

Interviewee: Gail Murphy-Geiss

Interviewee: Shayla Gordon

[Intro and consent] *So, just first, the basic question, what is your last name story?* My last name story, my last name is now Murphy-Geiss, it's hyphenated. My single name was Murphy, my husband's single name was Geiss and when we got married we hyphenated our names. And so, that was in like 1985, it was exactly 1985, you should know that. [laughing] And at the time a lot of people were starting to hyphenate their names, it seemed to be the trend. So that seemed to be the best option in our community of Feminists, we were both overtly Feminist. We didn't--there was no question I was not going to take his name, he was gonna hyphenate, we never--it wasn't really debated that we were gonna do something Feminist. So, some of our friends were keeping their own names, and, um, some of our friends were picking a new name based on a word that was meaningful, like two friends changed their name to Ruah which is Hebrew for 'spirit', they just liked that concept. And then some people were hyphenating. And we didn't want to keep our own names because I didn't wanna have children that had his name, and I didn't want to have children that had different names, and I didn't want to have all this different. So, I wanted us all to have the same name, and I didn't necessarily think that there was a word out there that was meaningful to us as there were for some people, so we hyphenated. And the interesting part of it is that in the marriage license in Massachusetts at the time it said 'maiden name'. I don't use that term myself, for me. So I could write Murphy and then 'married name' and I wrote Murphy-Geiss and for my husband it just said 'name'. So we said "Well, where does he put his maiden name?" 'Cause he was changing his name as well and they said "That's not allowed on the form you have to contact the Social Security Administration." So he just got married and became Paul Geiss-- which he was--I got married and became Gail Murphy-Geiss, and then he changed his name legally to Murphy-Geiss through the Social Security Administration. Two different applications cause they misspelled it the first time. I dunno if the form is different now, if men can change their name on a marriage license form. *That's interesting, so you already touched on you didn't wanna have children that had different last names, or only had one last name.* Or not mine, that also. I was like I'm not gonna bare children and have them have your name. So if I bare children they're gonna have my name, and then he's left out. I didn't want that either. They weren't gonna have his name that was no question. [laughing] *So, what did you hope for in choosing this name?* Well, I actually thought it was going to be the new way of things. It seemed like in the 80's, mid-80's a lot of people were looking for alternatives and this looked like it would be the best thing other than you know keeping your own name. That was always semi-popular but this just seemed to be gaining ground, and it didn't. My kids both have hyphenated names, Murphy-Geiss, and all through school they were either the only one or one of two in their class [with hyphenated names], you know in their graduating class. It just never really caught on, so, yeah I'd hoped that it was gonna be the new thing and we were just getting on at the beginning and it didn't turn out that way. *Have there been any unforeseen consequences?* Yeah, I mean there's three that I always think of, one is that some computers accept a hyphen and others don't. And again, if you

think this is the new thing you figure, 'Oh eventually it'll all work.' So, I have, you know, 5 different frequent flyer mile accounts with different airlines for example, and some of them have a hyphen, and some of them have a space, and some of them have my name squished together. And I can't just sort of type in my name I have to go look up which plan is this, does this have the hyphen unless the computer kicks me out, and that's actually a pain. Another one is when we spell it aloud for people M-U-R-P-H-Y hyphen G-E they say "what?" like people don't know what a hyphen is. So that becomes a problem and then the last one I would say is just like, you know when you go to a restaurant or make a reservation what's your name. We just--you don't wanna create a relationship with people you just wanna get on the list. So we usually say 'Murphy' which doesn't bother me, but it's sorta funny for my husband because that's not his name, and for the man to change his name to move to a different place in the alphabet as a result of that move, and then every time that you shorthand it for these little things--*It's not his*. It's not yours. And that's an inter--we just never, it's an unforeseen consequence. I think the one that's yet down the road though I talk about with my two daughters is what will they do and I say whatever you want. I mean I did what I want, you do what you want, there are no good options. There's options but there is no perfect option. *Right, and are there any times other than in restaurants when you are called by anything other than your main name? Like do you have any instances where your kid's friends will call you Mrs. Geiss or something like that?* Some yeah, they don't I mean they know. But my daughters, my older daughter's nickname is hyphen, like going through school they called her hyphen, her friends. They're young, they're pretty cool. I have evangelical conservative in-laws and they'll write a card to (my husband's a minister) the Reverend and Mrs. Murphy-Geiss. They'll usually put Murphy-Geiss, but the titles get annoying. Sometimes they would use Geiss and sometimes people don't understand the hyphen. But I think a lot of those are honest mistakes and we're constantly correcting people. But you might have to do that if your name was you know, Hickenlooper, I dunno. For me the issue is more like I don't wanna be 'Mrs.' either, I wanna be 'Ms.' or 'Gail' or 'Dr.' and the 'Mrs.' stuff is just as annoying as getting the Murphy-Geiss wrong. But most people get it right, I think.[pause] *And would you make the same choice again?* Ahh, that's a really good question. Um, I think I would despite the pain in the neck. I mean probably the other option would be to keep our own names, but there would probably be a different set of problems, but I just don't know what they are. So, I'm actually pretty happy with it, I think I could answer that better after my daughters decide what they are gonna do in their lives. And if it becomes a real hassle for them maybe I would rethink it. But I think we've all sort of enjoyed--like one time somebody said "Oh, Murphy-Geiss are you related to Kathy?" (my daughter) and it's funny because of course I am, there's no other Murphy-Geiss's and I always wanna say "No, who's that?" You know, it's sort of fun being the only 4 people on the planet with that name. So, that's a pay off, I guess I would do it again, you caught me on a good day. *What kind of reactions have you and your family gotten about your last name?* Hmm, I don't think many-- people say are you Murphy or Geiss, that's it. I mean, yeah, people haven't been too negative. I mean, I have friends who've hyphenated and they have had bad experiences. One of my best friends from graduate school is white and her husband's black and they wanted

to hyphenate too, cause they thought, the same time the same age, it's the new thing. But his family already felt, that he was bringing home this white girl, wasn't too thrilling. And she wouldn't take his name it was like a racist thing, like 'Oh, our name isn't good enough for the white girl.' So she changed her name to his, so there was another layer of interracial marriage issues that led her decision. Um, so, you sort of try to anticipate the reactions, so my family was fine with it, his family was fine with it. I think if--probably if I had not taken his name and I had kept my own his family would have been more disturbed. It took them a while to write Murphy-Geiss on the envelopes, they'd just forget, but you know reactions have been pretty fine. *So your husband never got any...?* Well, you know he's a minister and he's very liberal and feminist so occasionally he'll get a phone call from a stranger who says "I'm looking for someone to do my wedding I'm looking for someone really liberal, I looked in the phone book you have a hyphenated name, I thought you might be liberal." So he gets positive reactions that outs him as a not evangelical-wacko-minister type. So in that sense it's helped him. *Positive, right.* It hasn't hurt me and I think it maybe helped him. *Well that's good.* Yeah, it is good. [laughing] *Um, and do you--how affective do you think that your choice was in intervening in women being erased in marriage.* I think it--yeah it was very affective. I'm not erased, in fact my name's first, and if we get shortened it's always Murphy so that's fine. Yeah, no I feel it's good. I think it's going on to the next generation. I dunno how long this--my solution is not sustainable you can't have, you know, endless hyphens probably. *Mhmm.* So I don't know. It's not a great solution in the long term, but for one generation it worked great. *This is sort of the devil's advocate question, how meaningfully does a woman keeping her father's name speak to feminism? So..?* *Since last names are patrilineal.* Oh, I see, if I kept Murphy that's really my father's name. Yeah, I mean I get that, as far as Anthropology, which Sarah is in, kinship gets passed down, it's a lineage issue, but for me as a Sociologist, and Anthropology gets at this too, it's also an identity issue. So for me I didn't think of it as my father's name, I thought of it as my name. So by the time I would have kept it it would have been maintaining a piece of myself. I know though that, you know, people whose fathers are abusive or neglectful or leave the family sometimes they'll change their name to their mother's name 'cause that parent has stayed with them and that's become a more meaningful relationship. Because they want to change their identity, they want to distance themselves from that guy. I don't think of that as my dad's name, in fact it's my mother's name too, as far as I knew as a child. So, yeah that's a good question, that's great, that's fun. *And, you kind of touch on this, but what do you think the generation of children with hyphenated names should do. [anecdote about hyphenated children]* I know it goes on forever and ever. Well, I know my one daughter at least, if not both, wanna keep their names because we do so much like this Murphy-Geiss uniqueness. It's sort of fun, but again that doesn't--the thing is that naming used to be, I think across the globe, a way to identify yourself with this lineage with all these people. And as Americans have moved away from that association what's more important to us, I think, is who we become not where we came from. So honestly, the choice we didn't choose, the one of let's pick a word that's meaningful to use, let's create a family with a name that's meaningful to us, I think that might work really well. And you can still be related, it's not to say

that your kinship bonds are not important to you, but the naming through the ages, that may be a thing of the past. Not soon, but--*Right*. We're not looking back anymore we're looking forward. *And I know you said that you had friends that did other things, but were there any other options that you were thinking of, not just hyphenating or what that kind of--*Hyphenating or keeping our own, but keeping our own went out the door. We really didn't think about that. We had friends that got married in Washington and they named themselves the Washington's because that became meaningful to them in that way. So people were doing all sorts of things, but we thought we're getting married in Boston, who cares? And we don't have a word, and the other thing is sometimes you hyphante [and it] doesn't sound very good, like Geiss-Murphy that didn't sound good but Murphy-Geiss sounded good. I think if you had sort of too long, or-- for us it worked, that was the only thing we really thought about it. [closing]