

UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities Podcast
Season 6 Ep 2: "Things Are Going to Change" with Zandra Rolón

TRANSCRIPT

Deb Fowler: Hello, and welcome to *UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities: A Podcast*. I'm Deb Fowler, co-founder of History UnErased.

On January 13, 1983, Deborah Johnson and Zandra Rolón went to Papa Choux restaurant in Los Angeles for a romantic dinner. Little did they know that their desire to dine in one of the restaurant's booths would lead to a landmark civil rights case. After being seated at the table they had reserved, they were told that they had to move from the semi-private booth because they were not a "mixed couple". They refused to give up their seats, and when they were denied service, they began taking the names of all involved parties and contacted Gloria Allred, a well-known civil rights attorney.

Forty-two years later, we had a chance to sit down with Zandra Rolón to hear about how this historic court case impacted her life. In another episode - coming soon - you will hear from Deborah Johnson. But first, meet Zandra Rolón. Take it away, Kathleen....

Kathleen Barker: Thank you so much for joining us.

Zandra Rolón: Thank you for having me. Thank you.

Kathleen: Here at History UnErased, we are so excited to talk a bit more with you about the incident and the court case that resulted, that happened many years ago now, but we use your story essentially in one of our most popular teaching units, and so we want to know more about it and hear from you. So what would you like people to understand and know about your case?

Zandra: Primarily the reason that this all happened was because something wasn't right, because the owner of the restaurant decided to take the law into his own hands and found justification to refuse service to a group of people that weren't like him, stirred the need to do something about it. This case, I always like to remind people that we don't wake up in the morning and say, you know, today I'm going to go out there and make history. We do things. History is basically made because things are not right or they could be better. The case itself was the ultimate back of the bus syndrome in the scenario, and unfortunately for the owner, it happened to two women of color. So it was during— it pushed everything back to that doesn't happen to us now, but it's happening. It's happening. And the number one thing, I think that's the takeaway that I tell people, and that was a realization for me, was that I grew up in southern

Texas where it was whites only, and that didn't mean that only blacks were not allowed. It was anybody that was not white. So I grew up with that sense of, this isn't right, this isn't right. And that was the number one thing. I think that was the main message of this lawsuit was the reason it happened was because it was not right. And it also pushes the statement of you've got to say something or you've got to do something. Because even if it doesn't apply to you, if you don't say something or do something, it's going to apply to somebody and you know it's going to apply to somebody. And for you not to say or do something is not right. And it's important because so many people before us have paved the way for us. And you never know when you are going to be part of that paving the way for somebody, no matter what the topic is, if we're all responsible for each other and the rights that we have.

Kathleen: Can you tell us a little bit more about working with Gloria Allred, for example, what the conversations were like, or if there's anything you wish your legal team had done differently during your case?

Zandra: Working with Gloria and she has the reputation of don't mess with her. She was always very upfront. There was no confusion as to what we were walking into. Even from the very beginning, as Deborah and I were leaving the restaurant, I was taking everybody's name that was working there, and the first thing that came to my mind is, no, this isn't right. And we got to look into this, maybe I'll contact Gloria Allred. And I remember Deborah kind of going, are you kidding? But it's like, no, it just can't be right. So I contacted her and we met with her and she kept saying, I don't know. I don't know if you have a case, and it would probably be testing a city ordinance, but I don't know, but I will talk to my partners and I will contact you within the week. Well, by the time we got home, she called and said that she would take the case, but she said, but you better be very comfortable with being out and the fact that this is going to be big, so if you're not comfortable with what's coming, don't do it because it's going to be big.

So that kind of set everything in motion in the sense that, alright, if you're okay, here we go, because we're riding in her car and she's driving. So if there was any indication that, oh, I don't know, maybe we'll get in trouble or I don't know, then don't do it. But my thing for me was, let's do it. Let's do it. And okay, those people that don't know that I'm a lesbian are going to find out really quick.

So I appreciated the fact that she was upfront. There was no softness about her. She wasn't mean or anything like that. She was very professional and set the tone of, this might not be easy and it may not be fair, but good for you that you're doing this. And as far as if there was something that I wish they would've done differently, I thought about that, and I really can't think of anything that I feel I was disappointed in or they should have done that, or again, we were not driving and so we had to really trust that the person driving was going to get us to

where we needed to be. So there was a lot of trust in that category as far as, alright, okay, what's next? What's next? So yeah, I was very, very pleased and I still am with having gone in that direction with them.

Kathleen: It had to be a very interesting moment in your life basically to hand over this situation, hand over your life to someone who says, well, your life's going to blow up, but you just have to trust me.

Zandra: Yes, yes. Very much so.

Kathleen: It'll all be fine.

Zandra: Yeah.

Kathleen: So, thinking too then about your life beyond the case, how about your friends and your family? Did they support your case, or how did they react? How much did you share with them?

Zandra: Well, that's an interesting question as to how much I shared with them because it was on the news so I didn't have to share. It was being shared. Friends, they were very supportive. A lot of them were like, oh my God, what the hell are you doing? You're going to be, everybody's going to be watching you, they're going to be judging, they're going to be talking about you. And yet at the same time, supportive, because we were for, at the time, we didn't know this was what we were standing for, but it was going to affect people of color. It was going to affect gay people, it was going to affect women. It was going to affect just the basic law of what's right as far as service. And it was again, the back of the bus. It was another era of civil rights. And again, we didn't wake up one day and said, we're going to be part of history and we're going to change the law.

And it made me aware of how things have changed simply because people were courageous enough to say something. As far as my family, my mother was not happy. My mother was, she didn't speak to me for a while because I was getting calls— I lived in California getting calls from cousins in Texas and Arizona and places going, oh my God, I just saw you on the news. Oh my God. And everything in the news was lesbian couple sues restaurant, lesbian couple sues restaurant. And I think primarily the reason that my mom was not supportive in the sense of she loved me, but she was not supportive was because when gay people come out, you make your entire family come out, you bring them out of the closet also, they have to explain to their family or to their friends that didn't know they have a gay child and they have to explain it and they're going to be judged, they're going to be questioned, They're going— and especially during that time, it's like, what did you do wrong that she's gay? And so being out just to your friends

and family is one thing, but the case brought everybody that knew me out of the closet and my family was not pleased, was not pleased. So for a long period of time, I didn't get the support, the you go girl kind of thing. So a lot of times it felt incredibly lonely and it felt because of being Latina and growing up with a Latina mom, it was that, oh, I'm going to get in trouble. I'm going to get in trouble. And yet I was too far in it. I was too far in it. And it also, I had to remind my mom that when the whole thing of people of color could now sit at the counter, my grandfather, her father, took my cousin and I to one of the drugstores in Brownsville, and we had a ice cream float at the counter and people were staring at us, but I didn't know why until I was an adult. So I had to remind my mom, you grew up in that era and it was a person like your dad who said, we have the right. So in a way, I kind of maybe got it from my grandpa, I don't know. But yeah, it wasn't the easiest for my mother at all.

Kathleen: And that just can't be easy.

Zandra: Right, exactly.

Kathleen: And I love the connection to your grandfather, and it's also just a great reminder that this history is not that long ago, right?

Zandra: No, it isn't. It really isn't. I mean, just as an example, my mother had relatives in Kingsville, which was a two hour drive from where we lived, and she always stopped at this one gas station, always, never in any other gas station. She carried an empty paint can in the back behind my mom's seat for the kids to use it to go to the bathroom if we needed to, because the only place that she could stop to get gas was at this one particular gas station. And I didn't know that. We didn't know that until we were adults that that was the reason. And we could only go to this one Whataburger and it was a hamburger place. And the only reason we could do that was because she could not stop in certain areas because it was for whites only. It wasn't that long ago. It wasn't that long ago.

Kathleen: As part of our unit for teachers and students, we have a lot of great primary sources that you provided things like newspaper articles and documents related to your court case. And some of the newspaper articles are really fascinating, like the advertisements that the restaurant took out. So how did you feel about, or what did you make of the restaurant's reaction to your case?

Zandra: We were in our twenties, and so part of me, we were shocked. We were shocked, but it also, what brought up for me was fear that I think we're going to get in trouble. We might get in trouble for doing this and everybody's going to know that we are doing this. And because it was a restaurant, it was an establishment, and we were just two kids as far as he was concerned, it felt like had we not had Gloria as our attorney guiding us through this process, I don't know if

we would— I think we would've been incredibly intimidated and maybe not pursue it because they had more money, they had more power. They were guys. He was a guy, and we were just girls and I, we had that sense of, God, I hope we don't get in trouble by doing this. But we were shocked, especially the ads that he would put out. It made it as though we were being scolded by an adult and he was going to record that and let everybody else know. And I guess him expecting support, which he probably did from other restaurants or other people or his family or I don't know, but it was shocking and scary.

Kathleen: Well, and the fact that their hatred was so clearly on view, they didn't try to hide the fact that they were discriminating against you and others. It was just right there. Yes. In their advertising. They weren't hiding it. They are not hiding it. No. It's fascinating that they were just so confident in their own discrimination and discriminatory practices,

Zandra: And they didn't think it was discriminatory. They thought it was their right. A person like him would not have considered that he was discriminating. He had the right, because it was his restaurant, and we were just these kids, but he messed with the wrong kids.

Kathleen: So, how do you think the social or political climate of the early 1980s influenced your case? Do you think maybe your case would've turned out differently if it were something that happened today?

Zandra: Yes, to the last question, because the case occurred in the early eighties. We were, again, and it's hard to believe that we were, but we were on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, the Harvey Milk, gay movement, women's rights, abortion rights. We were part of that era because things were still changing in the eighties. It was still changing. People being able to come out openly, women seeking the right to have an abortion, reproductive rights. We were still in that era, but we didn't, from time to time, we didn't know. And at this time, also, we don't know that something else needed to happen. Oh yeah. And now this, oh yeah. And now until it happens, that's when one realizes that the work is not done. It's just who's being affected now and with what. And some of the laws are challenged that way. They're challenged by people that are victims of something that we didn't know was happening.

And it raises the question of, wait a minute, is this right? Is this can't be right? Can it? And you do the research and you finally realize that something that should not be happening is happening. So I think that the case in the eighties was supported by people that were actively involved with making changes regarding our civil rights. So I think that that was one of the reasons, because we got so much support from news stations and the papers and the interviews, all of the stuff that came. But I think it had a lot to do with the fact that we were still in the momentum of change, still in the momentum of change.

How do I feel about today? I don't know. A lot of our civil rights have already been challenged. Look at Roe versus Wade, especially with the new political climate, even the roles of women, the roles of wives. It reminds me of when I was growing up and we were watching television, black and white television, and the television shows where the woman is in a dress and earrings and high heels and she's making dinner and it's the, oh my God, are we moving backwards? And it's scary. It's scary. I have to say just the things about the rights of trends changing and moving and sports and just the challenges that I think are at hand that can be possibly rewind. It's scary. It's definitely scary. And what's next that's going to be challenged? Same sex marriages? I wouldn't be surprised. And I know that will stir up a lot of pushback for sure. Because there's too many of us that are legally married that- you're not- no way that you're going to rewind that one.

Kathleen: Well, and I think this is what makes your story and Deborah's story so important for our teachers and students to hear. Because it's a story about everyday activism and it's something that touches everyone. It's something everyone can do. Just standing up for yourself, standing up for others is going to be really important.

Zandra: And you know, it's interesting because I often, when we were dealing with women's rights, giving interviews and speeches and things like that, I remember this one young woman who said, we were talking about feminism. And her thing was, I'm not a feminist. And I think my heart stopped for just a second because I thought to myself, how dare you? You have no idea what women have done before you to the point where you don't even know that you had no rights. And the fact that you can play boys sports, you can wear pants if you want. You don't have to put makeup on if you don't. All of these things is because of the women that came before you. So do not disrespect the women that have come to you by saying you're not a feminist is like, yeah, you are doll. Yeah, you are. You're a free feminist.

And that was also a label that we proudly displayed as we do now, being openly gay and married and have children. Now we are open about that, and that's because of everybody that paved the way before us. And organizations like History and Erased. And what you have provided is fantastic because when they're learning about the stuff that happened, it was during the time of their moms and their dads and their grandparents. It's not like something we're learning about George Washington. It's like, no, it affected them. And what's fantastic is that what they're learning now has become history. That they are learning, that they're going to then help them shape the adults that they're going to be and the parents that they're going to be. I mean, the fact that high schools and middle schools have clubs and organizations to support transgender, gay, lesbian, he, she, them, they, all of those things. We didn't have that. We didn't have any of that. And now the fact that they have the support even in school, it's unbelievable. Beautiful. Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

I just retired in April as a physician. And one of the things, I had several, I'd say four patients that were parents of children that had gone through transition, and it would just bring tears to my eyes to the fact that what support, what love they had for their child to help them go through that transition as opposed to kick you out of the house because how can you be that way, which is what a lot of us went through just to come out of being gay or lesbian, much less, change your sex, change your identity? And I would always give them so much grace and appreciation for them doing that and being that for their child, the lives that were saved from suicide or drug abuse or depression or whatever. For those that don't have that. It's just amazing that the support system is here, that the support system is available to the kids, even if it's just amazing. Amazing.

Kathleen: Well, and we appreciate that you are part of that support system, too. How would you say this experience impacted the trajectory of your life?

Zandra: Especially after we won-- I remember once the state Supreme Court decided in our favor, we had to go to the lower court judges, and they had to override their decision. And I remember being in front of this one judge, and he's got the paperwork in front of him, and he goes to sign the form, and he stops, and he looks at us and says, "You know, you just made history. Things are going to change." And I'll never forget that. It almost makes me want to cry. That it gave me the confidence of, I'm not going to get in trouble if I say something that's not against something that's not right, I'm not going to get in trouble. And for that split second, I was a kid. I was a kid talking to my mom going, I'm not going to get in trouble. I'm not going to get in trouble. And it gave me confidence in a lot of ways and a lot of different ways that I didn't know until I've gone through it already and I look back and that sense of bring it, bring it. Let's do it. Let's do it. And why not? It's been on every news channel. We were on Donahue Show, we were in MS Magazine and Jet Magazine and all of that, that at some point it was, nothing can happen that's not going to be good, it just doesn't happen. So it gave me that, the sense of confidence. It gave me the sense of confidence that I'll fight back. And looking back 42 years, it's like I am very appreciative of where I am and my life and my marriage and my health and my everything. I feel like I have contributed to the point where it has contributed to me.

Kathleen: We've talked about this a little bit, but what advice would you give to someone facing a similar legal battle today?

Zandra: I thought about that, and there's nothing to lose. You got nothing to lose. The only thing that you got to lose is whatever you're fighting for, if you don't fight for it, that's what you're going to lose. The right to be married, the right to be who you are, the right to have, what you are, the right to pursue, the career, the education, the kids or no kids. And it gives, there's nothing to lose except for what you are fighting for that you don't fight for. And not only

do you get to lose it, but at some point someone's going to do it because it's going to affect someone else. And someone else is going to be the one that says, no, this is what's going to happen. It could have been you. And I'm not saying what a coward if you don't do it because it's a personal thing, no question about it. But if somebody was going through that, through a similar situation, I'd say keep going and trust who you're working with, trust who you're working with, and just know that everybody is looking at you so behave, behave, don't. Everything that comes out of your mouth is going to be recorded. Everything that— every facial expression is going to be recorded and somebody's going to play that over and over. So be aware of what you're saying and what you're doing and how you're saying it, because someone's going to put it down on paper. And now the times that we are in now, it's going to be on Facebook, it's going to be in Google, it's going to be somewhere. So if you're in a similar case, keep doing it. And just know that everything you say and do is going to be recorded. So give it your best, give it your best because that's how— it's getting into good trouble. You are getting into good trouble and it has to come out in a positive way. It just has to. Otherwise you'd be doing something different.

Kathleen: Let's all go out and make some good trouble today.

Zandra: That's right. That's right.

Zandra: Well, thank you so much, Sandra, for talking with us. We really appreciate it.

Zandra: Thank you so much for asking me to participate. Thank you.

Kathleen: Thank you. And thank you for all you have done to support History on Erased and share your story with us.

Zandra: My pleasure. Always my pleasure. And thank you for the work that you do. It has definitely made a change, and it's going to continue to make changes. So thank you.

Deb: Kathleen Barker is History UnErased's program director and is a library and information specialist and public historian with 20 years of experience as a museum and library educator. This podcast is funded by the New York City Council. It was developed by History UnErased and produced and edited by Dinah Mack, our podcaster and youth equity program director. Our theme music is "1986" by BrothaD via Tribe of Noise. Please rate this podcast and share!

I'm Deb Fowler. Thanks for listening. And visit UnErased.org to learn how we are putting LGBTQ history in its rightful place - the classroom.

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