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Southern feminist, queer, and anti-racist organizer and writer, Suzanne Pharr has chronicled her life's work in a new book, titled *Transformation: Towards A People's Democracy*.

Jacqueline Froelich spoke with Pharr, who lives in Little Rock, to bring us her story.

<https://publishing.vt.edu/site/books/m/10.21061/transformation/>

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Suzanne Pharr's book, *Transformation: Towards A People's Democracy*, issued by Virginia Tech Publishing, is available for purchase, or download at no cost through Creative Commons. A link can be found on Ozarks at large dot com.

We also post contact information for a free virtual 40th Anniversary Reunion of The Women's Project scheduled this Saturday, Oct 9, at 12:30pm.

Suzanne Pharr, was born one of eight siblings during the Great Depression and beginning of World War 2, in rural Georgia in 1939.

S1: "On a very small farm, a dirt farm in Hog Mountain, Georgia. Public education was very limited and I lived for the book mobile which came once a month."

V2 She went on to attend a small women's college in Georgia, earning an English degree, then a Master's in English from State University of New York, in Buffalo.

S2: "That's where I learned a lot about being a Southerner, and a lot about race ... at Tulane."

V3 In Louisiana, she almost completed her Ph.D. in American literature. But after a decade of academia and teaching she took a sharp left turn in the early 1970s into social change groundwork, eventually moving to a remote feminist farm on the Arkansas Ozarks.

S3: “I would say it was the assassination of JFK, Malcolm X, Bobby Kennedy ... every time your turned around someone offering tremendous leadership was being killed.”

3:30 V4 Pharr enter social service, directing Washington County’s racially diverse Head Start Program, co-founding one of the state’s first battered women’s and childrens’ shelter. She developed elder care programming for VISTA, before founding the now-historic Women’s Project in Little Rock.

S4: “One of the things that changed my life was organizing activists ... creating the first consciousness raising group in New Orleans ... activism.”

V5 Coming out as lesbian while at Tulane in the 60s, also informed her social change work, to include gender and sexual identity issues, long before such things were openly discussed, let alone acknowledged and advocated.

While at the Women’s Project, Pharr wrote articles for the quarterly newsletter, authoring the revolutionary “Women’s Watchcare Network,” which monitored and documented racist, religious-based, sexist, and anti-gay violence in Arkansas.

S15: “That’s what led us to monitoring the murders of women in Arkansas ... to bear witness to what happened.”

V6 She also initiated some of the first countervailing activism against rising political theocracy in Arkansas and the nation, that emerged in response to the civil rights movement.

S5: “The Women’s Project was a small organization ... sexism and racism as inextricably combined.”

V7 With the Women’s Project, Pharr traveled widely leading workshops for schools, businesses, civic organizations, progressive churches, and unions, on sexism, economic injustice, and homophobia, which led her to author the groundbreaking book, *Homophobia: a Weapon of Sexism*, as well as *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation*.

In the early 2000s, Pharr moved to Tennessee to serve as director of the Highlander Research and Education Center, a historic civil rights institute focused on social and economic justice. There Pharr worked to

infuse feminist and LGBTQ identity politics into the center's long-standing civil rights agenda.

S6: "What did that do for my life? I stepped in the grandest tradition of Highlander ... then we build a movement."

V9 Pharr has also served as a political strategist, beginning with Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign in 1988, and later as lead organizer for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

As such Pharr is among the first civil rights organizers in Arkansas, and the U.S. to collaborate with racial and gender diverse political leaders and activists –especially in the South, where the battle is re-escalating.

After 40 years as a pioneering multi-racial, multi-gender frontline activist, Pharr is reckoning with a backlash unleashed by the Trump administration.

S10: "I just watched what was happening, the slicing and dicing of democracy ... bound in authoritarianism."

V10 Suzanne Pharr's new book *Transformation: Towards A People's Democracy* brings forward decades of her social change practices and perspectives.

She hopes her new book, available at no cost, will encourage readers to actively organize in their communities, for a just, equitable and enlightened society.

S11: "It's not for people in high office, within social change or within the government. It is for those people who are what we call on the ground ... a roadmap.

V13 What worries Pharr most about extreme right wing efforts to extinguish voting rights, redistrict to advantage GOP Party politics, overturn Roe V Wade, and quash LGBTQ civil rights, is loss of community connection.

S12: "Not just worrying about what bills to be passed, or the supreme court ... that's the place where we have to work."

V14 Due the pandemic shut downs, free virtual, online meeting spaces have emerged, she says, allowing activists to organize in place. And in kind, Pharr and her publisher have made her new book available online for free.

S14: “And to be held in the Commons, because the movement gave me this book. I didn’t create it. It came to me thru the work of hundreds of people ... and in Tennessee.”

V15 Pharr is the recipient of a Harvey Milk Award, a Ms. Foundation Gloria Steinem Award and Stonewall Foundation Award for National Gay and Lesbian Leadership.

At age 82, Suzanne Pharr describes herself as a political handywoman. She continues to actively engage in protest politics, lobbying and meeting with activists from all races, genders, sexual identities, classes, ages, abilities, and cultures, to deploy strategies for justice and equality.

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