

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

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An Interview with Karen-Christine Friele

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Karen-Christine Friele: My name is Kim Friele. I was born in Bergen in 1935. I am nearly 75 years old. At the age of 26 I was married for one year and I worked in the insurance business. After my marriage broke up, I didn't want to lie, I wanted to be open. I thought that if I started to lie, I would lie for several years. In 1963 I joined the gay and lesbian movement and it was a shock to me because at the time nobody was open, everybody was young, everyone was repressed.

Carlos Motta: You were married to a man?

KF: Yes. I should have never married but I had been together with this boy since I was 14. I then opened up to my family. Of course it was a shock to them for a couple of months but later it was OK. I was also open at work from day one, and it would be blasphemy if I said that I ever had any problems there. When I joined the movement - it took me two years to find them because they were underground- I was shocked about how gay and lesbian life was. In Bergen we had no organized groups for gays and lesbians, and I hardly knew what such a life was like.

CM: Can you explain what was the state of the movement when you found them?

KF: At the time I joined we were about 130 members and there were only 4 or 5 women. It was a good social climate. We met once a month but it was all undercover, nobody had a name, the club host was anonymous, everyone was anonymous. But let me say that when I finally met somebody who brought me into the movement, it felt like I was coming home.

CM: Did the movement have a name?

KF: Yes, it was called *Det Norske Forbundet av 1948* (DNF48). At first the name was given to get people to join them: the organization's advertisements was “City and Country Join Hands.”

At the time we still had a law that penalized homosexuality as well as the psychiatric diagnose and the oppressive attitude of the Church. I had grown up in a very liberal home so all this was

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a surprise to me: I encountered another world and remember asking myself why we had to lie about our identities. Why didn't we feel proud of who we were? We were not criminals and we were not sick! What was wrong? I was very naive.

CM: What was the purpose of the organization in 1962? Was it primarily a community building organization or was it already a political group?

KF: I wouldn't say that the Norwegian movement was political at that time. It was a social organization that attempted to provide a warm and social meeting place for gay people from all over the country. Its main goal was to let people *breathe* once a month, to comfort them. We held debates and discussions but we mostly met, spent time together, then said good bye and met again a month later. However, the board of directors was already trying very hard to do something about the law that put men into jail.

CM: How did this early movement become political and what was your role in that process?

KF: I came out in 1965 and was asked by the movement if I would agree to come out to society, if I would be willing to write articles in the newspapers with my real name, lobby in parliament and to speak with psychiatrists about the psychiatric diagnose.

In 1973 they made me the head of information and I was honored. I knew that by doing this more people would start to come out. I wrote articles, I invited myself to student groups to talk to them, I invited myself to the parliament to talk to politicians - regardless of their party-, and I invited myself to the church to talk to students of theology. At the beginning silence was a big thing. Nothing was being covered by the press except for my small articles. I should add that at the time, we all worked in the movement in our spare time and were not paid.

CM: What was your political discourse at the time? What is the agenda that you were trying to push?

KF: The agenda was that it was wrong to criminalize gay men.

CM: It was specifically focused on the issue of decriminalization?

KF: Yes, from 1966 until that law was abolished in 1972. It was a wonderful process. My boss in the insurance business where I worked let me travel and didn't take one cent off of my wage. I just worked overtime when I came back. I went to Trondheim and to Bergen and visited student unions in other cities. I talked to the press and I tried as hard as I could to push that horrible paragraph out of the law. My message was: "Maybe I am a sinner, maybe we are all sinners and maybe we will all go to hell, but there is no need to put us in prison, to put our boys in prison! Maybe we are sick: but do *you* punish sick people?"

My tactic was fine but what I really wanted to do was to edit a book about the issue of decriminalization. And that was a success. I got people from Norway, Holland and people from from

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The Albany Trust in England, who had fought against the equivalent English law, to put together a book, which I edited and wrote an introduction for. The book was a sensation. We were able to collect enough money to print two or three thousand copies. We distributed it to all members of parliament, to lawyers, to psychiatrists, to priests, etc.

A Member of Parliament from the *Norwegian Social Democratic Party* -who sadly doesn't live anymore- raised the question in parliament immediately before Christmas, just a fort night after the book came out, and that started it all. I was then invited to the *Committee of Justice* in the Parliament and to other relevant meetings.

Around the same time we received from colleagues in Holland an official report that said that you could not seduce anyone to become a homosexual and that believing so was stupid. At the time I had fallen down and broken my arm, so I used my sick period to translate this report from English into Norwegian, to raise the money and get it printed. We sent it to the government and to the parliament just a couple of days before the government would decide whether to raise this question at all.

CM: Was this an active law? Were people really being sent to prison?

KF: No, it was a dormant law. But if you have a law that doesn't work and you don't dare to abolish it, then there must be something wrong with it.

CM: Is this the beginning of the movement as political organization?

KF: Yes, I think it is. But the real start of the political movement was in 1969 with the student uproar in Paris, the uprising of the colored people in United States and the beginning of the women's movement in the United States. Following these examples, very political students, left-ist Communists and and others began to join the organization in 1973. For a person like me, who was still stupid politically, I had my best years because then I understood that it wasn't enough just to abolish that law and not go to jail: we were still considered *sick*, we were still considered *sinner*s, etc.

CM: What about Stonewall?

KF: Yes, of course Stonewall! But the story of Stonewall did not really reach us until 1971. Remember that at that time we didn't have Internet and we didn't have more than one television station. We didn't really know what was going on in the world. We learned through friends and through American magazines, like the *Advocate*, the *Matter Sheen*, or other American gay and lesbian magazines. That is how I learned about Stonewall. That was my awakening. From April 1972 when the parliament abolished the law we started a much broader political work for human rights.

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CM: I understand the symbolic repercussions of the law for the gay and lesbian community and for the formation of the movement, but did it have any ripples in terms of how it affected people out there in society?

KF: We conducted an investigation and found out that most Norwegian people didn't know about the law. Even some politicians didn't know about it. They were astonished when they first were confronted with the law. This has something to do with the fact that it wasn't in use. They didn't dare to use it.

CM: The law had been in place since when?

KF: Since 1902. But most of the cases that were actually penalized had to do with pedophilia. I had a lot of gay friends in the 1960s who were "caught" but the authorities never issued a case against them under *Law 213* (that was the official name of the law) paragraph. I said at one time that if they used the law then they would have to arrest a lot of famous Norwegians! They were shocked. By using these kinds of arguments to show the stupidity of the law, I think we choose the right tactic.

After the law disappeared we started the work in schools, to demand that no teacher be sacked if he chooses to be openly gay and that no teacher be hindered in getting higher wages because of his sexual orientation, and we succeeded. Afterwards we started to work on the issues of gays in the military and so on. After 1973 it was not only me doing the work, thank God. Of course since the beginning a bunch of people had been advising on what tactics to use but it had been me who actually went out there...

CM: What is the image of the homosexual- the gay and the lesbian - that you were presenting to the heterosexual community at the time? What was the kind of identity that was been "constructed" and "sold"?

KF: Even if I am as old as 75, I have always enjoyed what you call *diversity*. I have never presented us as "we are as good as you" or "we are just like you," because we are not. I don't know how heterosexuals are, I only know how *we* are. I think it is stupid to do so because the point of this all is to accept that *we are* different, that *we are* unique, that *we* represent a color... *we are different*. Of course some women are masculine and some men are feminine, and so what? We shouldn't be perceived as criminals. It is wrong to criminalize love and it is wrong to criminalize people because they are not like *you*.

CM: When does the concept of equality start to play a role within the gay and lesbian movement? I know this concept has been foundational to the building of the welfare state in Norway, not necessarily along the lines of sexual orientation, or gender identity, but ingrained in the building of this society at large.

KF: I would say in the midst of the 1970s.

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CM: What did the question of equality mean for the gay and lesbian movement then?

KF: At the beginning we were all astonished about this idea: Where we really, when it comes down to it, *really* equal? It took some time for us to understand that being of another color, being a woman, being sexually diverse or having down syndrome was, in a way, a limp. As a movement we saw the likeness between the different discriminated communities.

CM: Was this somehow the ideological foundation of the gay and lesbian movement under your direction?

KF: I was taught by the example of the young people in the student unions and by the new feminists. They helped me to see the light. That was a revolution in my head. I used my experience and my authority together with other lesbians and gay men to say that things will be the way we want them or nothing at all. We won't go for second best. We have to be patient but we will go for the very best.

CM: In what year are we now?

KF: Now we are at the end of the 1970s. The 1970s were the most active years: that is when we "took the streets" and when we really formulated our movement politically. Our next achievements were the demolishing of the psychiatric sickness-diagnosis by the *Norwegian Psychiatric Union* and when *our* boys or girls who wanted to join the army could have the right to do so and serve openly. Until 1976 they could not have any education within the military, they were secondary people. We thought that our boys and girls should have equal rights, equal responsibilities, and should not be "pissed on."

CM: Were you already an official movement, if yes, how was it funded?

KF: We were an official movement but we funded it ourselves.

CM: By donation?

KF: We did not have any support from the State at all. We had to wait ten more years for that. We ran a restaurant in Oslo and we made a lot of money that way. All the members agreed that we should pay our bills and use all the rest of the money towards the political work. At this point, in 1972, I was offered the position of general secretary, so I quit my job. I held office until 1989. Later on we could afford to hire one person in Trondheim and one in Bergen who worked full time. We all worked together.

CM: Did you have a relationship in the late 1970s with the other social movements: the feminist movement, the Marxist-Leninists, the Maoist-Leninists, etc.? Were you still working together or had you already marked some differences?

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KF: Some differences had been marked. Even though I didn't want to leave the boys behind, I joined the new feminists and the lesbian movement to fight for lesbian equality. Lesbians had our own evenings without men around. We wanted to gain visibility. As lesbians we hadn't been threatened by *Law 213*, so we had been largely invisible. We had until then "made the coffee" and listened to the "poor gay guys."

When it comes down to the Marxist-Leninists or the Maoists, there was finally a break. They were a little group- and so clever- but we couldn't work together because they said homosexuality would disappear after the revolution. According to them, homosexuality had nothing to do with being born that way or having chosen to live life that way, it was a product of capitalism. They thought it was important to find the causes of homosexuality and that homosexuality could be cured. That was so much in opposition to our message of being proud, of coming out of the closet, of enjoying one's life...

CM: That is what you are talking about at this point: coming out of the closet?

KF: Yes, we were talking about being proud, coming out of the closet, that everyone is unique, that one has the right to choose own's own life, to choose who one wants to love, etc.

CM: What was next? We are now entering the 1980s...

KF: In 1975 we had started to work on demanding an Anti Discrimination Law on the grounds of sexual orientation. In 1981 it was issued. Until then we had continued to be discriminated in restaurants, we were accused of the most horrible things by the media, etc. It was more symbolic but it meant a lot. It was a message to the public and to the press that there is a limit. If you don't let me come into your restaurant to have a beer I am going to the police. We got the law and we got our beers too! This law raised the bar for Norwegian people, it made them a little bit brighter, a little more tolerant, and it made them understand a little more.

In the early 1980s we started to deal with the HIV/AIDS crisis. In June 1982 my partner and I went to the United States and we spoke at the *Gay and Lesbian International Day* in San Francisco. We were invited to the mayor's office and we met a lot of people. That was the first time we met people living with HIV/AIDS. At around the same time two famous Norwegian gay people, Geir Pedersen, who was a doctor, and Calle Almedal, had already picked on the fact that something horrible was about to happen: a virus that was not a gay virus. When my partner and I came back home I contacted them. I was still general secretary of the organization of which they were members and they put HIV/AIDS in the agenda. That was a very hard time because we had not only to give information to our own people but we had to stand up against all the horrible things that were written in the press and were said on TV and radio, such as that this was a gay virus and you had yourself (as gay people) to thank for it. This implied that homosexuality was a sickness and that it was a moral issue. A lot of work was put into getting this health group on its feet by using some of our money. After a while they got money from the State and then our organization got money as well because the State saw the link between distributing the kind of information we were producing in general and the fight against HIV/AIDS.

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They saw how important it was to have information about homosexuality and gay and lesbian life in schools to prevent that the youngsters would end up in crisis.

CM: At around the same time the theoretical propositions stemming from queer studies in the United States and Europe were starting to exert influence on academic and activist circles internationally. I understand that there was some kind of opposition or division between the interests of your organization and these theories?

KF: I will be very honest with you, I am an old woman of 75! To me these theories were uninteresting. I thought it was much more important to help those people who wanted to take care of their lives, who didn't dare to come out of the closet and who were thrown out of their homes. I used to call those other ideas 'intellectual masturbation.' Sorry about my words... I didn't subscribe to those ideas. One more thing is that at the time I didn't really understand them. Maybe my brain was too little to understand them... I was very afraid that we would lose the most valuable thing on earth: the right to be different!

CM: When you look back at the achievements of the organization in terms of legislation regarding sexual orientation what do you think allowed for these progressive changes to happen so rapidly in Norway in comparison to other countries where the process has been much slower?

KF: I think because we were originally so backwards and because in a way, we were outside, we were not in Central Europe. This was a wonderful thing because gays and lesbians took the lead in the sexual revolution, we took the lead in speaking loudly about sex... We sat in our boat with all to achieve and nothing to lose! Nobody could tell us about a law we didn't have, nobody could instruct us, so we took the grip.

CM: I would be interested in knowing your thoughts about the relationship between the legislation that has been achieved by means of the political work you have done and the general public's perception of homosexuality. In other words, has the law helped change people's perception of homosexuality? Do these things go hand in hand?

KF: They are in the same family. When young people are asked in television what they think is the greatest achievement of the Norwegian gay and lesbian movement they say: It's the new Marriage Act, or the Partnership Law... I don't agree- those are big successes but you can't build a house without starting from the bottom.

CM: And based on your years of great experience do you think that Norway is a more, "tolerant country" in regards to these issues? Is it a place where homosexuals can live open lives?

KF: Yes, no doubt! And this is an example that you can not do away with discrimination or intolerance only by means of the law. But the law is there to signal that this country does not accept discrimination, whether you like it or not. All of these laws together have also made the Norwegian Church change. Many priests and bishops read the Bible differently today than they did forty years ago. And of course Norway is not an island out somewhere alone: we are a rich

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country, we are a member of today's world, we are not a funny icy thing up there near the North Pole anymore... We were taught by other movements, other countries, the struggle in South Africa, Martin Luther King, etc... There are so many to say thank you to...

CM: And what now? It seems like Norway is perhaps the most advanced country in terms of legislation, there is 100% equal citizenship in terms of sexual orientation, what is the current struggle? What is at stake for young people?

KF: The sad thing is - I'm traveling a lot visiting schools- that when I travel to the outskirts of Norway, I find young people with the same problems as forty years ago.

CM: What kind of problems?

KF: Things like: Do I dare to tell my parents? Do I dare to tell my football friends? Do I dare to tell my neighbors? Who am I, and how am I going to accept it?

CM: What is the work that needs to be done in that regard?

KF: We have to focus our resources into schools, into football teams, into youth clubs and we have to stand up for gays and lesbians all over the country, not only in the big cities. And we have to hope that if one person in the dark west, comes out, maybe next year 10 more will come out. We must not only concentrate on international meetings, big offices, on going to the Parliament and on having more of laws.

Nobody's soul can survive by telling a 17 year old boy, oh when you are 18 you can get married if you want to. What does that mean to a boy who is sitting alone crying, who is only connection with the gay community is his online chatting? Does that give him any warmth, does that make him dare to go into the sitting room and tell his mother and father? And that is the sad thing that we have to do it over and over again... But the lucky thing is that today we are accepted as an organization with money, they listen to us, and it is easier for us to give hope to the young gays and lesbians struggling. Even in the Church it is more hope today than ever before.