Oral History with Denise Gray

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Interview with Denise Gray
SESSION 1 (3/26/2020)

KIM: (00:04:15)
Today is March 26, 2020. It's 3:35 p.m. This is Kelsey Kim from CSW [Center for the Study of Women] speaking with Denise Gray. All right, Denise, I know we talked a little bit for your pre-interview about your background, but I'd love to hear more about growing up and your childhood. When and where were you born?

GRAY:
I was born in 1952 in the upper peninsula of Michigan. My father was a state policeman. My mother was a teacher who went on sabbatical on behalf of me and my first two brothers. Then she went back to work and later had two more kids. So, I have four brothers. We very shortly moved to the lower peninsula. My father was transferred, so we moved. I spent most of my childhood in a suburb of a small city and had a lot of freedom in the neighborhood. There were a lot of kids in the neighborhood. It was fun. And [pause][laughs] what can I tell you about that?

When I was in third or fourth grade, we moved again. My father was transferred, so we moved to a village, I guess you'd call it, in the lower peninsula again. That's where I spent the rest of my childhood and teen years until I went to college. I went to a small high school. I was active enough, in the plays, and in the choir. And [pause] what else can I tell you? I had lot of friends. It was pretty good growing up. But when I got into my teenage years, I don't know. I just got to be a little bit more of a loner. I didn't want to hang out with my friends that much. I would stay home and read, and I made excuses not to go to band camp. I felt a little more isolated.

KIM:
Do you know why that was?

GRAY:
I don’t know. I’m not really sure. I had a lot of issues with my mom. I felt like she didn’t get me and my dad didn't get me. I had different ideas than my parents and I wasn't allowed to freely express them. We had a big, huge fight around race. My dad ended up saying—well, I think he said some really racist things. I don't know. It was a shock to me because I always thought that—am I going off too much on a tangent?

KIM:
No, no please go on.

GRAY:
I always thought of him as a very equitable guy, and I thought he brought us up to treat everyone fairly and equitably. Then to find out that he had these views—it really threw me. It was kind of a rude awakening and my mom really never stood up for me. She always would side with my dad. I don't know—I always really felt at odds with my parents.

KIM:

How about your relationship with your brothers? You said you have four brothers, right?

GRAY: (00:09:29)

When I was younger, in elementary school, I was really close to my brother who's a year younger than me. We were best buds. I have one brother who's three years older than me. The three of us were pretty close, but when they got to be seven or eight, they didn't want to play with me anymore because I was a girl. They didn't want to hang out with me. I just always felt like they got more privileges since they were boys. Yes, there was that, there was that definitely.

KIM:

What kind of privileges?

GRAY:

One thing I remember is my oldest brother was on the wrestling team, and until he got exempted, me and Dan [pseudonym] and Boyd [pseudonym] were all supposed to alternate washing the dishes after dinner. But when he got on the wrestling team he was exempted from that because he had practice until seven o'clock. My dad's side of the family was mostly—he had a lot of brothers. And it was really big [unclear], so it was hard to stick up for myself.

KIM:

I can imagine, especially because it sounds like you and your mom were outnumbered. It was five to two, right? Men to women?

GRAY:

Yes, and it wasn't even like she was on my team. She was always supporting the other team. [Laughs]

KIM:

Do you remember anything particular about your childhood home? Were there any smells that you associate with your home?

GRAY:

No. I don't. I do remember my grandma's house. When you went upstairs, it had a certain smell that I loved. It might have been a mixture of moth balls and mold. It was probably slightly moldy, and I know she had moth balls in the closet. There was also cedar mixed in because it was a cedar closet. But I was small then. I don't really remember our house––I didn't really get sensitive to smells like that until about my early twenties.

KIM:

You said you grew up in Michigan, right?

GRAY:

Yes.

KIM:

Can you describe the neighborhood more?

GRAY:

It was a classic small town. We lived on Main Street. We lived in a hundred-year-old house that my mom and dad were slowly fixing up. It was very white. The whole town was very white. I only found out later the reason why it was so white was that none of the realtors would sell to any other skin color.

KIM:

I see.

GRAY:

Yes, once or twice there would be a black family that would move in outside of town. I found out later that they got harassed enough to move.

KIM:

Oh wow. That's terrible.

GRAY: (00:014:07)

Yes, middle America.

KIM:

We had talked about your school. You said you had liked school when you were younger, but when you got to high school you kind of withdrew?

GRAY:

I didn't really withdraw in school. I was pretty active in school activities, and I did enjoy school. But when I got to maybe my junior year, I stopped wanting to hang out with my friends as much. And on the weekends—[pause] I don't know. I was thinking—I always knew that I would go to New York. I wanted to leave during high school. I wanted to be an actress. I was mad at myself for waiting so long and even going to college felt like a cop out. But I did. [pause] I went to college for two years, in the theater program, and then I left for New York City. And, wow, that was a [unclear] Oh my God. It was really hard for me. I was scared to begin with, even though I was—this is like a therapy session [Laughter] I'm going on too much. Keep me on [crosstalk]—

KIM:

—[crosstalk] no, no. It's fine. I was actually wondering if you could tell me what college you went to for two years?

GRAY:

I went to Michigan State.

KIM:

For theater?

GRAY:
Yes.

KIM:
And you also said that you were in band. I'm just curious—what instrument did you play?

GRAY:
I played clarinet.

KIM:
You seem to be very into the arts, theater, performance—

GRAY:
Yes, I always loved singing.

KIM:
What was it about New York that really drew you? Was it the theater scene?

GRAY:
Yes, I wanted to be a singer and an actress. That's what I did for quite a while. That's what drew me to New York.

KIM:
What kind of productions were you in?

GRAY:
In where? In New York or in—

KIM:
Yes, New York.

GRAY:
I was in two off-Broadway—no, I did three—three off-Broadway productions. One was a musical review. Then I did a [unclear] play off-Broadway. I did a tour of *Godspell*—a [unclear] of *Godspell*. I did a commercial. I sang on a commercial. It was just my voice. I did some [unclear] stuff.

KIM: (00:18:40)
That's fascinating.

GRAY:
And a couple of other productions that were from the [unclear] that were actually quite good. That was later. That was after I got married and had my son.

After—Oh! I guess I was in my early thirties—I decided I wanted to focus on singing, and I took lessons with an opera singer for two years and then a jazz singer for another two years. In the meantime, I put together a combo, and we would perform around the city in small clubs and street festivals. Yes, [unclear] for some time.

KIM:

Wow, that sounds so fascinating. [Laughter]

GRAY:

It sounds that way. Yes. [Laughs]

KIM:

Was it during this time that you started to notice a sensitivity to chemicals or fragrances?

GRAY:

Yes, I remember I was about twenty or so was when I first noticed it. I was working as a waitress and to go up to the dining room, we'd have to get into this elevator. I was in the elevator with all these other waitresses and they must have just cleaned something really– it smelled so [unclear] to me. I couldn't believe it. So there I am like, "Oh my god," "Come on, you guys?" and "Nobody else?"

[unclear] I started noticing I was [unclear] to perfume and other kind of cleaning supplies. But I thought, "Oh, well, it's not a big deal." I can manage it, and it was pretty easy to avoid being around them. But as time went on, it got worse.

KIM:

Was that an issue? Being an actress and a singer— having multiple chemical sensitivities? I imagine that you'd be around fragrance, like perfume.

GRAY: (00:21:33)

At that point, in my twenties, it really wasn't an issue. I noticed that one elevator, but it wasn't a [unclear] issue until I became–I'd say mid-thirties. It really ramped up by the time I was pregnant. Then after I had my son, it got a little worse.

When I was acting—the only time I—I didn't do so much acting after that, when I started concentrating on my singing. But I did return to it for a little bit, maybe a year before I left the city, and it was very tough.

I remember I was in this one-day-only performance, this [unclear] play. Rehearsals were really hard. Some of the other actors—even though my friend was directing it, and I told him the problem that I have. He said, "Oh, all right. We'll support you, and we'll tell everyone not to wear perfume or cologne when it comes to rehearsal." But that didn't always happen, and I didn't want to always have to say, "Oh, I can't stand here because of perfume stink." It was hard. The performance took place in a small theater. They had set pieces that were drying backstage and paint cans. I remember waiting in the wings—before I was supposed to go on—I was waiting with my head poked out the door to the

outside so I could get some fresh air before I went on. Yes, that would have been really hard to continue in that respect. You're always around other people—the set, and makeup and all the machines and all that stuff.

KIM:

I imagine that'd be pretty difficult. Before that point where you started getting sensitive, how would you have described your health?

GRAY:

I'd say good. I mean, I did have bad TMJ [temporomandibular joint dysfunction]. Well, I had an eating disorder. I had an eating disorder so bad that I ruined my teeth. I eroded enamel on my teeth so much that I had to—well, I got bad TMJ. They bore down so far that my jaw was hitting my nerves in the back of my jaw joint and causing headaches, back and shoulder problems. Aside from that anatomical problem though, I'd say I've always had good constitutional health. From the time I was a kid, I would have to fake a sick day. I never got sick.

KIM:

Yes. [pause] Thanks, sorry about that. Yes, before then, you were generally pretty healthy.

GRAY:

Yes.

KIM:

To get a general timeline for you, when did you say you got married and had your son?

GRAY: (00:26:15)

I got married in 1990. Had my son in '94.

KIM:

Okay, and you only have one child is that correct?

GRAY:

Just one child.

KIM:

You said after that point, you started becoming more sensitive to chemicals. Can I hear more about that?

GRAY:

Well, as soon as a couple years after my son was born, I started doing some work with new mothers as a doula.

KIM:

Oh? Okay.

GRAY:

I found that I was having trouble going into homes sometimes and working with some of the things that I was smelling in the home.

KIM:

Like do they use incense and stuff?

GRAY:

No, but I guess just certain [unclear] or if they've used a lot of furniture polish. But it wasn't too bad at that point. It was really an on and off thing. I would say it probably ramped up more after 9/11 [September 11, 2001 attacks]. I lived in the East Village, maybe one block north of the tower. At the same time, we were renovating an apartment. I was in charge of the renovation, so I was in that environment a lot with all those paints and solvents and glues and polyurethanes. [unclear] [Laughter] So anyway, that, simultaneously with 9/11—I remember reacting to my husband's deodorant all of a sudden. I couldn't stand the smell of his deodorant.

KIM:

Can I ask about your career transition to a doula? How were you inspired to do that?

GRAY:

When I had my son, it was difficult. He was a difficult baby. He hardly ever slept, and I just realized after that how much I could have used some help and how hard it was to be a new mom and not knowing what you were doing. There's a lot of isolation involved. I just thought that it was something that I'd enjoy doing. So I started doing that. Also, it was very flexible because I could work it around my hours and my son's schedule.

KIM: (00:30:37)

Was it hard starting to develop these symptoms while still raising a child, working as a doula, and being exposed to all these different fragrances?

GRAY:

It was. I think the hardest thing was getting my son and my husband to understand—to believe me. They really didn't. By the time my son was seven, my husband and I separated. That emotional stress was really hard on my chemical sensitivity. It made it worse more. Then, at the same time, my son was so, so, so devastated. And I was devastated. I couldn't give him the attention he needed, and at the same time I was experiencing all these symptoms. Trying to ride in a subway car with him and we'd get in the car and I'd say, "We have to move down to the other end of the car where there aren't people."

"Why, mom?" [unclear] "No, mom."

And his dad and I were at odds because we were separated and divorced. His dad didn't believe any of it. He thought it was all a figment of my imagination, so he influenced my

son's thinking too. I felt like I was on the outside. I was like, "I'm failing." I didn't know whether to stand up for myself and say, "Look, you can't come into the apartment wearing that body wash. You can't do it." I didn't know how to deal with it. There was no good way for me to live with my son when he started wearing all that stuff that middle schoolers love to wear, like Axe-type body wash. Horrible [crosstalk]–

KIM: (00:33:28)
–[crosstalk] Yes, Axe is the worst.

GRAY:
Right? You know that.

KIM:
Yes.

GRAY:
Yes, so we had a really hard time.

KIM:
It sounds like you had to deal with a lot of disbelief from your family.

GRAY:
Yes.

Kim
Was that an issue with anyone else besides your son and your son's dad? Were there friends or other family members who acted that way?

GRAY:
My family members, like my brothers, were pretty cool about it. They didn't really understand, but they believed me. They took me at my word. Through the years, they've been more supportive, and they know more about it. I didn't see very much of my parents. When I was getting bad with chemical sensitivity, I remember going down to see my parents in Florida when they needed help, and I stayed with them. Oh god, that was hard just to be in the house. It was like walking through a minefield, you know? My mom had those plug-in deodorizers on the walls. In the room she put me, there was some moldy [unclear] in the closet she had forgotten about. She went to the hairdresser, and then we had to assist my dad in a nursing facility. That was so awful. I remember sitting there and he was sitting in the wheelchair and I was sitting on the bed. I stuffed some Kleenex up my nose. My dad noticed it. He didn't really talk much, but he knew something was going on that wasn't right with me. [unclear] The nurse was so [unclear]. Finally, I ended up not going to see him as much. All because of fifteen minutes [unclear]. I don't know. That was really a hard time because all those strong emotions really make my reaction to chemicals get a lot stronger. I noticed whenever I cry, I smell everything more. I react to everything.

KIM:

That’s so interesting.

GRAY:

Correct. It's really not friendly to chemicals.

KIM:

Do you know if your family had any history of illnesses or sensitivities before? Or were you the first one in your family to experience this?

GRAY:

As far as I know, I’m the first one in my family.

KIM:

Have you ever tried going to doctors or anyone in the medical field regarding your sensitivities?

GRAY: (00:37:32)

Yes. [pause] That’s problematic. [laughs] As you must know.

KIM:

Yes.

GRAY:

I'm looking up, now, to have—What I have are two health practitioners: one, I rely on, the other I only use for blood tests and stuff like that. Which I never do, only if I had to. The one that I rely on is a nutritionist and a chiropractor, who also is chemically sensitive. So, he really gets it. He’s been really great. The other is a conventional Western medical doctor who is a nice man, but I don't know whether he doesn't listen or he just doesn't believe because [unclear] “Oh, what’s the problem?”

“Well, didn’t you hear the earful I gave you? [Laughter] From the first time I had a visit with you.”

It's so frustrating. I get angry whenever I think about it. And then his office. It’s supposed to be an independent office— small town. During the conglomerate of hospitals, so now they’re like a clinic of the hospital. They apparently had to abide by some guidelines that they all use in the hospital, which means that they’re using a lot more disinfectants, hand sanitizers—the office is just so [unclear]. It’s horrible. I haven’t been there in almost two years now. The last time I went, I literally had to walk out in the middle of my exam. I left.

KIM:

Wow.

GRAY:

I've never done that before.

KIM:

How did you find your nutritionist/chiropractor?

GRAY:

Well, when I moved out here— I moved out of the city because of chemical sensitivities and mold in 2011. When I got up here, shortly after I joined this organization, [unclear] I don't know how I found other people that were chemically sensitive. There's a network, and I was talking to this other woman in New York State who knew a holistic dentist who's about an hour away from me. I was having a lot of dental issues and I had to see a dentist, [unclear]. So, the holistic dentist turned me on to the nutritionist. The nutritionist was awful at [unclear]. They're biologic-centric, not holistic. Well, they are holistic, but they call themselves biologic-centric. It was really great to have them and then they referred me to the nutritionist and the whole network there. I have to travel for over an hour to my nutritionist and about over an hour to get to my dentist, but it's well worth it. I'm going to change doctors. I can't stand that guy. Even if I have to travel an hour and a half, I'm going to go with somebody that gets it.

KIM: (00:42:21)

I imagine it's well worth it to have someone in the medical field who believes you and knows what you're going through.

GRAY:

Yes.

KIM:

You said that you moved out of the city in 2011 because of MCS?

GRAY:

Yes.

KIM:

So, you were having issues with—you said, mold?

GRAY:

Yes. On top of the MCS—well, when I separated from my husband and I moved back to my old tenement apartment building. They started—every month—spraying pesticides in the hallway, every floor. It was really awful. I had terrible reactions to that. At first it didn't bother me that much, and then it started bothering me more. Everything was ramping up with my stress from going back to school and separating from my husband and my son having issues with visiting, and everything just converged. So, I was reacting more and more to the pesticides. Then there was a leak in the bathroom of my neighbor, who I shared a wall with. His toilet leaked down six flights. It was such a big leak that you could actually hear it in every hallway. As you were walking down the stairs, there

was a gurgle. I alerted the landlord and the super[intendent] and they didn't think it was important. [Laughs]

KIM:
Oh, god.

GRAY:
They really didn't. They were not really a slumlord, but that was last time. Then I had to take them to housing court to get it remedied. The remedy was worse than the problem almost, with some awful toxic paints they painted over the mold. They only painted over one hallway closet with mold in it because that's the only one they had access to, so it's probably [unclear]. I was just getting sicker and sicker. I couldn't think. I couldn't sleep. I was coughing up bloody mucus.

At the same time, I was starting to research chemical sensitivity, talk to other people who had it. I knew I was going to have to get away for a while to get better. So, I started leaving to go up to the house. This house, that I live in now, is what my husband and I had bought during our marriage as a cabin in upstate New York Catskills. While we were separated, we were sharing it. I would take three or four days to get away from the pesticides when they were going to spray. Then I would come back down to the city, and I would do that for four months maybe. I would come back, and I'm still smelling it, so four days wasn't enough. Then I'd have to take a week, and then the mold problem set in. Oh my god. By that point, we had formally divorced and we flipped a coin for the house. I called heads. [Laughs] Momma didn't raise no dummy. I called heads. [Laughter] So, I bought him out of the house, and I've been living up here since 2011. I wasn't able to really live in it for the first four months. I had to sleep in my car because the house was moldy. There were heating issues, and blah blah blah.

[unclear] I feel completely safe here. I'm really, really lucky I had the ability to get out. It's the best thing. The best. So many people with chemical sensitivities don't have a place where they can tolerate, and you know how that goes.

KIM:
Yes.

GRAY: (00:48:50)
Like sleeping in your car, and then you have to find a place to park your car when you sleep.

KIM:
Definitely. Has MCS disrupted your social life in any way?

GRAY:
[Laughs] What social life? I don't have a social life anymore. I don't have a social life. [Laughs] No, I shouldn't say I don't have any, but I do a lot of phone. I do have two neighbors who will go for walks with me. We walk on opposite sides of the road, and I've

gotten to know them pretty well and their families. That's great, when I can have that. I really look forward to that one-on-one and being with other people. But other than that, it's very rare that I can either see my son—we've been working out—I've been working on the relationship for ever since I got up here. He's just devastated that I left him to live with his dad when he was fifteen [unclear] in high school. So, he felt like I was abandoning him. And rightfully so. It really, really hurt him. It hurt our relationship. Even [unclear], we're much better now, but it's been a long slow road getting him to where he [unclear] father.

So, what we do when I see him is, I send him a packet of clothes [Laughter] that's tolerable for me, that are either his own clothes that I detoxed, or I buy new clothes for him that I detoxed. I have a set of clothes that I send to him, or I drive down there. I honk the horn, "I'm here! Come get your clothes!" He comes gets the clothes, goes up, takes a shower with the products that I leave for him. He detoxes, puts on the different clothes, and then we have a nice visit. We go to a park [unclear] ball.

KIM:

Are you still currently working?

GRAY:

No.

KIM: (00:52:15)

So, you retired from—when did you stop working as a doula?

GRAY:

Well, I really stopped working as a doula when I left the city. I wasn't doing much doula work by the time I left the city. I had gone back to school. I was in school and working with a couple of doula clients as a babysitter [unclear] or as a regular babysitter for one of my clients, but that was problematic too [unclear]. I couldn't do much with the kids if it meant going outside of the apartment. [unclear] non-toxic apartment, but there were cleaners in there that I couldn't use. I couldn't give them a bath. I had trouble with the laundry soap and the fabric softener and the baby's diaper. It was just one thing after another. That was really [unclear] before I left, maybe a year before I left. When I went back to school, I did have trouble in that environment too. I just barely made it to graduation.

KIM:

What were you studying in school? [pause] Are you still there? [pause] Hello? [pause] Can you hear me, Denise? [pause] I can't really hear anything. So, if you can hear me, I'm going to hang up and try calling back in just a minute.

[INTERRUPTION]

Interview with Denise Gray
SESSION 2 (3/26/2020)

KIM: (00:00:20)
I was in the middle of asking you what did you go back to school for?

GRAY: (00:00:24)
I went back for social work.

KIM:
You weren't able to get into social work after that, is that right?

GRAY:
Right.

KIM:
Okay. What school did you go to?

GRAY:
Fordham University.

KIM:
Yes. And right before the call got cut off, you were telling me how it was difficult to be in school. Could you elaborate on that?

GRAY:
Yes. Our bathroom—I couldn't find a bathroom I could tolerate. The study labs and libraries—I'd have to find a place where I was so distant from other students, but it's not always possible to be far enough away. The hardest thing was being in the classroom with a lot of other students who were wearing products that I didn't—you know.

I remember the first semester back, the professor pulled out this magic marker that you could use on the blackboard. I said, "Oh, I have to leave class." [Laughs] I went back after the class and I told her what had happened. I asked if there's any non-toxic marker she could use instead. So, she did that. The professors were pretty willing to work with me, but it was the students. How do you get a whole classroom full of students to accommodate me? It's not possible.

KIM:
That's a good point. [pause] Have you ever joined any online community forum for people who deal with similar like sensitivities?

GRAY: (00:02:51)
No, not really.

KIM:

During our pre-interview, you talked about being on the board of two different organizations.

GRAY:
Yes.

KIM:
Could you talk a little bit more about that?

GRAY:
One organization was a housing project within a 501c3. It was initiated by another woman who was chemically sensitive, who had an idea for housing MCS people in a co-op situation. Where we would—we meaning the board of this organization—would buy a property with a house on it that was workable and renovate the house to make it manageable for people with chemical sensitivities to live in. Maybe depending on the size of the house, there'd be several apartments in it that people with chemical sensitivities could buy into. They would start out with a six-month trial, and then if worked out, they would then buy the co-op. It was built like a regular co-op, except that it would only be for chemically sensitive people. The idea was that we would keep the environment and the materials safe for us. It was a learning experience. [Laughs] I mean, it was a great idea, but it never really got off the ground.

KIM:
I see. [pause] You were also on another board as well?

GRAY:
Yes. And then shortly after that I joined another board of a support organization for chemically sensitive people. I was on that board for five or six years. That one was much more organized, I'd say. There was always structure there. It was more workable, but I guess being on a board, whether you're chemically sensitive or not, there's a burnout. You reach this point where [pause]— on the whole, I really enjoy being on that board, participating in support calls, facilitating support calls, and doing things that need to be done. I still have a lot of friends—all my phone friends are from that organization.

KIM:
It sounds like you were really involved in doing things with advocacy and support and outreach.

GRAY:
Yes. It's good for me. [Laughter]

KIM: (00:07:29)
It sounds like you were able to make a lot of friends from that and form a community through that.

GRAY:

Yes.

KIM:

I also have some questions about your daily life. I know last time we talked you had said that you have a lot of hobbies, like you do a lot of sewing, drawing, watching DVDs and reading. Is this—sorry, I'm trying to think of how to phrase this. I noticed that a lot of your activities are indoor activities. Is that because of MCS?

GRAY:

Yes. I mean, if I could, I would go to the movies or see a concert, or go to a retreat or something. I don't know. These are things that I've found that I can do to occupy my time that don't interfere with my intolerance or my tolerance, however you want to put it. [Laughs] They're safe for me.

KIM:

Yes, I also love sewing and knitting and that kind of thing.

GRAY:

Really?

KIM:

Oh, yes. I've actually I recently got into—I don't know if you've heard of this, but have you heard of quilling?

GRAY:

No, what is that?

KIM:

I find this so fun because I'm really into crafting. I love these types of things. So quilling is when you take really thin strips of paper, and you have this little tool that you use to twirl the paper into different shapes, like leaves or circles and stuff. You form them to make shapes. I like to do that and make little flowers out of quilled paper.

GRAY: (00:09:51)

Oh, that sounds interesting. Very artistic.

KIM:

I'll have to send you a card then. [Laughs]

GRAY:

Yes, do!

KIM:

Especially now that we're all quarantining [2020 COVID-19 pandemic], it's such a great quarantine hobby because it's pretty simple. You don't even need a lot of tools, as long as

you have paper. I have like a special quilling tool to twirl the paper, but if you don't have that, you could also just do it by hand. It's so much fun. [Laughs]

GRAY:
It sounds a little bit like origami.

KIM:
Kind of, yes. It was actually invented by Italian nuns in the sixteenth century. They would cut up strips of newspaper and twirl them with their quills, which is where the name came from.

GRAY: (00:10:42)
Is that right?

KIM:
[Laughs] Yes.

GRAY:
Wow. Isn't it amazing how things come to be?

KIM:
It is, and how things last.

GRAY:
Yes.

KIM:
When I send you the legal agreement, I'll have to send you a little sample of it. [Laughs]

GRAY:
I would love that.

KIM:
Sorry to get off topic. [Laughs]

GRAY:
Oh, that's okay. What I like to do is I like to take scraps of fabric and quilt them together as patches on denim jeans and jackets, like we used to do in the '60s and '70s.

KIM:
Wow, that's great. I know you said you hand sew. I have a sewing machine, but I've had a hard time using it. I'm not so great at it. I think I also prefer to hand sew.

GRAY:
I love to hand sew. It's more satisfying than using a sewing machine.

KIM:

I feel like using a machine for me is really frustrating sometimes because I don't know a ton about machines. Sometimes my thread will get caught and then I'll get really frustrated.

GRAY:

Yes, I agree.

KIM:

I think with hand sewing I have a lot more control over it, so even if it takes more time it feels more satisfying because I can control what's happening better than with the machine.

GRAY:

Yes, yes.

KIM:

Do you also knit or crochet or anything?

GRAY:

I don't.

KIM:

Oh, okay. Because I knit. I want to take up crocheting, but I always learn and then forget how because I learned knitting first, so that's the only one that I remember. [Laughs]

GRAY:

Oh, I bet you can do some great things with knitting. I used to make—What do you make?

KIM:

I mostly do scarves and hats. I can't really do anything complicated yet.

GRAY:

That's cool, though! To be able to make a scarf or a hat that you can wear, that's cool.

KIM:

Yes, I'm all for hobbies that you can do inside while you're watching TV or multitasking––like reading or something. Sorry, I'm sorry to get off topic. [Laughs]

GRAY:

No, that's okay.

KIM:

Let me see. Going back to our questions— [pause] Have you ever received any sort of mental health counseling for having MCS? Either formally, for example, going to a therapist, or informally, like getting support from your friends?

GRAY: (00:13:42)

Oh, yes. I'd say both. I formally went to a therapist for a couple years, as I was getting divorced and just before I left the city. And that was—as I started getting more and more chemically sensitive, that got to be unsatisfactory. It was like an exercise of frustration to get there. I couldn't get there without getting sick on the way. So, that wasn't so helpful, and she wasn't very understanding about chemical sensitivities. But I have had phone consults with a social worker to help me and my son repair our relationship. That was really helpful. He didn't know much about chemical sensitivity, but was very open to learning. That's it, you know?

KIM:

It's a shame that your therapist wasn't open to MCS. Just for some overview questions—how would you say that MCS has affected your life the most, or what in what way has MCS affected your life the most?

GRAY:

My relationship with my son. [pause] And my so-called career. I would say my son, first of all. Then career and social life.

KIM:

Have your friends been open to you having MCS or were they in disbelief?

GRAY:

Well, kind of a mixed bag. One of my very best friends was in disbelief and so I lost that friendship. I thought that was a real loss. But another very good friend was open to it and open to learning about it, hearing about it. I find that my real true friendships have lasted. Anybody that didn't believe it, I don't think they were my true friends really.

KIM:

Has having MCS affected the way or the amount of time you can spend with your friends?

GRAY:

Absolutely. One hundred percent.

KIM:

Do you mostly see your friends online or do you call them now?

GRAY: (00:17:38)

Yes, we speak on the phone. I did see one old high-school friend now [unclear] fifteen years. But it's rare—mostly phone.

KIM:

Before you had MCS, how often would you see your friends?

GRAY:

Once or twice a week.

KIM:

Earlier today, you said that you had someone who would get your groceries for you. Is this because of MCS?

GRAY:

Yes.

KIM:

How long have you had someone getting groceries for you?

GRAY:

Eight years, I guess.

KIM:

Are there other tasks that people assist you with because of MCS?

GRAY:

Yes, like mowing my lawn and getting my tires changed. When I switched from my snow tires to my other tires, I have to get the other tires to the mechanic and I can't put them in my car because they smell. So, I have to beg somebody to do that for me. [Laughs]

KIM:

I know earlier you said riding the subway when you lived in a city was difficult for you. Do you mostly rely on private transportation now?

GRAY:

One hundred percent.

KIM:

All right. Just some overall questions to tie up the interview—how do you think society will view MCS in around ten years?

GRAY:

Fifteen years ago, I used to say, "In ten to fifteen years, [unclear] is going to get it now. I won't have this issue and it won't be so difficult. It's not as difficult as it used to be—not as. Now, as you know, there are many more [unclear] who are dealing with us.

In fifteen years, [pause] I'm going to say it's going to be like the pandemic. Very similar to a pandemic. I think there's going to be so many chemically sensitive people that there is going to be no option.

KIM: (00:21:36)

That’s all of the questions that I have. Is there anything that you'd like to mention that we didn't get to talk about?

GRAY:

I’d like to thank you. I really think it's important to get this news out there, to educate people who might not have heard about it, and to help those who are newly experiencing [MCS] to let them know that they’re not alone and to get help.

KIM:

Thank you so much. That's such a nice thing to say.