at work and she told him he had to come home. He came home and my brothers were still locked out of the house because she was screaming and ranting and raving at me. My dad came home, and first he tried the good guy tactic, but eventually he started screaming at me too, and they told me I had to go to a psychiatrist. They did send me to the psychiatrist. I don't know how they found him. He was like ninety years old, and he was this really sweet guy, really nice. He asked me if I liked to hug and kiss my friend and I said, "Yes." They never asked me more than that and I never said more than that. He told my parents that I was fine, it was just some phase, and that they should ignore it totally, but that we should all go to family therapy.



My parents found this family therapist. They went once and they had this huge fight. Then they sent me. The therapist promised me that I could tell him anything and he wouldn't tell my parents. He asked all these questions. He was all worried about if I had a good relationship with my mother. I had a terrible relationship with my mother. I was fairly honest with him, and then he told my parents everything I said, after he'd promised me that he wouldn't tell them anything. My parents didn't want to go back to him because they had this big fight, and I wouldn't go back to him because he told on me. So it just got dropped. The really nice psychiatrist guy had told them to ignore it because it was just a phase, and to let me do whatever I wanted to. They were really stuck, so they let me do whatever I wanted to do. I still got to sleep over at Luita's house every Friday, which was what our pattern was. So I never ever talked about it; they never ever asked. That pattern continued through my end of my relationship with Luita, and for many years after that.

Chazan: Did they ever come to be more accepting?

Saunders: This all happened when I was sixteen. I think until I was about twenty-seven we never talked about it, although I would bring my girlfriends home with me whenever I went to visit them. I slept with them, but since we weren't talking about it they couldn't make me not do it. I didn't use the word *girlfriend* or anything. I had lived with these different women, and had these different relationships with women whom they had met. When I was about twenty-seven I wrote them a letter saying, "By the way, I'm tired of not calling it what it is. You know I'm a lesbian, and I've always been a lesbian and you just have to deal with this." They both wrote me back totally bizarre letters. My mom always thought I might be that way because of the thing that happened with Luita, but she just couldn't believe it. My dad wrote me back some weird letter about how I was a lesbian because I didn't get along with my mom. They were worried about it for quite a while but at some point they just... [Now] they're like totally normal about it. They were totally supportive of my getting pregnant on my own and having a kid and their only grandchild. Whenever I see them I almost always have a girlfriend with me. We do mention it sometimes. I will make sure I use the word *lesbian* around



them, or something like that, just so they can't forget. But they seem to know I'm a lesbian and think that's fine. They have even told a few of their friends.

Chazan: I was wondering when you first came to UCSC, and why you chose to come here, especially coming from New York?

Saunders: Well, we had moved to Los Angeles my last two years of high school, so I was already in California. I didn't choose to come to UCSC. I went to UC San Diego, but my girlfriend Luita from high school was at UCSC. I was totally miserable in San Diego. By that point I had read this article in the *New York Times* magazine about lesbians, and I knew I was one of those. I was totally excited, but I couldn't find any lesbians where I was going to school. My girlfriend came up here and there was this big gay and lesbian meeting that she went to. She was totally excited, so then I started spending almost all my time in Santa Cruz meeting other lesbians and going to these meetings. I eventually dropped out of school and moved up, partly to be with her, but even more to be with all these lesbians.

Chazan: What year was that?

Saunders: 1972. The conference, the big first meeting was in the fall of 1971, but I moved up in early 1972.¹⁹ I went to Cabrillo and then I went to UCSC, and I graduated from there.

Chazan: When you were a student at UCSC, were you aware of a GLBT community? What did that community look like at that time?

Saunders: Well, [I had] a different girlfriend named Robin; she and I were listed as the lesbians to contact in the *Kresge Handbook*. If people coming to school were wanting to talk, they could call us. There was a whole bunch of different stuff that was happening. At that point, people really identified more as "lesbian and gay." Bisexuals weren't really

¹⁹Saunders is referring to the conference "Homosexuality: Exploring an Alternative in Sexual Expression," held at Cowell College in December 1971. See *City on a Hill Press*, 12/9/71.



considered part of it, and transgendered—we hadn't even heard the term yet. There were all these activities on campus, and different lesbian and gay groups that I was involved in. All my friends who were lesbians, who went to UCSC, were involved in starting all these different organizations in town. The Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective and Women Against Rape—lesbians from UCSC started almost every single one of those women's organizations, and I was really involved in most of those.

Chazan: That's great. I was wondering if you were involved in the feminist community here in UC Santa Cruz.

Saunders: I was a women's studies major. I graduated in 1976.

Chazan: You were involved in founding the GLBT Center on campus, weren't you? Did you do that as a student or after you graduated?

Saunders: I did that as a staff member. I was a student at UCSC, and then I left. Then I came back to work at UCSC in 1984. When I came back to work I was a lesbian. I had a bizarre life turn, when I was actually married for a while to a man. I was involved with the LGB community as a lesbian, and as a straight (I never called myself bisexual), and that's when I gave the space to the GLBT community.

Chazan: Was that a difficult thing to start at the University? Was there a lot of opposition or a lot of support?

Saunders: Well, through the whole history of UCSC, there have always been lots of different LGBT groups. People could plug in in lots of different ways depending on how they identified and what kind of things they wanted to do. But there never was a physical space. I was in charge of this room which used to be called the Crown/Merrill Recreation Room, that was this totally under-used room no one was interested in and no one maintained or did anything for. But as soon as I [said] "Oh, well this could be a space for the LGBT community," all of a sudden everyone was totally interested in the building.



Chazan: I have a question about your Jewish identity. How does your Jewish identity fit in with your lesbian identity? And also, while you were at UCSC, I was wondering if you were involved with Hillel, and how the Jewish community or how Hillel responded to your sexual orientation?

Saunders: I always kept my involvement with the Jewish community. It's a lot stronger right now than it was through my student years, but I always went to Jewish functions and there were so many lesbians on campus that were Jewish. I felt for years that everyone who was a lesbian was either ex-Catholic or Jewish, and that there was a really big difference, that people had to be ex-Catholics in order to be lesbians, but you could still be Jewish and be a lesbian. When there was the Briggs Initiative in 1978, a whole bunch of us lesbians went to the rabbi and said, "We see other Jewish organizations around the state taking a positive stand for gays and lesbians. We want you to do that too." I think that I haven't really ever encountered a whole lot of institutionalized homophobia in the Jewish community. There are certainly always individuals who are totally homophobic, but like I'm involved now with the Temple and doing GLBT stuff. The Temple [Temple Beth El in Aptos, California] has this Twice Blessed group for lesbians and gay people. Everyone's cool about it. Hillel, I think, was kind of initially more conservative.

Chazan: Nowadays they do Queer Shabbat.

Saunders: Right. But I think Hillel was initially a lot more conservative, because it's funded by the Jewish Federation and the Jewish Federation didn't for years... It's not so much that they were anti-gay, but they just didn't see being gay as anything important to the Jewish community, even though there were all these gays and lesbians. It wasn't ever an issue that they addressed. Hillel didn't really address it for a lot of years. But it wasn't like we weren't welcome to be a part of Hillel. Everyone I know was really out all the time. No one was closeted. Wherever we went, we were really, really out.

Chazan: I know that you co-wrote *Lesbian Health Matters!* I was curious how that came about.



Saunders: We wrote it in 1979. You know what I said earlier about all of these UCSC lesbians founding all these different organizations in town? Well, it's called the Women's Health Center now, but at that point it was called the Women's Health Collective and we did a lot of health education. There were lots of lesbians involved in founding the organization, but most of the services we had were pretty much for straight women. A lot of it was birth control and abortion. Gynecological health was for everyone but we didn't have specific programs for lesbians. One of the members in this health collective, Mary O'Donnell, was studying women's health issues at UCSC. She had written one short article, and she had wanted to do more research, because at that point there was nothing on lesbian health at all. Nothing, nothing. What we found was lots of lesbians never went to the doctor because they either didn't want to come out, or if they did come out it was such a disaster. So [the Women's Health Collective] wanted to write something to help lesbians gain control of our own health care. And four of us, three of whom are still in town, got together and wrote this and did all the research ourselves. Now it's this sweet little book, but it was totally earth-shattering when we did it, because there was just absolutely nothing else. We started distributing it nationally right away. We got a grant from the Ms. Foundation to help pay for the printing, but everything else we did for free, a labor of love. Now there're huge books, and some of the stuff we have is totally outdated. But then it was a really big deal.

Chazan: What was the social scene like for lesbians in Santa Cruz at that time? I don't even know. Like did the Dakota Club exist?

Saunders: No, but there was always a bar. There were a whole bunch of different ones. There was the One for One club and there was a bar out on Commercial Way. But a lot of us were students and we were under twenty-one. Some of us used to be able to crash the bars, but a lot of us couldn't. The social scene involved doing political work together. That was one of the really big things, doing political work together. And being in classes together, because a lot of us were women's studies majors. Then Cabrillo College started a women's studies program, so people had classes there too. And these huge friendship groups. There were restaurants that we hung out in, like The Crepe Place. When it first



opened it was this tiny little place on Ocean and Soquel, and a bunch of us used to hang out there. The scene was: everyone had a girlfriend, but then had another girlfriend, or another girlfriend in addition to that. The scene was non-monogamous. At that point I still spent a lot of time with gay men. There were a lot of ways that gay men and lesbians were connected, particularly around stuff at UCSC. So we all spent a lot of time with gay men, and there were some lesbians who were really into drinking, but I wasn't ever one of those. When I was at UCSC, there was a very visible segment of the lesbian population that was into shooting smack. It was a really long time ago and it was really a serious problem. I know some of those people who are still in the community today, and they all have Hepatitis C and assorted other things. So not everyone made really healthy choices.

There were places that people worked to meet each other. People worked at the cannery; people worked at O'Neill's Surf Shop. There were a bunch of places and when you're a lesbian you just kind of knew, because the community was much smaller. People really knew each other. And all the older dykes who had been in the community a long time called us baby dykes. At one point I had meetings at my house every Friday night, and usually there were just college-aged people, but one night all these lesbians from the mountains came, and they were totally shocked at us, because they thought that we were all so sexual and so non-monogamous, and also we were stronger feminists than they were. The sort-of older lesbian community wasn't so feminist-oriented.

Chazan: You said that there was a lot of coalition between the gay and lesbian communities. Did that change in the later-1970s with the separatist movement?

Saunders: Eventually most lesbians that I hung out with got more hooked up with doing feminist stuff. I think eventually a lot of us were more aligned with doing stuff for women, and much less aligned with doing certain gay stuff. There was a larger movement to be lesbian separatists and have nothing to do with men at all. That's when there were all these issues about whether people had boy kids, and if they were welcome at meetings, or child care, or conferences, or concerts. Also, there was a big socialist feminist movement and a lot of us were pretty hooked into that, too.



Chazan: I am totally fascinated to hear about a lot of the political activism that you were involved in at the time. I know you mentioned the Briggs Initiative.

Saunders: The Briggs Initiative was a big thing. And a lot of us were really involved in getting adequate child care. Pretty much all of us were doing pro-abortion stuff and doing a lot of work to deal... You know, most of the lesbian movement and the women's movement in Santa Cruz was pretty white, and a lot of us were really trying to reach out to communities of color. Well, first of all, getting lesbians of color to want to be involved in the stuff that we were doing, but also doing work with families of color. The Familia Center was an off-shoot of the Women's Health Center. I was in Women Against Rape and the Women's Health Center, so those two things were my whole life. Women Against Rape here held this big national conference, where we invited people from all these other [anti-rape organizations] to come here and meet with us. A lot of us did stuff for violence against women, even though it was it was this really big heterosexual issue. And a lot of us wrote a lot. We had articles in different women's journals and newspapers around the country. In one way it's hard to come up with specifics because it's like all I did. I mean, I don't know how I ever managed to graduate because all my work was political work and I hardly ever had time for my school work. On one hand, it was totally fun. On the other hand, it was totally draining, because we could spend hours arguing about something that I pray people never argue about anymore. These little political differences about whether you're a feminist socialist or a socialist feminist could involve six months of arguing. I hope people don't do that anymore.

Chazan: [laughter] They do.

Saunders: I know people my age don't. But I hope your generation doesn't. [laughter]

Chazan: We argue about whether you're an anarchist feminist or a feminist anarchist. [laughter] I was curious if you could talk about how you got your job, what different work you did at UCSC? I know you were the college administrative officer of Merrill for awhile.



Saunders: After I graduated from UCSC, I did child care and lots of political work for a long time. Then at some point I felt like oh, I was involved in starting all these non-profits and I should actually learn something about what I was doing. I went to San Jose State and I got an MBA, which everyone thought was the weirdest thing in the whole world. It was very un-political, and I got a lot of shit from the community about doing it. I decided that I was really sick of never earning any money because I didn't come from a middle-class background and I didn't have parents who were always giving me money. My girlfriend at the time worked at UCSC and she was helping me look for jobs.

There was a job at Merrill, and it was called bursar then, although it turned into college administrative officer. I got it. I was really young. I was only twenty-eight, and through the whole interview process everyone told me I didn't have a chance of getting it. But I got it. It was the only time in my life I was so terrified of coming out. I had this really big visible job, and I just couldn't figure out if people were going to be able to deal with my being a lesbian. It took a while before I felt like I could come out really slowly. Eventually, I was out to everyone in the whole universe. I had always been that way, and it was really the only time in my life that I hesitated to come out, because at that point I knew lesbian faculty, but that's different. You could be out as a faculty person a lot easier. But in terms of being a lesbian staff member... There just weren't a lot of people in visible positions that were out. I remember at one point talking at a GLBT rally about how when I was a student and I wasn't working at UCSC, it was so easy to be out, but as a staff person it was a much more closeted environment. Not all bosses thought that was so great. There just wasn't the same kind of support. I had several different bosses. I was out to everyone I worked with at Merrill (that was easy), and also to all the other CAO's and to all my various bosses. My girlfriend was at that point also a CAO, so we were out as a couple. UCSC is this totally liberal place, but staff are much more restricted than students and faculty. I really always felt that.

Chazan: Do you think it's changed or that it's still that way?

Saunders: My new girlfriend is a staff member up there and she's out. She works in a straight part of UCSC, not with students. She's out, and most gays and lesbians I know



there are out and they know other gays and lesbians there, but... When I was working they were trying to start this big gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered staff organization. These people really wanted to do it but it was really hard to keep it going. We were all in really different jobs; we didn't all agree politically; it was hard to come up with exactly what we wanted to do. We wanted to be more visible and meet with the chancellor, but it was sort of hard to know what we wanted to ask for.

Chazan: What was your relationship with straight colleagues at Merrill like?

Saunders: My relationship with straight people at Merrill was great because I supervised everyone and I only hired people who were gay and lesbian friendly. I hired other gays and lesbians to be on staff and we started GLBT housing at the Crown/Merrill apartments. We were always really active. A lot of gay and lesbian students felt like if you were gay or lesbian you shouldn't be at Merrill. You should be at Porter or somewhere else. It was always totally frustrating because we had more gay and lesbian staff than anyone.

Chazan: Why do you think there was a resistance to be at Merrill?

Saunders: Because I think the student community as a whole was much more political in like diversity and fighting racism, and less political about GLBT issues.

Chazan: As a student, or as part of staff, have you ever encountered homophobic incidents at UCSC?

Saunders: When I was a student, I would be walking around holding my girlfriend's hand or kissing her on a bridge or something, and people would walk by and yell "dyke" or "fag" in that totally disgusting way, "bitch" or that kind of thing. I was a history major too, as well as women's studies, and the faculty were like, "Why are you writing about this marginal stuff?" I said, "Because no one else is talking about it and that's why it is still marginal. If people don't talk about it then it's going to stay really marginal." At that point in the Seventies it was much harder for out gays and lesbians to



get tenure. We, as students, were involved in several faculty cases where people didn't end up with tenure, and didn't end up staying at UCSC. We were sure it was because they were gay. It was some gay men. Then years ago Nancy Stoller, who was Nancy Shaw then...there was a big thing about her tenure and we were sure it was because she was lesbian. And in class when we would bring up gay and lesbian issues they were like, "You know we don't want to talk about that. Why do you always have to talk about what you do in the bedroom?" That kind of attitude.

I know staff who've felt like they didn't get like a week's vacation off, or a promotion because they were gay or lesbian. They were passed over. You were supposed to be able to pass. People didn't get hired because they looked too gay or too lesbian, but you know that changed over time.

Chazan: What do you think about the emergence of the bi and trans communities at UCSC? I know that you said that wasn't really a part...

Saunders: It wasn't part of the early days at all. Although a lot of people were probably quite bisexual, people were forced to identify either as gay or lesbian or straight because that was what the politics were then. I had this straight period in my life. Initially, when I was asked to do this interview, I was asked if I was bisexual. I'm like "No, I just totally don't relate to people being bisexual," which is my own political thing. I mean emotionally, I understand how people are bisexual, but politically, I just don't think bisexual is the thing. I still see the word pretty politically.

Now in terms of transgendered stuff... In the old days, we would call people transexual. They were always male-to-female people who were involved in the lesbian community, and who were sometimes well-accepted in the lesbian community, and sometimes weren't. I remember I went to a big lesbian conference in Los Angeles, and the people in a couple of the workshops demanded that anyone who was transgendered leave. It's easy for me to understand gay, lesbian, and transgendered as political things. Bisexuals I understand as more of an emotional sexual thing, but not so much as a political thing. I



was never one of those totally welcoming lesbians to bisexuals. I was part of a large group of people who weren't.

Chazan: When the GLBT Center was founded, was it just the gay and lesbian center? Or was it called the GLBT Center?

Saunders: It was called GLB first and then it was GLBT.

Chazan: How did you incorporate your activism while you were working at Merrill? I think you talked about that a bit, but I was curious if there was anything else you wanted to add?

Saunders: We started a bunch of stuff, like gay and lesbian housing, and the GLBT Center. We used to do this racism diversity conference as part of the core course. We did them the first bunch of years I was there. I always made sure that GLBT issues were part of it, and that programming reflected the needs of the GLBT community. I really supported gay and lesbian students being residential assistants and taking positions of authority. And hiring lots of GLBT staff.

Chazan: I was curious about the impact of the AIDS crisis on the GLBT community in Santa Cruz, or within your own community and group of friends?

Saunders: Well, by the time the AIDS crisis hit, I was not involved with the gay men's community at all. I was just involved with the lesbian community and the women's community. Initially, I knew this was this big thing going on and it was really important, but for a long time I think me and my friends didn't feel like we had anything to do with it. We felt like lesbians were never going to get AIDS. So the community I was part of was not very involved in doing AIDS work for a long time. But there was a group of lesbians who immediately started getting involved in doing AIDS work as soon as it became clear that it was like this major crisis in the community. I think there was sort of this split for a while about how much lesbians... We were like, "Oh, well you know gay men never came and worked with us on child care issues or abortion issues, so why



should we go work on something that just affects gay men?" But I think as the severity of the crisis really became... I don't think that anyone ever expected that so many people were going to get sick and die. So many of the people that I knew from my old days at UCSC have died, or are living, but sick. I think it ended up having a huge impact on me and all my friends, because there were just so many people we knew. People my age were hit really hard.

Chazan: Having been in Santa Cruz since the 1970s, what would you say were the most significant victories, defeats and challenges that you both personally encountered and that you have seen the LGBT community encounter?

Saunders: Defeating the Briggs Initiative. And having the first gay and lesbian parade downtown. I was at the first parade. Having that first parade downtown was a really big deal. Now it's all festive and everyone sits on the side in chairs, but for years people held up disgusting, hateful signs and it was really ugly. It wasn't like people came out to watch. We used to beg our straight friends to come out and watch, or maybe be in the parade with us. I think just having it was a big deal, but watching it change into something that people enjoy that aren't part of the community, I think that's really different.

Let's see, other things. Having a GLBT Center on campus that actually has a real paid staff member, as opposed to some of the people who did it as a part of their job. I think that was a big thing. And having GLBT housing. And even in women's studies, there didn't used to be any GLBT courses, except for student-taught courses. Actually having regular faculty there teach those courses. And having the GLBT community get a whole lot more diversified. And I think all the community organizations that we started were really the backbone of what went on to develop. When I moved here in 1972, Santa Cruz was just so different. It didn't used to be this "gay and lesbian friendly" place, and gays and lesbians didn't used to come here seeking out others. Of course, we were here but it's totally changed. We're known nationally. It's totally different.