

University of Washington

Women Who Rock Oral History Project

Transcript

**Cristien Storm**

**Narrator:** Cristien Storm, co-founder of Home Alive and University of Washington Department of Women's Studies

**Interviewed by:** Timothy Green

**Date:** February 20, 2011

**Location:** Cristien Storm's home, Seattle, WA

**Length:** 35 minutes

Timothy Green (TG): Okay, alright.

Cristien Storm (CS): Whenever you're ready.

TG: Do you consent to this interview?

Cristien Storm: Yes I do.

TG: Please introduce yourself

CS: My name is Cristien Storm.

TG: How would you describe the music community you are a part of?

CS: Currently? Or-

TG: Currently and before, I guess.

CS: When Home Alive started, when we began, I was in a few different bands and there was actually this practice space called, "The Dungeon" and when I moved here a bunch of different bands practiced there and people were supportive of each other and I also did performance and spoken word. (dog barks) That is gonna be really loud. (Calls to other room) Hey Ajax!(?) You wanna grab Corra and put her in the bedroom? (Chuckles) (Inaudible background) (Cristien continues to chuckle)

Background: That like scared me.

CS: I know, it's like piercing. It's like a heart (imitates the sound of a heart pumping)  
Ok. (Inaudible background) (Cristien jokes around)

Background: Ok, perfect.

TG: Ok, so are we starting over again?

Background: Yeah, I think – (Inaudible background)

TG: Ok, please introduce yourself.

CS: My name is Cristien Storm.

TG: You said, I'm sorry, what organization?

CS: I was one of the founding members of Home Alive.

TG: How would you describe the music community you are a part of?

CS: When Home Alive began, there was just a ton of people, like everybody I knew was in bands and people were supporting each other's bands and shows. There was also a big spoken word community, and a lot of cross over between poetry and performing spoken word and music and bands and it was just kind of a lively time.

TG: For background, can you talk a bit of when and where you were born and how that connects to your musical experience?

CS: Yes, (laughs) I can! Uhm, when and where I was born... I was born in Pasadena, California, uhm raised mostly in the Bay Area. A little bit of Michigan, but mostly in the Bay Area. And how does that relate to my music and music community... uhm I grew up very much involved in the punk rock community. I went to see bands from along the time I was, I don't know, eleven or twelve and that really resonated with me in the sense of uhm, rebelliousness but also there were a lot of young women that were really making these links between music, art, feminism, and a way to really tell their stories and share their stories and their voice in ways that were really kick ass and that really resonated with me when I was younger and I think carried through and still does today in a lot of the performance that I do. Uhhh, so does that kinda?

TG: Do you remember your first experience with music? An early experience?

CS: My first... my first experience with music... I was probably in the womb! Listening to music! That's a great question. I- no, there isn't a single defining first moment uhm with music but I remember going to – and I'm really bad at names, so I'm like gonna tell you Gretta Harly would be great because she remembers all these names of all these bands and

she's just kinda like, has like an encyclopedia brain. But I remember in San Francisco there was this place called The Farm and the Cabuki (?) Theater, we would go and see bands and uh I would remember feeling- I would just go by myself like this young little girl and I remember being really thrilled that I could go by myself, hook up with people, and feel this sense of community and a sense of political engagement and activism in the music. So that was – it was really moving, (inaudible), and inspiring. It was sort of, it wasn't just about going to shows. This is about building community and that felt really important.

TG: Can you tell us a little bit more about your musical background?

CS: My musical background?

TG: Yeah

CS: Yeah, I'm a writer and a performer. I played drums in one band for a little bit but most of the music for me, it's been singing and writing lyrics.

TG: Okay, cool. Can you talk a little bit maybe about how the Seattle scene has changed since you've been involved? Over the past twenty years or so?

CS: Yeah, I mean I think before – I moved here in 93 or 92 and before that I think there was – there wasn't a whole lot of – there was a strong music community in a sense that people really supported each other's bands. Right? So like bands, you'd go to the shows and it would be all the bands and all the band members. I think there has always been a sense of collaboration and support for musicians and artists in the community. But I think that there was a moment in time when Seattle really got focused on for a variety different of reasons. It kinda had a natural spotlight with the grunge scene and people from subpop that you talk to can say more about the details of that but I think it really – I know I came in right when it was coming to be, to boom and it really shaped the sense of possibility and energy and excitement. It also, I think, really helped give people this sense of community. This really strong sense of, "were in this together, we're gonna support each other" and when bands make it really big there was like a sense of collaboration and excitement like "yay you're making it" but also really rooted in grass roots and staying true to the sense of punk rock ethos really.

TG: What about the safety of female artists and musicians? Did you feel like there was a need for Home Alive (inaudible) before Mia Zapata's death or how did that specifically come about?

CS: Yeah. You know, one of the things that I always say is that If Mia's assault, rape and murder had been the only traumatic event in all of our lives, Home Alive would not have existed. It really was the culmination of a lot of our friends are not making it home alive and once they're home, they're not necessarily safe in their homes. Just having friends that were surviving domestic violence and so it was a culmination of, enough. That that was really this piece – it wasn't just about Mia. It was about, this is a time that there is this sense of energy and that was the catalyst for all of us sort of coming together but all the discussions

we've been having before were really about like what do we want to do so that we're safe and taking care of each other and that moment around Mia's murder was when we met and began talking specifically about offering (inaudible) self defense classes, as well as organizing in our communities and those dialogues had already been going on.

TG: And how long did it take Home Alive to organize, like how did Home Alive come to be?

CS: We began meeting in the aftermath of Mia's rape and murder and really talking about, I think, early on, there was a sense of fear. There was a sense of anger and rage. And we wanted to do something with that and what came up again and again was that we wanted self defense classes. When we started looking into different, I think originally we were like, "woo! Bring someone here and train us!" and they wanted to like set up a satellite office here. In looking at the self defense classes that were available, a lot of it was really expensive and a lot of it didn't necessarily reflect the kinds of violence we were facing in our lives. Didn't really look at the complexities, didn't really look at community and building community. It was really kind of like stranger danger. So we just, we started training ourselves and created our own curriculum and I think that goes back, I think, back to the punk rock, do it yourself ethic that was really rooted in the stuff that we were doing. It was really about, let's do this for ourselves and define it for ourselves and make it look the way that we wanted it to look so that it resonates with us and that in turn resonated with other people and they began to ask us to teach classes and sorted expanded that way. At some point we were like, we should start an organization and start a non-profit but we didn't sit down and say we were going to start a non-profit. We really kind of sat down and said, we need free (inaudible) self-defense classes and it grew.

TG: What specifically was your role in creating Home Alive?

CS: There's a lot of different roles. Like in the beginning, all the founding members, we did everything as a collective and collaboratively. Over time, I began teaching and developing the curriculum as well as supporting and organizing shows. There were people that had a lot more capacity and connections in organizing big shows. Then we all worked collaboratively on the album, CD, the art of self defense. It was a collective, everybody was basically doing everything. Towards the end, there was, we had defined roles like the Program Director. But that was really just a name, well I guess it wasn't. It was a lot of focus around the curriculum.

TG: As for community support for Home Alive, was it hard at first? Or how did you gain support?

CS: You know, there's always an amount of support for Home Alive. Just a tremendous amount of support, and that has been something that is really inspiring and touching for me to see and to be a part of an organization that so many people felt a sense of engagement in and ownership over. Just a lot of community members that felt like not only was Home Alive something that connected with, but really felt they were doing something that was part of this organization. And so it never really felt like, it's just the nine of us, this is our organization and we're gonna do stuff for other people thing. Whether that

was bands like doing benefit shows or organizing events or people would stop by the office and say, hey we're gonna go on tour we want some literature and stickers. Then they would talk about Home alive and they were never officially like members of collective members but they felt like it was their organization and that was always very inspiring and also, I think, showed how we set up and worked, and how we did this work, was really about building community and it showed in that regard.

TG: Can you talk a little bit about the CD that Home Alive released, and how that came to be. What was the initial plan for that?

CS: Yeah, it kind of, the same way there was a tremendous amount of support, we put a call out for the CD, and we started getting bigger name bands, and also at the time there sort of spotlight was on seattle and seattle bands, and so it kind of mushroomed and all of a sudden we're getting a track from Pearl Jam and Nirvana and as well as wanting to include spoken word. And so just the outpouring of support for it made it grow and then Sony records got involved and all of a sudden we were negotiating this pretty big record, cd deal with Sony Records and being pretty straightforward in terms of being we're going to do this the way that we want to do it, and we're a collective, which means we all have to agree and negotiating that with this huge corporation. But also that was possible because of the bands, they just jumped in and they were really willing to do anything to make it happen to support Home Alive. And then that. And again, I think that was just a tremendous out pouring of support and belief in the value and importance and mission of what we were doing.

TG: So last year the board members decided to deactivate the organization after seventeen years. Could you describe that decision and what lead to it?

CS: I wasn't involved in that decision. I'd been, I'd stepped out of doing any direct work with Home Alive a number of years before that. And, I went—there was this big community meeting that I went to, and I think that, well I don't know the decisions that made that happen. There'd probably be some people that you can talk to that were really directly involved. I know that what the pieces that I heard, were that there was just a I think similar to a lot of non-profits, you know sort of struggling with fundraising and sort of being in emergency mode, and I think for some people like you know we are continuing this cycle and we need to just stop. (laughs) And not do that. I know some of the instructors were trying to figure out a way to stay committed to doing the classes, and not necessarily that might look really differently than having a single organization organize all of that. But they are still teaching classes and people are still doing some of the uh the curriculum.

TG: Is there a future for Home Alive, I guess maybe if not as Home Alive, as something else?

CS: Yeah, well one of the things—this is just something that I just felt resonated with me was so many different people had gone through the instructor training, but also taking classes. And had this sense of, I'm taking this class and then we would get a call saying "I'm sharing the information from the information from the class that I took when you came to

my high school with my friends” and you know. People really feeling like they could disseminate that information amongst themselves and having that sense of empowerment and the sense of energy that meant a lot of the work that Home Alive did is out there. And people are taking it and really doing their own things with it. In ways that I think are really exciting and engaging, and that’s really different than this organization sort of having total ultimate control over a curriculum. And so that—there’s a lot of people that felt like I’m going to still teach classes and do it in this way, sort of you know people are still calling and asking about can you come do a boundary setting workshop and then people are doing it. So, the work is being done, it just looks really different.

TG: So I guess switching to your role in the activism or human rights projects did they/that develop in Home Alive, or did that start there, or how did that come to be your involvement in activism?

CS: Can you ask that again?

TG: Okay, did your activism begin in Home Alive, or did it precede that, I guess what was the role in Home Alive in developing your activism?

CS: Yeah okay. Yeah I think everybody that came to Home Alive, all the founding members had been involved in political work, community organizing, activism in different ways for sure. And myself included absolutely been involved in community organizing before that. And that one of the things that was exciting about working at Home Alive was developing curriculum that wasn’t just about teaching self-defense skills, but was really linking that up to social justice, social change, and the variety of different ways that worked. Whether that’s supporting Mother’s For Police Accountability, supporting groups and organizations that were addressing hate crimes, or building collaborations with domestic violence organizations and supporting them, but also really finding different ways people define safety and self-defense, and seeing a part of our work is trying to really broaden self-defense instead of narrow it to like it means these five skills. Um, and that that was an exciting piece of community organizing and collaboration and it brought Home Alive and myself into collaboration with a ton of different organizations that over the years that was incredibly exciting. We worked with the Northwest Coalition for Human Rights, and they were the ones that were talking about doing cultural organizing and really excited about the work that we were doing and the music community because they were seeing the far right, and white nationalist organizations use cultural organizing. And they were like, whoa Home Alive, you’re actually doing this and we’re seeing folks that are not doing this good work. Using cultural organizing and so we built collaborations around that, as well as working with people who are doing social movement and social justice theory and work. And linking that up to self care and the ways we can take care of each other. Does that make sense?! (laughs) Okay all right.

TG: I think that’s what we are interested in, hearing how it all links up and connects together. There are a lot of things involved here. So, I guess segueing to your book, could you tell us the name of your book and what it’s about?

CS: Yeah, so the book is called *Living in Liberation: Boundary Setting, Self-care and Social Change* and it uses the boundary setting curriculum that I collaborated with and began a lot of work with on at Home Alive as a spring board. So it's really rooted in, here are these boundary-setting skills, but how can we think about using them, and rooting them in social justice and social change. So really thinking about the ways that we take care of each other matter. Like if we're just doing it as um, like one of the things that was exciting, again back at Home Alive, was that it was looking beyond individual safety and individual self defense. This isn't just about individual people keeping themselves safe, it's about building communities where violence is less likely to happen. Where the ways that we respond to it build community rather than tear communities apart, and also where we aren't living in fear. That living in fear is isolating, it's disconnecting and it kind of crushes our ability to feel connection with people. And what if we could be taking care of ourselves in a way that interrupted that. So the book really looks at that and, it's a call to imagine possible alternatives. Rather than sort of just shutting down and well we live in a violent world there's nothing you can do, that's kind of the way it is so we just have to hunker down, and try to keep ourselves safe. What if we were imagining communities and relationships where that didn't happen, and how can we be responding to violence and abuse where crossing boundaries in the moment, but also link that up to a vision of possible relationships and communities where that didn't happen.

TG: Could you say more, I guess about your involvement in both music communities and activist communities and sort of how the two mesh together. I think people watching this are going to be interested in that intersection. What else could you elaborate on that?

CS: Yeah, well I think there's always been a tremendous amount of connection between music, art, social justice, social change, and activism, and that that's a lot of, that's not just about protest songs or fundraising through benefit shows. I think that that's really important, but that's one piece of it, but that art and music have always been away to express resistance, right, and to express pain and trauma and to name the things that we might feel rage or pain about. And to name those things in a way that isn't just intellectual process, right, but can really experience a performance piece, or you can feel a song that just really touches you. You experience that differently, and so the idea of naming violence and abuse, but also naming possibilities has always really been rooted in culture and in music and art and cultural production. And that also art is just a powerful way to heal. I mean when you're thinking about self defense and boundary-setting not just as a way to respond to violence but as a way to heal, and that healing needs to not happen in isolation. That art is –has always been a tremendous force for healing. Whether that's naming something that's happened or naming a process around it or sharing a story or just providing a sense of relief, right, or joy. Um, you go to this show and you have this really great time, or you see this amazing painting. It doesn't always have to be about violence and abuse it can also be like whoa that's right, there's magic and beauty in the world (chuckles) that's right. Oh! That's just as important as being able to name violence and abuse. And art does it. In ways that just sort of talking about it can never do.

TG: Do you have anything else to say about I guess maybe community organizing for people that are interested in bringing together different communities and diverse interest groups,

and stuff like that. That's one thing that's interesting about Home Alive, is how all the different interests are coming together under one banner, and I think that that's something you might be able to speak about. I don't know what advice or maybe some lessons you've learned through that process.

CS: Ask a little more.

TG: Okay. Um, working with across various sectors-public and private, with different groups to achieve whatever goal, working in these collaborations. Forming the collaborations. What as you're going through Home Alive were some of the very important lessons or things to keep in mind for community organizing?

CS: Yeah Yeah. You know I think. Well one of the—because art was so central to so much of, like all the individuals that were coming together for Home Alive. That people were, like we were artists, musicians, and performers and writers, and that wasn't separate from the work that we were doing at Home Alive. And I think a lot of times it gets really separate. Or the writing is, or the art is either to support—it's sort of like that same thing like a protest song, or supporting a benefit show—that while that's important. Part of what I think gave people a sense of connection and really this feeling of ownership in Home Alive, right. We had some many people that just felt this was their organization. That, that was the experience of being connected with art and music. That wasn't about this sort of like intellectual process of creating curriculum, but that when people would experience that. That they would take that and go out in the world, as musicians or performers or writers, or you'd have like this thirteen year-old girl who was like I just started this band, and I want to like have Home Alive stuff there because this resonates with me and that's this connection. It's powerful, but it's also more visceral. Right, that it this feeling that, ummm, a lot of people came to Home Alive with and left, so like they'd come in and get these skills and tools and then integrate them into their life and their world and that took Home Alive, the mission and values, a lot of different places and that is community organizing. Right, it is not so much the controlling, I mean, as an organization, there was a lot of struggle in terms of how do you maintain control of our curriculum and when do you, when do you sort of stop and say actually we are not just going to let anybody take it and when do you just support and let people go. But, ummm, that the organizing piece, I think, really came from people coming in and getting skills, building capacity and then going and doing the work that resonated with them around safety and self defense, and that meant a lot of different things.

TG: What other project are you working on now?

CS: I have a partnership called If you don't they will. And that was... The big history: when I was at Home Alive, I went to a conference put on by the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity and it was on white nationalist music, and I was like, "what is this" and I went was kind of freaked out. In all honesty, because there was this multi-million dollar music industry that was funneling, uh, funds into political platforms, into running people for school boards, all to fund white nationalist organizing. And I did not know that. It was like, I am part of an organization that sends bands on tours and organizes benefit shows and is

really connected to the music community. This isn't on my radar and that is crazy. And so that sparked a relationship with this organization called the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity. And they were the ones that really, first named cultural organizing; and there were like, you guys are doing cultural organizing, and I was like really? Oh, so there is a name for it. And so we began collaborating and that collaboration was really, again, about how can you really be rooted in the arts and music and see that as a powerful tool, and our theme was that, we, in this collaboration what we wanted to do is to go to rural suburban communities where white nationalist were organizing and where the Northwest Coalition for Human Dignity they were supporting people responding, and we went in there and we went to these communities but we did it through music, art shows, organizing skateboarding events and these different things were about rebuilding youth culture – well, I mean we weren't building it, we were like letting youth build their own anti-racist culture, right, and just supporting them as adults and that was cultural organizing but it was linked up to the work they were doing – all that to say- That was an exciting accomplishment for me between the work that home alive was doing – doing intentional cultural organizing and supporting that the work that the northwest coalition for human dignity was doing. That organization folded and the woman that I was working with there, she and I started this partnership that is about cultural organizing and how can people respond to opposition social movements. And really staying connect to arts and cultural production.

TG: Is there anything else you want to say about that, it's a very interesting...

CS: Yeah. Isn't that?

TG: Do you have a story to say about that experience?

CS: You know one of these things, there's so many. One of the interesting things is, there was an interview with – I believe it was William Pierce but I would have to double check and look—it's either Richard Butler or William Pierce, a white nationalist. And they were talking about looking at sup-pop- we need our sup pop. Sup pop started as a small local label, ummm, that was really about supporting bands and building community and supporting this music community and to see a white nationalist saying like, "Wow, we've got resistance records, which is one of the original labels that was using music and supporting bands" And,, (pause). Well sorry. Let me say that again William Pierce is this old sort of guy- white nationalist and he began looking at music and using music as a tool not only to recruit but as an organizing tool and organizing strategy. Like if you send bands on tours, you get somebody information, you connect people, you build bridges – and it is all this stuff that Home Alive is doing because that is what we do. Oh, this band is going on tour and they want to bring home alive literature and then all of a sudden you've got somebody in Chicago who saw a band and saw our stuff and called us and wanted to get information about on how they can get and do a project there and that is building community connections that you saw white nationalist doing the same thing, really intentionally around organizing and recruiting young white people and that that was terrifying to see and really alarming because it was effective, (laugh) they were raising a tremendous amount of money and they were successfully recruiting young white women and boys into this movement. And so we began to really one, raise awareness

around and that this isn't just a few of kind of yahoos out in the woods (pause) singing music like rrrraarrrr kind of music, but this was people that were organizing- sending bands out to like country fairs, on tours and having like international conferences, that this was a social movement and so (pause) that also I think helped look at the work that we are doing at Home Alive. Like, wow- we really are linking up to social movements and really supporting that and we need to be aware of opposition social movements that are happening that are really intentionally seeking some of the same spaces

TG: What do you see the future of your work being, in the next 5 to 20 years? What does the future hold for cultural organizing and your work?

CS: Yeah, I am really excited about having done the book but using that as a springboard, to think about the ways in which we do our work. There is a tremendous amount of burn out, and a tremendous amount of, umm, (pause/exhale), this sense that we get out there, we do this activist work and it is kind of separate from our lives separate from, that we kind of do it we burn out and we take care of ourselves and jump back in there. But what if we did our work in a way that was (pause) that actually increased our sense of resilience, that really was exciting and that a lot of that is rooted in imagination and holding onto this possibility of having things be different that we lose when we're really rooted in fear and only just responding to violence and abuse. And a lot of that is about being able to have this vision of what it is we are working towards. And I think that sometimes there's a sense of urgency in a lot of organizing that's about - We don't have time to do that, We have to respond, We have to fight, We have to get in there. I think that is really important, but one of the things that really doing this work with Home Alive has helped ground me in is that we can't just constantly be responding, we have to be able to really have a vision of what it is that we want and that we have to be aware of when we use that. And so a lot of the work that I am doing now is around cultural, ummm, it's still cultural work, work using art and music, but in a way to really capture imaginations and see radical visions and radical imaginations of alternatives and possibilities as our work. That that needs to be, ummm, not only (pause) how we respond to things but it needs to be linked up to, ummm, I just said that word, that, uh, radical imaginations and, ummm, imagining possibilities is an important piece of how we respond to the things that we we are trying to fight or change in the moment.

TG: Is there anything you want to add, that maybe we haven't covered? (inaudible).

CS: No, I feel like I've blabbed. (inaudible question). Yeah. She is in Seattle. And she was really, she, did a lot of work on the CD and has a memory just like a vice grip and she would be great, I think, to talk about Home Alive (pause) and the beginning of Home Alive but also the CD and the work around that. (long pause). I don't know, I am trying to think of people, if you wanted to talk, that were involved in the decision to fold the organization. I know (pause) Brett and (pause) yeah... I can give you some names.