

**Susan Phillips  
Annie Artino  
Narrator**

**Sara Ludewig  
Interviewer**

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Susan Phillips                    **-SP**  
Sara Ludewig                      **-SL**  
Annie Artino                       **-AA**

**SL:** You can just talk a bit about what you brought today, your story, harm reduction.

**AA:** What'd you bring today, Susan?

**SP:** I brought I think probably the only surviving original Street Works bag. Street Works was a street outreach collaborative that formed in 1993. I think '93. I don't even remember how many organizations were involved.

**AA:** I thought there were six but maybe it was nine.

**SP:** I don't even remember. At this point I'd really have to think hard. Back in the day it was a pretty special and transformative thing to the community of people providing services to homeless kids. For a long time before there was actual legal needle exchange outreach workers were clandestinely carrying needles in their bags and exchanging them. And condoms and all sorts of harm reduction related tools and tricks.

**AA:** And education and normalizing stuff for people. Meeting people where they were at.

**SP:** That really dates us, doesn't it?

**AA:** Right. Well, exactly. Also, lot's of information—Hep C wasn't really on the radar, but people were still dropping dead like crazy from AIDS. All of that was in motion. A lot of the services were based around "who deserved help and who didn't."

**SP:** You had to be sober to access stuff.

**AA:** There was a huge pushback. You had to be a "good person." If you were in the sex industry, or if you were in all these different realms you didn't fit and you were endangered. Or the workers put you in danger because they didn't have alternatives for you. Street Works was really active in creating environments where that didn't happen and where people were truly met where they were at. And empowered to make their own choices in how to improve their lives.

**SP:** And sponsored harm reduction training for youth workers—

**AA:** Everywhere.

**SP:** All over the state.

**AA:** And fought for it because it was not—now it is an accepted perspective and blah, blah, blah, and it's all evidence based. But then it wasn't. People believed in the "tough love" practice. All this other stuff that was really punitive and ineffectual.

**SP:** I got in trouble with our MBH HIV prevention contact manager for saying it out loud at a conference one time. [Unclear name] pulled me aside: not to ever say that word again.

**SL:** Was Street Works based in the Twin Cities?

**AA:** Yeah. The first of it's kind in the nation.

**SL:** How did both of you get involved in harm reduction in Minnesota?

**SP:** Because it just made sense. I think Gayle Thomas, who should be here at some point, I've had lots of conversations with her. [Rosemary] dragged me to Harm Reduction Coalition Conference in Oakland.

**AA:** I came into it where I have my own history—I was a street kid and I was homeless for a long time. I had very little interest in receiving services. I was "bad" or something. I wasn't interested in being mainlined into housing. I didn't trust them. I didn't think that they held their word. I was part of the collective that started the Hard Times Cafe. We had a lot of connections with those communities. A lot of connection with people who were involved with [unclear] communities. A lot of [unclear] members. People would pass away from AIDS or ODs or whatever. Part of it came just from being part of that community. When I turned twenty-three I met Jesse Seveda who used to do outreach at Hard Times. I was working a second job at First Avenue at the time. He tried to offer me candy or condoms and I said, "I don't want either one of those. I want a job I don't fucking hate." He got me an application to apply to be a case manager for Safe House, which I was completely unqualified for. I interviewed, and they ended up hiring me as an on-call person and started training me. That's where I was introduced to the formal idea of harm reduction.

**SP:** Me?

**AA:** You didn't. Pam did.

**SP:** Really?

**AA:** Yeah. And then I met you. I heard about you, and you scared me. They had to explain to me what gangster rap was because I just thought it was music. They were trying to tell me what inappropriate music was and I didn't know.

**SP:** Pam?

**AA:** Yeah. She only liked country western, which I was like—she was like, "You can't play inappropriate music. And I was like, "What the hell is inappropriate music?" And the guy was like, "She means gangster rap." I was like, "Uh, okay." Then I met Susan, who at that time was the director of that program. I'd heard about her but she scared me.

**SP:** Before you met me you were—

**AA:** Of course! They were like, "And she went and did the PeaceCorps in Costa Rica, and she's this big deal, and she speaks several languages, and la la la la." And then I saw this chick walked up and she was bald. I thought she was punk rock. She had a little stocking cap on, little combat boots, and she was holding the hand of this little, teeny, beautiful girl who was like four years old, Emily, who is her daughter. How old was she?

**SP:** Two.

**AA:** Little teeny thing. She just took up space. It was beautiful. She was funny, she encouraged people to question things and to questions politics. She was just rad. I was, "I'm still scared of her, but I love her." [laughs] You did. You've got to remember one of the first times you were there the super pissed off kid who went and told his case manager I pushed him down the stairs when what I did was walk by him with a bag of garbage. Yeah. I was brand new and was totally scared I was going to get fired. She was like, "Nope. Not what happened." She was standing there.

Over time it was a place where I really got to learn about harm reduction and learn about that aspect of it. And really see it—I'm an experiential learner, so I did it to myself before I did it to anyone else. That's where I found it to be profoundly effective.

What's interesting is that now when I have questions about harm reduction strategies she's my go to person to call. I love it. I'm pizarro about it because it's been the thing that makes most sense and is most flexible and effective. I got that job when I just turned twenty-three and I'm forty-six now.

**SP:** Emily's twenty-five. I also think, you know, I've had to be harm reduction as a parent, too, because you can't be one thing at your work life and one thing at home, which has been interesting to say the least. In part, not because it's hard to practice harm reduction, but because I end up getting judged by other parents who don't think my strategies or what I let my kids do and encourage them not to do is appropriate. I found out from one of Emily's peers from a mom that I ran into in another context that, "Oh yeah I always thought that you were buying drugs for the kids." And I thought, "Yeah, I was." No. So, yeah. I don't know. That's how I got involved.

All the things I ever learned at harm reduction conferences, you know, when people start talking about crack babies, I'm like, "Actually, the placenta absorbed most of that crack cocaine and what those children were suffering from was malnutrition." I get to lay out things I've learned at harm reduction conferences over the years.

**SL:** Can you talk a little bit about what has changed over your years working with harm reduction?

**AA:** Well, I don't work in the social service industry anymore, but I can say in my final years there there's a lot of people in this town that claim that they're practicing harm reduction and aren't.

**SP:** It's going through a buzzword phase.

**AA:** It's become a buzzword and everyone says they're doing it. I think the number of people who truly comprehend deeply what it means to be a harm reductionist has shrunk. I mean I think part of it is the needle exchange isn't there to sort of be the central clearing house of those ideas. I think also it's not as collaborative. There's not as much harm reduction practiced in that context. Maybe by individual people. I think it's also more funders, there's more stuff on there, but less opportunity. Harm reduction takes time. You need time and you need to be able to build report. Anything else you can do on the fly, sure. But to really be effective with it it takes time and space, and people need to learn to trust that time and space. That is what does not appear to be available. Especially within organizations. There just isn't the time and space. There are really big caseloads; you've got three months to do six things that take twenty-six years to manifest.

**SP:** Or even you're only housing in this context. You're only 'blah blah' in this context. It's become more constrictive right now. I think that that's common whenever people get scared. Then you only have more conservative governments. People get scared and they contract and tighten up. I've seen that a few times over the years. I also see less true community participation than there used to be. It's been kind of professionalized out. Part of that makes it easier and more palatable for the funders and less effective. They'll say, "Oh yeah I took that class on harm reduction." That's not enough.

I also think we have always lived in the land of ten thousand treatment centers, so there's still this twelve-step orientation to the world that we've always had to fight against. I think the safe harbor stuff, helping people who are being sex trafficked, helped continue, strengthen, the attitude that sex, all sex work, is bad and exploited. There is no

way, there is less of a way, to insert harm reduction strategies into working with people who are involved in the sex industry or involved in sex trade because it's all perceived as bad.

Well again I think it's good intentions without a deeper understanding of the effects when you look at safe harbor stuff. Because, yeah, when you're fourteen years old you shouldn't have to sleep with someone as old as your grandpa if you don't want to. And all of those processes. I also feel like if you're thirty-five—

**AA:** —and making bank with your webcam.

**SP:** What are you defining as trafficking. I like the safe harbor laws in decriminalizing that especially for young people so they don't have to wear these labels. I don't like that there are rumors that there are shelters that won't take girls that are [angry?] Like, really? How are you supposed to be coming out if you've been trafficked? You should be pissed as hell and want to light the world on fire. Put her ass in a karate class. [laughs] For real. Let her punch some stuff. It's the urge to simplify things that aren't simple. Harm reduction lets things be complicated. And lets people work on things and improve their experience mastery where they can and as they're ready to. And I think that's the brilliance of harm reduction.

**AA:** I agree wholeheartedly. We know each other too well.

**SL:** Is there anything else you want to say about harm reduction or your work with Street Works?

**SP:** I just think that because I had a harm reduction perspective when I entered into relationships with young people that there are young people with whom I'm still—they aren't young anymore. They're thirty-something. I think about Judy. Not sure where she is. She's still in contact with Camille though, and Camille updates me from time to time. Here's someone who if we had approached working with her from a traditional sort of perspective we would have lost her a long time ago. Or Crystal.

**AA:** Who's now a successful youth worker.

**SP:** I thought she was a chef. She's in culinary school.

**AA:** That's not who I was thinking of.

**SP:** I was thinking of Crystal, not [unclear]. Who was it that went and has been working with the safe harbor stuff? Anyways. Harry. Yeah. If we hadn't insisted that they change in order to add access services and stay-change in order to keep receiving services we would have lost track of them a long time ago and they might be dead.

**AA:** Right.

**SP:** How did you get involved in this project?

**SL:** I've been working with Professor Sullivan and she asked me to be her transcriptionist, so I've been transcribing oral histories of mother's of users and then also she's gone more into harm reduction recently. I've been learning about things through that.

**AA:** You're like, "This is insane!"

**SL:** I'm just typing away.

**SP:** That's awesome. Does she teach?

**SL:** History at Macalester College. She teaches a course on addiction, and on race, gender, and medicine, which is the course I took with her. Focusing on women's studies and history.