

GLAMA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT



PARTICIPANT: Randy Hite

DATE: February 3, 2018

LOCATION: Randy Hite's living room in Kansas City, Missouri.

INTERVIEWER: Austin R. Williams

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Randy Hite was born in 1959. He attended the University of Missouri-Kansas City, graduating in 1982. He served as a member of numerous Kansas City organizations dedicated to LGBTQ issues, including Project 21, an organization that donated gay and lesbian friendly books to public school libraries in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Coming out, the Human Rights Ordinance Project (HROP), the Human Rights Project (HRP), Project 21, The Heartland Men's Chorus, life as a teacher, HIV/AIDS, becoming an activist, the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), the 1993 March on Washington, Kevin Oldham, the Westboro Baptist Church, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), The Four Freedoms Democratic Club, meeting his future husband, being denied the right to enter the U.S. as a family with his partner.

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Randy Hite Interview

AW: Okay. Well, welcome. Today is February 3rd, 2018 and this is, once again, part of the GLAMA Oral History Project. I am here today with Randy Hite. I am Austin Williams. I spell my name A-U-S-T-I-N, W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S. I am the interviewer. And though I just said your name, could you go ahead once again and state your name and please spell it?

RH: Sure. I'm Randy Hite. Randy, R-A-N-D-Y. Hite, H-I-T-E.

AW: All righty. And with this being part of the GLAMA Oral History Project, maybe just a good starting point would be for you to, however is comfortable for you, walk us through some of your earliest years of where you were born and when you were born and perhaps maybe some of the coming out process for you.

RH: Okay. Sure. So you'll know my age, I was born in 1959. Pretty happy childhood. The only thing I'll say about it is that I just knew pretty early that I was not like a lot of the boys that, you know, liked to play sports and that sort of thing. I was more quiet and liked to read, and... So, that was my, kind of, my first indication that I'm, kind of, a little different.

I remember calling somebody a fag like, in sixth grade and not knowing exactly what it meant at all. But the teacher got onto me. Like, *Okay, that was really a bad word.* But I didn't know what that meant. But then I knew what it meant about, when I was 15. Because when I was 15... And actually, kids starting calling me that. You know how cruel kids can be. But... At 15 I knew I was gay. I don't know if I had all the words but I knew I was gay. I was attracted to men. And I didn't know what to do about it because I'd been brought up in the church—Southern Baptist Church—and knew that was wrong.

So, one day I was watching TV. And there was a TV program on from a minister who had an outreach to youth. And at the end of his show he said, "Now, if you youth have any questions, feel free to write me and I'll answer your questions." And I thought, *Well, I've got a question for you.* Yeah. And so, I wrote him. His name, I remember, is Dawson McAllister. I think he's still alive and doing ministry to youth. And he wrote me back this letter I have, dated 1974, when I was 15. And basically, his advice was to just pray to God and God will take away wrong desires and put right ones in their place. That was his exact quote. You know? God has made sex for one purpose and one purpose only. And that's for man and woman coming together and... And so, I just thought, *Okay. Well, now I know what to do?* Because, you know, who else was I going to talk about this with?

So I prayed all through high school that God would take away those wrong desires and put right ones in their place. I even had a plan to marry my best friend—a girl—we were very close in high school. I thought, *I can just, you know, I can get this done.* But that

didn't work out. And I went to college at UMKC. And that's when I started noticing there were other guys like me. Because I went to the conservatory of music. I majored in music. And so, there were other gay people there, gay men there. And that's, kind of, when I started to feel more comfortable and thought, *Okay, this is not going to work. I'm not going to—it's not going to work that, that I'm going to be changed.* So I just started accepting myself more. And that's... That's kind of how I made peace with it. Now, the family thing is another question, if you want to hear that story. [laughs]

AW: Sure. If you want to tell us. Yeah.

RH: Okay. Sorry.

AW: No, you're fine.

RH: So I was out as a gay man. I was going to gay bars and found some gay friends, you know, in my early college years. And so, the way my family found out, basically, is there was a man at one of those bars that saw me that happened to know my little sister who was four years younger than me. So, he was in the bar illegally, underage. But for some reason, he knew who my sister was. He knew me—probably just from talking to my sister. And so, he went back and blabbed to my sister. “Guess what? I saw your brother in the gay bar.” Then, of course, she goes and blabs to my mother, unbeknownst to me.

So then my mother comes to me sometime later and says, “Well now, your sister told me something about you.” And so, I knew that she knew. So I didn't really have to come out to them. They just, kind of, approached me. I mean, she approached me. And the way it worked in my family was they all kind of found out at different times. I never really told anybody. They all just kind of found out through other means. And eventually, when I knew everyone had found out, I did say something at a Thanksgiving dinner once. And it was—there was complete silence. And then they just went on like nothing had happened. Like, you know, just went on their—yeah. It was just kind of like, “okay, thanks.” And then they just... Yeah. So, no, not really acknowledging that too much. So...

AW: Was that sort of silence in that moment a comforting thing, or an awkward—

RH: It was like, kind of like, well, you know, this is what I would expect from you, my family. You know? So, it was like, okay. I've told you now. Now I don't have to pretend that you don't know. I know, it's out in the open now. So it was good for me to know that, okay, I don't have to pretend anymore. That you don't know because you know now.

AW: Right.

RH: And it didn't really come up again. That was in 1985 when I did that.

AW: Oh. So, this was well after you had—

RH: I graduated college in 1982. But the thing with my family, the Thanksgiving—1985 was when I knew everybody knew. And the last to find out was my father. And that's a funny story. I can tell you that story if you want to hear a funny story. But there's other things we can talk about too.

AW: That's okay. Go, go ahead. Go ahead. Yeah.

RH: Well, it's kind of, I would say maybe a little embarrassing. But at this point in my life, I really don't care. It's kind of a funny story, so I kind of want to tell it.

It was 1985. I was a teacher. I graduated school in 1982 and had a teaching job. So, my summers were off. And my boyfriend and I at the time were spending the day together in the summertime. We'd been to some thrift shops, and we came home for lunch at my house and one thing led to another. We ended up in the bedroom. And my father happens to come by my house because at one time I had said to him, "Dad, I need help with something at the house." I don't remember what it was though. But just, "Sometime I'd like you to come over and look at it." Well, he chose that day to come over and look at it. So, he comes in the front door, which is open, and sees what we're doing in the bedroom and turns around and walks out. I—and my boyfriend didn't even see him. We were obviously engrossed in what we were doing.

AW: Ah.

RH: And so, he goes home and tells my mother that I'm gay. And she goes, "Yes, honey, we've known for some time. You're the last to find out." So then my mother tells me that story. And I thought, *Okay, everybody knows now*. So that's when I did my little Thanksgiving thing. Okay, everybody knows now. But that's just kind of a funny story—how my father happened to find out about it. [*laughing*]

AW: Yeah. For anyone, for their parents to walk in on them is...

RH: Well, yeah. But the thing is, I didn't even know he was there—

AW: Right.

RH: ...until my mother came over and told me that's what had happened.

AW: Yeah.

RH: He just like, stopped at the door. And we didn't see him. And [he] walked out of my house. So—

AW: Huh.

RH: Anyway, that's that story.

AW: *[laughs]*

RH: *[laughs]*

AW: Well, let's talk about some other things you brought up—

RH: Yeah.

AW: ...about, for instance, you mentioned going to college at UMKC.

RH: Yes.

AW: You also talked about becoming a teacher. So—

RH: Yes.

AW: ...maybe if you want to talk about while you were in college, any significant moments in your life that shaped you? You said you went and you studied music.

RH: Yes.

AW: And, you know, I think that comes into play in many aspects of your life.

RH: Yes. Yes, it does, actually.

AW: So how would you like to talk, maybe, about your college years and what happens after college? Like, immediately after college, as far as, I mean—In teaching, like, how'd you get into that?

RH: Well, that's an interesting story, actually, too. I graduated in 1982. As I mentioned earlier, college is where I began to feel more comfortable with who I was. And I started dating and everything. And I got my first teaching job because I had interviewed at a school for a part-time job and turned it down because it was such an awful position. And then later I got a phone call. A few months later I got a phone call from another school district that had talked to that school district and they knew about me. And so, I actually, I didn't so much as knock on their door but they called me and said, "We have a position that's a temporary position if you're interested." So that's how I ended up teaching at Fort Osage. And I taught there for four years. That was my first adult job, teaching. And it—

AW: And to be specific, teaching—

RH: Yes. Teaching music. I was teaching music. It was a middle school. And so, I just remember, you know, I was living an out-gay life. But that was forty-five minutes away

from the school district. You know? It was kind of like two different worlds. So, I was closeted when I was teaching. Of course, this was the eighties, you know?

AW: Right.

RH: So it was just—I would go home and have my gay life and then go to school and have my professional life. And the two wouldn't really mix.

AW: Yeah. And for anyone watching this, to provide some context, this is actually the second time that we've met and spoken.

RH: Yes.

AW: So, there were a couple stories you talked about before when it came to being a teacher as far as some of the students kind of having intuition as to whether or not you were a gay man.

RH: [*smiles*]

AW: I don't know if I'm paraphrasing that correctly or not. But what I want to ask about is—and you inferred this in talking about how you had these two separate lives.

RH: Yes.

AW: But for someone who maybe wants to understand the challenges of not being able to be one's self in a workplace or whatever, what was your assumption as far as—there weren't any direct policies that you were aware of—at least as far as—that you would be fired if you came out as gay? But why was it that you feel you couldn't have that aspect of your life known?

RH: I think it was just the way society was at that time. I mean, this was the eighties. And, you know, Ronald Reagan. And just—gay was not anything that was—I mean, we were illegal. You know? The sodomy laws were still on the books. So, it just—I didn't know anybody that was a gay teacher that was out. It was just kind of the way things were. You just knew it was best to keep quiet about it. And because of the whole history of being gay—when they would go to those raids and publish the names of the people in the newspapers—those people would lose their jobs.

AW: Right.

RH: You know? So, it was just the history of—you just never tell anybody in your workplace. But I did have an occasion when I was there, where one day—it was actually very early. I think my first year. One little girl just popped up and said, "Mr. Hite, are you gay?" And I was like, horrified that she would even say that. And I tried to pretend like I didn't hear her. And I didn't—I didn't acknowledge her.

Then later on, after I decided I didn't think I wanted to teach school anymore—I was in a period where I needed to work—so I went into substitute teaching after my regular teaching job ended. And that's the times where, somehow kids are just—kids know. Kids know you're different. And there were a few instances where it came up. And again, it was just very uncomfortable. And I remember sometimes disciplining kids for saying anything about that. You know? And then thinking later, *I'm making somebody in trouble because they're being perceptive and being honest about who I am.* It's like, *Ah, what did I do?* So the whole experience was—you just hoped that you were carrying yourself in a way that no one would say anything.

AW: Yeah.

RH: That was just kind of how I operated back then.

AW: Yeah.

RH: But the kids that—I'll put it this way. The kids that, you know, that are not sheltered, that are watching the R-rated movies, that are hanging out with the wrong kind of crowd—they know about sex. They know about stuff like that. And so they're the more perceptive kids. The less innocent kids. And they're able to know, "Okay, you're different." And they're able to spot you. So I had a few of those instances. Yeah.

AW: Right. Okay. Well thank you for talking about that. Which is very interesting as far as—I mean, in any profession during that time period, you're probably facing those kind of challenges. And speaking of that time period, another thing that's important, I would imagine, in your generation was that in the early eighties an illness that starts off as what is referred to the Gay Related—

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: ... Immune Deficiency Syndrome—

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: Eventually becomes known as AIDS. And to put it in a question, I guess—do you remember, for instance, when AIDS first came on your radar? And what impact that maybe had for you personally or anyone that you knew? However, you might want to speak to that.

RH: Wow. What a question. Yes. You have to think back to the eighties. Okay. This is before the internet, before the 24-hour news cycle. You know? Before CNN, you know, all that stuff. So news didn't travel very fast.

The first inkling that I knew anything was up was probably in the early eighties. I don't remember exactly what year it was, but it was the early eighties. And I had a job that I loved. It was right out of college, actually, as a singing waiter. And that job, actually, to

this day I still have some of my good friends from that time period that were just very close. But it was connected. The job at the restaurant was connected to a hotel.

And so, it was a very—it wasn't usual for me to do this—but for some reason they needed somebody to do room service. And so, I brought up a meal to a guy. And he ended up like—actually, no. This is the story. He had eaten in the restaurant. And I think we'd flirted. And I think he'd given me his room number. So I went up to see his room number and I would say we had sex but it was really weird sex. It was like he didn't want to kiss me. It was like, how far away can I be from you and still have sex? It was just, kind of, one of those things. And I thought, *that guy is really weird. What is he, what is he doing?*

Later, I understood, he was from New York. And he was practicing, you know, safe sex where you don't—we didn't know anything. You don't kiss. You know? You don't do anything like that. And that's when I found out later, *Oh, that's what he was doing.* But I didn't know at the time that's what he was doing.

I also have a memory of I was dating a man that's still a very good friend of mine to this day, in 1985. A lot of things happened in 1985. And 1985, of course, was when Rock Hudson did his thing in the public media and died of AIDS. And I was dating a man, and I had in my head, *Do we need to be practicing safe sex?* Because at that time, that was when I was first aware that there was a different way you had to have sex now. You know, *should we be practicing safe sex?* So, that's like, kind of, when I was thinking about it in my head. This is 1985.

So, this is like, three to four years after it had surfaced. But that's because, you know, it, it took a while, I guess, to get to the Midwest, right? It started on the coasts and came this way. And that was my first inkling that, *Yeah, okay, things are changing now.* And really, I started keeping a list of people that I knew that had died. And as the eighties went on that list got bigger and bigger and bigger, of course. So, you know, I had some, some friends pass away from it. Yeah.

AW: And it's during this time then, I think, that—1986—you've also mentioned was a big year for you. And there's a key Supreme Court decision, but then there's also a change in your life as far as—I don't want to call it maybe an organization that you joined, or—I think you know what I'm referring to?

RH: Yes. I do know what you're referring to.

AW: Yeah.

RH: Well, 1986 was the year of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which, if you remember, is the Supreme Court decision where they'd challenged the sodomy law which made sex between gay people illegal. And it came out of Georgia. And it went all the way up to the Supreme Court. With a five-four decision they decided, yes, those laws are okay. It's okay to have laws that make sex illegal. So, basically, they kept the law as it was. And in my

mind, I thought, *This is 1986. I've been out for several years now, dating, and enjoying my gay life, accepting myself more.* And I thought, *I'm illegal? The things, the private things that I'm doing are illegal? What? In America? What?* And I just thought, *What the hell?* And I thought, *This ain't right, and I'm not going to be quiet about it.*

So it just brought up in me the injustice—I have a thing about justice. And it was just the injustice of that. It's like, how can you Supreme Court, you know, tell me that I'm illegal? That what I do is against the law? Oh, my God. When I think about it now, I just get upset.

So, 1986, that was like, okay. Something's got to change here. And 1986 was also the year I got a phone call from a friend of mine that told me he was starting a gay chorus in Kansas City—a gay men's chorus in Kansas City. He had seen other gay choruses and wanted to start one in Kansas City. And so, I thought, *Sure, why not?* So we started the Heartland Men's Chorus in the summer of 1986. And it, it—

AW: Can I ask who that individual was?

RH: Yeah. His name is James Morche. M-O-R-C-H-E. I've lost track of him. I don't know if he's still alive or not. I often wonder what happened to him. But he was a good friend of a current friend of mine, Roger Gladden. Roger and James worked together. So James shared his idea with Roger, and Roger and James, kind of, were the instruments behind kind of starting to get the word out that we're going to start this chorus. James was a hair dresser. He cut my hair. So, that's how I knew James. But he also had another job as well where he worked with Roger. So we started this chorus.

Kent Barnhart was a part of the original chorus. If I could throw out, drop another name, as Ann Hampton-[unintelligible 00:22:16] likes to say she drops names. But it was an exciting time, and I am still a part of the chorus to this day. So it's something that seemed to be a small thing at the time but it surely has affected my life in a big way.

AW: Sure.

RH: Yeah.

AW: Now, we've also spoken about the chorus in the past. And however you would like to speak to it though, as far as—it's a gay men's chorus. You just described it in that sense.

RH: Yes.

AW: Although, I understand that there became some internal debate as to whether or not that was really the case, or whether that should maybe be known to the public. And could you speak, perhaps, to what becomes the schism within the chorus regarding being a publicly gay chorus?

RH: Yes, yes. You've said it quite correctly. We did not have "gay" in our name, as some of the choruses did at that time. We were the Heartland Men's Chorus. And at the time, I really didn't think that was a big deal. But it kind of turned into a big deal. Because I saw the chorus as—okay, this is a way we're going to, kind of, make society better [and] change people's attitudes about things. We're a bunch of gay men standing up here singing about our lives, and we were coming out of the closet in a sense. You know? There are gay people in the world. And that was, for me, kind of what the whole idea behind what choruses were at that time. This is something we do. And it's a very public thing about being gay. There were other members of the chorus who weren't as out as I was and thought of the chorus as a safe place to get together with their friends and make music. And they kept saying things like, "This is not a political organization. We don't want to be political. We just want to make music." Right? So there was this divergence of these two attitudes in the chorus. And—

[smoke detector begins to beep in the background]

AW: Actually, Is that anything in particular? Don't—feel free to—

RH: I don't know what that is.

AW: Actually, okay, well, it's going off. It...

RH: Let me find out what it is. Because that—let me find out what it is. Do I need to—

AW: No, you're fine. Go ahead and, yeah. Unplug.

RH: Disconnect.

AW: Yeah. If it... Just if it's something that's going to keep going. I don't know.

[recording pauses]

[recording resumes]

AW: Okay. And we're back. We heard a smoke detector so we've just taken a break. And you were speaking to that, sorry, schism, and—

RH: Yeah. So there were these two different ideas about what the chorus was, and it kind of came to—well, let me just back up and say you asked earlier about when I found—was learning about AIDS. And one of the things that happened early in the chorus' history was, as we were just having our first rehearsals, there was a man there. Brian McGlothlin [phonetic spelling], I believe, was his name. And he had been living in, I think it was San Francisco—certainly it was California—but he had come back to Kansas City where he was originally from. He joined the chorus, and he was the one that told us that we had to join the GALA organization, which was the Association of all the Gay choruses. It's listed for Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. And so, upon his urging, because he

had been part of the San Francisco gay men's chorus out there, we joined this organizing called GALA - Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses. Right?

And Brian actually, the unfortunate thing is he was the first member that the chorus lost from AIDS. He died a few months later. And so the chorus' first public performance was at his memorial service, or at his funeral, actually, before we had our first concert.

So here the chorus was. How that story fits in is here the chorus was a part of the GALA Association. And in our program, there was a big concern about—do we spell out what GALA stands for? So is the word gay in our program? And there were some people that said, “No. We are part of GALA but we don't have to tell people what that means.” And others were, “If you don't, you're being dishonest with who we are. Put what it stands for. This is why we're a chorus. Right? We're part of this organization.”

And so, it just got to be real heated with these two factions, kind of, fighting each other. And eventually, because of that, I quit the chorus because I thought, *This is not the organization I thought it was, that's going to do good for society—if we're going to be too closeted.*

They—the other faction thought, *If we can just get people to come to our concert without them knowing about us, and then they like us for our music—because it's all about music—then sometime in the future they'll just find out that we're a gay chorus, and we'll have changed their mind that way.* That was, kind of what they were thinking. And I'm like, no. That's dishonest. You say who you are up front. So that caused a schism that made some people leave. I left after a couple of years. Some of the leadership left. And eventually, my side won out. [laughs]

AW: Right. Okay. Well, thank you. And actually, to review these notes real quick—So, is that the GALA Convention in Seattle? Or is this—

RH: That was like, in 1988, that schism. In 1987-88. Hm-hmm. [affirmative] And then the GALA convention in Seattle, that was the next time there was a festival of all the gay choruses coming together—in 1989 in Seattle. Now, the chorus thought they might attend that but after the whole political uprising they didn't. But I, as an individual, attended that. And that was my first GALA Festival.

Those festivals happen—at that time they happened every three years. Now they happen every four years, and I've been to several since then. That first one was just so—such an experience. It was like a peak experience for me to be in a different city for a week. I was there for about a week, and every day was concerts, concerts, concerts by all these choruses. So it was just such an emotional roller coaster, first of all, of hearing all this music of being joyful and being sad. But at the same time, being around all these people that were gay. You know? So, it was very affirming. And it was just like nothing I'd ever experienced before. So, I was kind of like, hooked. Like, *Okay, I've got to have this again.*

And I remember, one of the things I did at that festival was attend a lecture by a lady. Her name was Bernice Johnson Reagon, who I believe is still alive. She was a member of 'Sweet Honey in the Rock' which is a musical group that basically they were all African American women that sang just all kinds of acapella music. And all the lesbians knew who she was. I didn't know who she was. So, I was in this lecture with all these lesbians, and me, and a few men sprinkled in there. And somebody asked her what she thought of this festival. And I'll always remember what she said. She said, "You know, it's really something—" I'm paraphrasing, of course. But she said, 'It's really something when people who are oppressed come together, not because of their oppression but because they want to celebrate who they are.'" And I was like, Wow. That's right. We're oppressed people. But we're not coming together because of our oppression. We're coming together—this festival is a celebration of who we are as gay people. And we celebrate through music. And I was like, yeah.

So that's what got me hooked on singing in the chorus and got me hooked on going to the GALA conventions. And that's why the chorus is such a big part of my life now. You know, she just nailed it right there. It's like, this is a celebration of who I am. And with all this negativity society brings gay people, it's important that you just wipe that out and you just learn how to celebrate who you are. It doesn't matter what they say. You just have to celebrate who you are yourself. And you do that through music. I do it through music.

AW: But to be clear, you had left—you had resigned from the chorus—

RH: *[laughing]* I—

AW: ...and then you were there, right? Yeah? No? Just, I want to make sure—

RH: Yeah.

AW: ...that I was clear with that chronology.

RH: I had. And the thing is, the next time there was a festival like that, it was the first time that the chorus went to a festival. It was 1992, and it was in Denver. The chorus went to it. I wasn't singing with the chorus at the time. I was still estranged from the chorus. But I went to that convention, kind of, on the coattails of the chorus. So I knew I wanted to be at that festival, right? And it was another wonderful time. I was proud of the chorus for getting up there and singing it.

So, you know, I was watching the chorus from afar going, *Okay, are they out yet? Are they out yet?* And I even remember having that conversation with the director at the time, Reuben Reynolds, who—Reuben is now the Director of the Boston Gay Men's Chorus. But he was Director of the Heartland Men's Chorus. He was our second director. And I happened to see him somewhere in public, and he invited me to come back and sing with the chorus because he knew I had sung before. And I said something about, "Well, you know, I left because you're not out." And he goes, "You know, I'm

working on that.” I remember him saying, “I’m working on that. “ So I think he was aware of the situation.

I finally did come back to the chorus in 1995 because the next GALA Festival was in 1996, and I thought, *Okay, this time I don’t want to be in the audience. I want to be with the chorus.* And so, I came back to the chorus, actually, in 1995 so that I could go with the chorus to the next GALA Festival.

AW: Okay.

RH: That’s when I rejoined. And I’ve been with the chorus ever since then.

AW: Got you.

RH: Yeah.

AW: Well, let’s work our way up to 1995 and 1996 through a couple of other events in your life. As we’ve talked about, as I’ve talked about with many people, there is a series of public debates regarding ordinances in 1990 that the Human Rights Ordinance Project—which becomes the Human Rights Project—was involved in.

And before that—Now, you did not go to the 1987 March on Washington?

RH: Not that one. No.

AW: That’s right. But a group of Kansas Citians comes back from that and forms the Pink Triangle Political Coalition. And ACT UP/KC is formed also in 1988 and 1989.

So what I’d like to ask is—the activism that starts, kind of, taking place around the city—

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: ...in the late eighties. What was on your radar, for lack of a better term? I mean, did you know about ACT UP? What did you think of their tactics? And, and how is it—because I do know that you come to know David Weeda and, and, and become involved with Human Rights Project—

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: But actually, I can’t remember whether you were with them, I think you were, when they were the Human Rights Ordinance Project?

RH: Yes. Yes.

AW: So when is it that everything that’s happened in your life with the Heartland’s Men’s Chorus starts evolving into a more—I don’t want to say, robust form of activism—

RH: Yeah. Yes.

AW: just, however you want to speak to all of that.

RH: Well, I would say that it was just so opportune that that was happening in Kansas City at the time when I was starting myself to feel like, *I've got to do something to get this change*. You know? So, it all kind of came together for me. Like, this was a vehicle for me to try to do what I wanted to do. Since—I had told you about how upset I was about that '86 Bowers v. Hardwick decision. It's like, okay, *I've got to change things*. And the chorus for me was a way to change things.

And then this HROP organization started coming along, and I don't honestly recall where and how I met David Weeda. But, you know, I certainly was involved in that. I wasn't like, on the Board, but I was certainly in there at all the meetings. And I was a donor because I thought this organization has to survive. So, that's kind of where I got my feet wet in the activism of actually going down to a few City Hall meetings, you know? And planning our strategies, and writing letters, and all those things that activists do.

I remember just being in awe of David Weeda because he was the out-front spokesperson. Right? And we would have these rallies, and the news organizations, the camera would be in his face, and he would just be so well-spoken and say what our points were and be so eloquent. And I just would look up to him and think, *God, I want to be like that*. You know?

So that's kind of where I planted the seed. Like, *I'm going to be like that someday*. And in my mind, I started calling myself a gay activist. It didn't feel really true at that point. But that's where, in my mind, I thought, *I'm a gay activist*.

And I just kept affirming that to myself. *I'm a gay activist. I'm a gay activist*. And eventually it became true. Certainly, it did in the nineties—which I can talk about more of what I did—but that was where the seed was planted. Like, *this is how you make change*.

So, I did everything that HROP told me to do, and was in a lot of their meetings. Now, ACT UP, you know, I was aware of what they did. I understood why they were doing what they were doing. I didn't really know the people in ACT UP very well. So, I don't really recall if I was judgmental of them at the time or not. I mean, I certainly understood what they were about. I think I just kind of watched them do what they did. You know? I wasn't involved in what they did at all.

But that's—those early years were certainly where I started to feel like a gay activist. And then, of course, the 1993 March on Washington.

AW: Right. Yeah.

RH: Do you want to talk about that?

AW: Yeah, I was going to ask about—because I genuinely don't know—for instance, I think the March on Washington takes place in April of 1993. Or, is it even—

RH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AW: Oh, you've got it right there. [*points to plastic rainbow flag*] Yeah. Do you want to hold it up?

RH: Yeah. You know, I keep—

[*RH removes flag from small TV tray which then falls over*]

AW: Are you all right?

RH: I'm all right. I keep a lot of things, much to the dismay of my husband.

AW: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative and chuckling*]

RH: And this is one of my relics from the March on Washington.

AW: If you can hold it up, actually, a little higher.

RH: Yeah. [*holds up flag for camera*] Yeah. Okay. There it is.

And also, I have the t-shirt. [*holds up t-shirt*] This is the official t-shirt of the March on Washington. Of course, there were many t-shirts, but they asked for submissions for the official t-shirt. And this is the official t-shirt which actually happened to be designed by David Weeda. Not David Weeda. I'm sorry. David Westman—who was from Kansas City. And, actually, who I did date at a one time. But, anyway, that is the official t-shirt that I still have.

So, HR—the reason I went is because HRP was gathering people together, and I said, “Yep, I'm going to go to that.”

AW: Okay. And we're going to talk about the actual march here in a second. I was curious if—I know that there was a rally held at the park that's right down there on the plaza—

RH: Yes.

AW: ...and right before they left, this was within weeks of—a gentleman named Kevin Oldham—

RH: [*nods and smiles*]

AW: ...were you aware of his death?

RH: [*big nods in affirmation*]

AW: And the reason I bring it up in this context—and I don't want to give them more credit than—

RH: Yeah.

AW: But the Westboro Baptist Church comes. And it's their first-time outside Kansas City where they had protested—sorry outside the *state* of Kansas.

RH: Yes.

AW: And they also end up going to the March on Washington. Do you remember the Westboro Baptist Church being at those events in April—

RH: Yes.

AW: ... of 1993?

RH: Yes. I remember that name, Kevin Oldham. And actually—interesting what I remember—his father was the Minister of Music at the Christian Church on the Plaza. So that's where the memorial service was, and that's where the Westboro Baptist Church protested. And I think after that is probably when Kansas City passed the ordinance about protesting at funerals. It came up because of that very incident. So, yes. I was very much aware that they were at that event and causing all the commotion. And that was very public. Yeah.

AW: And can I ask, just because we've almost become—not normalized—but there had always been religious opposition to issues of homosexuality.

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: But this clearly had to have almost appeared as a whole new level of animosity.

RH: Yeah.

AW: And just how did it strike you at the time? Was it—

RH: Well, it was just part of what we were battling. I mean, the church has always been one of the oppressors of gay and lesbian people. And so, it was just this radical faction of the church. And, you know, just hatred. So, you just, you just knew that those kind of people were out there. And you just had to do whatever you could to try to combat it. Yeah.

AW: And so not to be anachronistic—and we’ll move past them—but did you have any idea at that point, for instance, that they were going to become known almost nationwide, worldwide? Or did they just seem to be someone from across the—

RH: Yeah. No. I didn’t have any thinking that they would go on to make a name for themselves like that. No. I just thought they were, you know, just these conservative people from Topeka that happened to find something to get them on the news. So, yeah. They were just something that—I remember the strategy because, you know, that was one of their big moments—the Kevin Oldham moment. And then they would protest other funerals as well. And I remember the strategy was, okay, eventually this is not going to be news anymore. So the news organizations can stop covering them. That was, kind of like, what we were hoping for. That they would just go away because they were always wanting the spotlight. And when you didn’t give them the spotlight anymore, then hopefully it would go away. So, it was just, kind of, *how do we deal with that?* You know?

AW: Yeah.

RH: So—

AW: Got you. So, the 1993 March on Washington though, as you remember it, and key moments—

RH: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

AW: ...however you would like to speak to that.

RH: Yes. A key moment that I can recall is that we got there, actually, before the March happened. So, being, of course, the political organization, they had arranged that we would go talk with our congresspeople and Senators. And I remember being in a group of people that went to talk to this Senator, our senator at the time. And I think it was Senator Bond—I’m trying to remember if that’s correct or not—but he was a Republican Senator in 1993. And he wasn’t there. The Senator wasn’t there. But his staff was there. And there were several of his staff there. And there was a large contingent of us. There were like fifteen, I don’t know, twenty people in this room talking about these issues.

And, again, this is where I’m sitting there, amazed that all these people are outspoken, and they’re just coming right at those staff members. And those staff members are trying to be defensive and trying to make the Senator out not to be as homophobic as he was. And they’re just saying—they’re just, you know, right back at them. And I just thought, *Okay, okay. This is what I need to do. This is what I need to be able to do.*

And I remember saying something afterwards, after that meeting to one of the people, it’s like, I really, I really appreciate the way you just spoke up. And she was like, “You’ve got to do that.” You know? Like it was no big deal to her. And it was like, *Wow, I just*

need to get that courage to be able to be that courageous and do that. So that was a moment where I thought, Okay, this is what it takes. This is the lesson for me. Right?

So, the other thing I just remember is—This is funny because I was there with a friend—not only my HRP friends but also a good friend of mine. He was going to school here in Kansas City, but he’s originally from Denver. And so, I was hanging out with him as well, and there was a big question about, “Okay, who are you going to march with? Are you going to march with Missouri or Kansas?” And of course, I’ve got to march with Missouri. But, you know, Kansas came before because they were doing the states alphabetically, right? And so, I think the thing was, *Okay, we’ll march with Kansas because Kansas City kind of embodies both cities.* So that’s where we started and marched.

And then I remember—I’m so glad he did this—after I was probably about half way through the march or something, he said, “Come on.” And he just dragged me over to the side, and we got up on something like a hill or something, and then we just watched the parade. So I was with him, my good friend, watching the parade. I mean, I’d been in it for a while, and it was so cool to watch it. Just all these people, you know? And eventually, I think, we did see our friends. And then we met up with our friends after it was over, of course, and we were all on the lawn there because it was the big rally afterwards.

I just remember being with David Weeda and all those people from HRP, sitting on a blanket there listening to speech after speech, and, you know, being enthused. I’ll also tell you this: there was musical entertainment there too. And the musical entertainment that I remember was—Patti Austin was a singer there. And I, of course, I liked Patti Austin. But she sang a song that touched me there, and it was a song that had been written about AIDS. But the message, the title of the song was *We’re all in This Together.* And she sang that song. And I looked at that crowd and thought, *Yes, we are all in this together—this fight.* You know? And it just was one of those moments I’ll always remember her singing, and I’ll always remember my feeling I had there that we’re all in this fight together. It was just [*puts hands to chest and makes whispered cheering noise*].

And then, for some reason—the march happened, then it was over, and people left—for some reason I had stayed an extra day, and I don’t think some of the other HR people had stayed an extra day. But I remember going back to the place where I just was the day before, and they’d cleaned up the lawn. And nobody was there, you know? And just walking around going, *Okay, did this really happen? Did anything happen? Did we make any difference?* You know? It was just like—then the city went on, like it was—you know? And I thought, *Okay. Wow. This is kind of weird.* Just one day all this energy, and the next day all these people are gone. And like, nothing happened. It was wild. [*laughs*]

AW: But then you come home and you make things happen.

RH: [laughs]

AW: And it was, I think, just a month and a half after that—June 3rd, 1993 is when that ordinance—sexual orientation was added to the city’s civil rights—

RH: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

AW: ...ordinance. I’ve asked many people this: do you remember that happening? Or was it something that just kind of went by without any sort of, you know, real fanfare? Because it had been three years in the making—or actually, many people would say decades in the making—

RH: Right, right.

AW: But three years after it had been introduced. I’m just curious if—shortly after that, if you remember it passing or not?

RH: You know, it’s interesting that you should ask me that because I hadn’t thought of that. And I don’t have a memory of it passing. What I do have a memory of is the first time that it failed. And the first time that it failed, I’m not sure what the year it was when it first came up for a vote—

AW: May of 1990.

RH: Okay. And I remember, we were at All Souls Unitarian Church because it was after the vote. The vote was going to be taken, so HROP, I think at that time, had convened a meeting at the church. Because we were either going to celebrate or we were going to strategize. Right?

So Katheryn Shields comes into that meeting from the City Council meeting, as we were sitting there. We were kind of expecting her—I think we were expecting her—and she comes in. And as soon as she came through the doors, everybody just stood up and applauded her. Standing ovation. Because she had been our champion. She had been the person that was working on our side. And I remember, her son at the time was a toddler. And she was holding her son’s hand. And she just walked up the aisle to the front of the room. And that’s, you know, just a moment I will always remember.

She addressed us, and she said that the Mayor, Emanuel Cleaver, had said that the ordinance needed to go back to committee for changes or whatever. And I remember her saying—so she deliberately asked the mayor, ‘Okay, what kind of changes do we need to get this passed?’ So, she challenged him. “Okay. If you’re bringing this back to the committee, tell me what we need. Why isn’t it ready to be passed?” She was right there challenging the mayor. So that was just the struggle.

And, of course, the whole struggle with Emanuel Cleaver not giving us a proclamation for gay pride because, you know, he’s a black minister. That whole controversy. And I

can remember Mayor Cleaver walking into Pride. We didn't expect him to that year that it was at Southmoreland Park. And I was there when he walked in and it was like, *there's Mayor Cleaver*. And I just remember—I think that's when he said the comments that, you know, he was more excited to be here than at the Jewel Ball or something like that, which he also was invited to. So I—those are just impressions from that time. You know?

AW: That's interesting. A lot of people have spoken about those moments. And one thing I will clarify, I think—so it was actually Dick Berkley who had been the Mayor when it was first rejected.

RH: Oh, first rejected. Okay.

AW: Yeah. And then shortly thereafter, within the year, Emanuel Cleaver is elected Mayor.

RH: Oh, okay. [*nodding*]

AW: And many people were definitely upset with Cleaver who had also voted it back to committee.

RH: Yes.

AW: But for anyone watching, I think it was—

RH: Okay.

AW: ... Dick Berkley. But everything—I've seen videoclips of what you spoke about—

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: ...with Katheryn Shields saying, "Okay, if we need to fix things—

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: ...what are we going to fix?" But essentially, that ordinance never was brought up again. Like, in—

RH: Hm-hmm. [*affirmative*]

AW: ... in that form.

RH: Yes, in that form.

AW: Yeah, yeah. And that Pride proclamation is interesting. That was June of 1991, and I believe you were there? So you were there at that—

RH: At that Pride celebration.

AW: Pride celebration.

RH: Yes.

AW: Okay.

RH: Oh, yeah. Because I was a big activist. And, you know, you've got to go to Pride, right?
[laughs]

AW: Can we maybe speak about the resurgence of Pride? I want to move forward to Project 21 here in a second.

RH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AW: Marc Hine, who was also involved in the chorus—

RH: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

AW: ...and I think shared your thoughts on the fact that the chorus should be openly gay—

RH: Yes.

AW: ...was—I know, very instrumental in the formation of—I believe it was GALA as well. But different from the organization you spoke of earlier, right? Or was that GALA? Okay. To not confuse things—

RH: Okay. [smiles]

AW: ...because I know that Pride Festivals in the late eighties and early nineties had seen a resurgence as well. I mean, do you remember the first Pride Festival that you went to by chance?

RH: Hm. I would,—hm. I would say that one where Mayor Cleaver walked in. If I had time to think about it, I might remember something else. But I—

AW: Sure.

RH: ...I don't, I don't really—

AW: That's all right.

RH: I think there might have been one across from The Levee Bar earlier than that. But—

AW: That's all right—

RH: Yeah, yeah—

AW: ...yeah. That's okay. I just—but it is interesting that, at least the way you recalled it, that moment, you know, that Pride moment—

RH: Yeah.

AW: ...being a big thing. But after that 1993 March on Washington—if I have my chronology right, I believe that Project 21 and the issue with the—

RH: *[face lights up and hand comes up slightly]*

AW: Go ahead.

RH: Let me back up and say, I do remember a Pride parade that was on the Plaza. I don't know what year it was, and it started on State Line and moved through the Plaza. And I just remember the phrase was, 'We're here. We're queer. We're going shopping.' Or something like—it was just stupid, like—but anyway, I do remember that parade. I don't know what year it was. But, yeah. That—

AW: That might have been 1990. I've seen—

RH: Yeah, yeah.

AW: ...some videos.

RH: Yeah. So I was involved in—you know, whatever the Pride events were, I was there. Yeah.

AW: Okay. Yeah.

RH: So, you were asking now about Project 21?

AW: Yeah. And maybe I should just leave it open ended and ask you—How do you recall—

Well, first of all, for anyone watching, what was Project 21? How did you become involved in that?

RH: Okay. I will tell you that story. As an activist, I was always going to meetings. And one of the meetings that I went to on occasion was PFLAG. Of course, PFLAG—the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—an organization to help parents deal with their gay children. And so, I was at one of their meetings. I had several friends that were PFLAG folks. And at one of the meetings, their speaker was Rob Birle. B-I-R-L-E, I believe, is

his name. And Rob had been a part of this program in California, I believe it was called Project 10, where they were donating LGBT-friendly books to public schools. He had moved back to Kansas City and wanted to start that program here. And he talked with passion about this program. And me, being a teacher, I thought, *Yes. Yes. What a way to make a difference.* And so, I, right away, wanted to become involved in Project 21. That's what they ended up calling it - Project 21. I think the idea was to go into the 21st Century or something like that.

AW: I always wondered about that.

RH: I, I don't know if, yeah, that's the reason. But I think that's what the idea was behind the name. So, it was a group that I was involved with. I believe, like, '94 or '95—I believe that group was already in existence when I joined it. So I wasn't there at the very, very beginning. But I joined quickly after that. And there was a couple of librarians in the group and people that loved to read books. So we would get together and—it's kind of like a book club—and talk about books. And then we would purchase the books and then donate them to the public schools.

So I was involved with that for many years, and the thing that I was also involved with was, they had press conferences to announce what books we were giving. And that seemed to be controversial because, you know, this was the nineties. And so, I was a spokesperson at those press conferences.

AW: Okay. And I know that we had seen some news footage of you in one of those press conferences, which, I believe is like, from '95 or '96. But to speak to the origin story of Project 21—you said you came on, you think, a little after they had gotten started?

RH: I think so.

AW: Because there was a controversy regarding the Olathe School District and a particular book, *Annie on My Mind*.

RH: Yes.

AW: And could you speak to that?

RH: Yes.

AW: What was going on?

RH: I believe that was the first year they donated the book. Nancy Gardens, the author, her book was *Annie on My Mind*. And *All-American Boys*, I think, was the other book. And what happened in Olathe was that when they were given this book, they discovered to their horror that they already had this book in their library. And so, what they did was they removed it from their library. So when they did that, some teachers and the ACLU got involved and sued the Olathe School District because they were saying that was a

first amendment right kind of an issue. And they won that court case. The Olathe School District was ordered to put that book back onto the shelves. So what that did was it just gave publicity to the whole issue of gay and lesbian books in public schools. It just gave publicity to our whole organization. You know? So that was like, one of our successes.

AW: Yeah. And do you recall any other books beyond those two books, just off the top of your head?

RH: We gave a book of role models. It was more of a picture book. I think it was called *Heroes*. We, for many years—five or six years I think—the project went on. And we donated many books. I have a whole list of them somewhere I could get you if you'd like. But I will admit this. I didn't always read all of the books because I was more of the activist that wanted to be on camera and actually go out and donate the books. That was the hard part, actually. And that was one of my jobs was once they decided on what books they wanted to donate, someone had to physically go to the school district and say, "Here's your books." And that was me.

I would go to those school districts and say, "I'm with Project 21 and—" You know. So, I had a couple of very interesting conversations with superintendents of school districts about this is why we are—and how is the policy for your gay and lesbian students? You know. So I would have those difficult conversations. That was what I could bring to the committee. Other people could sit in the room and read books and recommend them. I could go out and do the work. Because, at that time, I was a gay activist. That was my role.

AW: Right.

RH: So that's how I think I really contributed to that organization. I was their foot person, basically. Yeah.

AW: And—okay. Actually, I want to keep going with this. I realize we're down to one minute. I need to clear some space on this [camera] card. I forgot to do that. So we're just taking a quick break here. We'll be right back.

RH: All right.

[*break in recording at 1:01:35*]

AW: Okay. Now, what I was going to ask—before we broke, we were talking about Project 21. And I was going to ask you—there was a book burning with the Reverend John Birmingham.

RH: [*nodding in affirmation*]

AW: And I wanted to ask whether you recalled that incident? Whether you were part of the group yet when that happened?

RH: Yes, I was. And I do recall that incident, mainly because I probably got a clip of it. I was real good, at that time, of setting my VCR to the news programs and recording the news. And I knew that somebody, one of the television stations had gone out to interview him. So I remember—actually, I can see in my mind the clip, the news story of him doing that.

And, of course, you know, fringe—you just say, okay, that's just this fringe character that thinks he has some point to make. But again, it's just like the Westboro Baptist Church—or the Olathe School District. They give media focus to whatever the subject is.

Just the fact that, you know, you've heard that phrase, 'Any publicity is good publicity.' He was doing that. But it was giving publicity to what we were doing. You know? So, we used it to our advantage. Basically—because most people would think, *He's the strange one burning books. The other people are the more rational people, right? The Project 21 people.* So, we, you know—

AW: Yeah. Because I think a term, whenever I look at Project 21 news clippings or anything like that, or the press conferences, the word censorship comes up a lot. Was that—

RH: Yes.

AW: ...a big talking point for you?

RH: Well, yeah. And that was the whole point of the Olathe School District lawsuit—the Olathe School District was censoring stuff. And that was the point of that. So that was the whole issue. It's like, *What information do students have access to? You know? Who controls what students can read? You know? Is the school district—can they say this subject is not appropriate?* You know, that was the whole issue.

And the whole issue of LGBT or gay people in schools, that's kind of like, the final frontier, right? I mean, because we were slowly coming out, I guess, at that point. But schools are like, one of those last things, and still today even—to be comfortable with the whole idea that there are gay teachers. There are gay students. You know? So just the fact that it was gay and schools, that was the controversy. Right?

This was the nineties. It was a controversy. You know? Ellen didn't come out 'til 1997, and that was a big deal when she came out. But that hadn't happened yet. So we were still trying to help people feel more comfortable with the whole issue. So that was our whole slogan—people need information. All we're doing—we're not controversial. We're just giving information. Students have a right to this information. And some school districts were like, "No. Our students don't want that information." So, that was where the whole controversy was.

AW: Right, right. And you were speaking earlier about how you were actually the one, or one of the ones who would physically go and actually try to deliver these books.

RH: Yes.

AW: So, I'm just curious how something like that actually plays out in real life? Was there a phone call ahead of time?

RH: Yes.

AW: Would you just show up to—

RH: Yes. There was always an appointment. I would always say “I have these books.” I would make an appointment to go. And I believe—

AW: The school district?

RH: With the school district. With different districts it was like—sometimes I would deal with the librarians, and just go to them. And with some school districts I had to go through the assistant superintendent or whatever. So different school districts would want me to meet with different people. It just kind of depended on what kind of school district it was.

I remember one school district, I believe it was Blue Valley, there was an Information Officer. And he was kind of like the IT guy. And he was the one I made an appointment with. So it was just different jobs in different school districts who I would make the appointment with. But it was always an appointment. They knew I was coming. I would come in with my sack full of books and say, you know, “Here are the books.” And inside each book was a little sticker that had ‘Donated by Project 21.’ So we were trying to give ourselves credit for those kind of books.

AW: Do you recall any particular districts either being, like, *Oh, that was easy?* Or the exact opposite?

Was there any other school district besides Olathe that jumps out as far as really having a problem?

RH: I had—yes. [laughs] Independence strikes me as—I remember talking to their, I don't know if he was a superintendent or an assistant superintendent. But, you know, on the surface he seemed nice and cordial. But I could tell that he was not comfortable and that, probably, the books wouldn't get to the schools.

A lot of times, they would accept the books, but then the books wouldn't get into the libraries. Like, you know, we would call back and say—A lot of—what they did after they had learned they had to deal with us, a lot of them would say, ‘Okay, well, we'll have a committee review the books to see if they're appropriate for the students.’ So they would be lost in this, you know, never-neverland—they're with the review committee, and the review committee is still meeting. So they would never actually get into the

library. That was kind of their stalling tactic. If they didn't like what we were doing, that was the way they, kind of, dealt with us. "Okay. Well, thank you very much. We'll have our review committee review these to see if they're appropriate." You know? So Independence, I remember, just him saying that he's not comfortable with me at all. And he's being nice to my face but, you know, down deep I know as soon as I leave, he's probably going to do nothing with those books. That was just one memory I have.

AW: Right.

RH: Yeah.

AW: Okay. Yeah, thank you. And then with this—coming from the organization or spawning off of an organization in San Francisco that already existed—I'm curious if you were aware of or coordinated with any other cities or states that had similar projects to Project 21? Or, if this was all in-house—and by in-house, I mean, like, within your organization.

RH: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

AW: Did you—

RH: Yeah.

AW: ...know of other cities?

RH: Oh. Other than the original one, no, I did not. However, I believe what happened—and I think I have the history correct on this—is that our Project 21 was an independent project. But then it soon got under the umbrella of GLAAD. GLAAD is the Gay and Lesbian Association—I'm sorry. GLAAD—I've got my organizations wrong—Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. They're still around, by the way. I think they're, maybe, a little less relevant than they were in the nineties.

But they, at that time, saw what was happening in Kansas City and their strategy as an organization, as a national organization was to have local chapters. So they wanted to establish a local chapter here. And there was an organization that had been established in the early nineties. Marilyn Hutchison was a part of this organization and so was Brian Williams, called The Friends of Justice. So that organization transformed into GLAAD and then Project 21 came under the umbrella of GLAAD. That's kind of how we were doing our work.

And GLAAD had several other projects besides Project 21 that I was involved with as well. And they were really a major force for activism in this city. They had a speaker's bureau which I was a part of. So I would go out and do speeches at colleges and churches just about the gay experience. They also had their communities of faith. They had an organization for gay-friendly churches. And what else did they have? They had something else. [pause] Oh. They gave media training, actually. I remember having a media training by Donna Red Wing in the early years. But she—they always would give

this Media Training 101. And really, it's basically how to talk to the media for activists. So, they did several good things that I was involved with for many years.

AW: And speaking of media training and this whole conversation we've had that's kind of leading to a much more public role that—I mean, going from someone who is not out at their job but—

RH: Yeah.

AW: ...to someone who is on television.

RH: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

AW: And there's some interesting stories about, I don't want to say being outed on television, but—

RH: Yeah.

AW: ...and talking about schools. Let's talk about, since you had spoken about being a media spokesman for Project 21—

RH: Yes.

AW: ...and I know that we have with us right now a 1994 newspaper article. Eventually I know that—Well, this is also around the time, I think, that you meet your future—

RH: [nodding in affirmation]

AW: Okay. Yeah. So, however in—everything I'm throwing—

RH: Sure. [laughing]

AW: ...out there. [laughing]

RH: Sure. And I will just preface this by saying, in my professional career, I had already left teaching.

AW: Right.

RH: And I was doing a few other things in my life for as far as my career goes. So I felt less restricted. I was more able to be out. And one of the things that was, of course—we talked about the March on Washington in 1993. You know, me learning how to be an activist, kind of. And then the next big step for me, as you mentioned, was in 1994. I was featured in a series of articles on gay life in Kansas City.

[reaches for newspaper]

This is a story—front-page story—that ran for three days in 1994. And it was about speaking out.

[reads from newspaper] “Kansas City’s lesbians and gay men long have been most invisible to the surrounding straight majority. Now they are speaking out.” So, you know, the first day, Lea Hopkins, of course, is on the cover. The second day, this is— [looks at newspaper a bit confused] who is that? Anyway, he was a friend of mine. I think his name is Kirk. But I was in the paper on the third day. Not on the front cover. But I was in the inside pages. There I am.

AW: Okay.

RH: Right there [holds open the full newspaper spread open to reveal article]

AW: There we go.

RH: Can you see it?

AW: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

RH: Okay. [smiling and enthusiastic] So, there I am with my glamour shot with my borrowed tie from my friend. And so, I remember thinking at the time, *My God, everybody’s going to see this. Everybody’s going to know about me.* And I was a little like, *should I do this, or should I not do this?*

And I got advice like, “It’s okay to do this.” Carl Cropsey [phonetic 01:13:08] at the time, he was involved in some stuff. And I remember calling up Carl and saying, “Carl, should I do this?” And he said, “Yes.” [laughs] So I said okay. What do I got to lose? And so, they interviewed me. And I—actually, that photograph was taken at *The Star*.

So I thought, *Okay, everybody knows.* It was kind of freeing at one point. But at the other end, I thought, *Okay, everybody at my work’s going to know now.* You know? But that is kind of like, Okay, I don’t have to pretend, you know, any more for anything. Anybody. Because it’s in the paper. Right? Everybody knows. And at that time, you know, in the nineties, people did still read the paper. So, that was a big moment for me.

I’ll tell you a funny story aside from that. Years later, right? I meet at a party an ex-student of mine. I mean, a student I had had taught at school. And she saw that in the paper and, and was like, “Yay, Mr. Hite comes out.” [laughs] So she was very supportive and that’s what, you know, she told me later. That she was glad I had done that. So that was a big moment for me.

The other thing that started happening was because of my association with Project 21 and GLAAD—as we mentioned the press conferences, they—news stories—I got interviewed. And I was on the news for those press conferences. And so, you know, what they would do is they would cover the press conference but then they’d want to

have a one-on-one interview. And they did that to me, several, several times. So I was featured in one of those in 1995 pretty heavily—and about where I used to teach school. And I had no idea they were going to say all that. But, they did. So—

AW: Because we've talked about this story, and it's very—I don't want to say scary way or whatever—

RH: [*smiles and sips water bottle*]

AW: What is that news story or what was it about?

RH: It was 1995, and they had covered the press conference. Then one of the reporters was talking to me privately. The camera wasn't on or anything. She was just talking to me privately. And I had told her where I used to teach school in Fort Osage. So, what happened was when I watched the news story that night, she had actually gone out to the Fort Osage School District. And right there by the Fort Osage sign, she was talking about me, you know, and how I wasn't comfortable being out when I was a teacher in the Fort Osage School District. Right? So, I was like, God, you didn't have to say all that. [laughs]

So that's when I learned my lesson. Never say anything to a reporter, even if it's off the record that you don't want flashed on the TV. That was my media training right there. It's like, okay. Well, you gave her that information. So you know, watch what you say to reporters.

AW: Yeah.

RH: Because they'll take whatever they want and make it theirs.

AW: Yeah.

RH: So, anyway, that was—

AW: I just found that so interesting that they actually went to Fort Osage to get that shot of Fort Osage even though it had, the story had nothing to do with—

RH: Yeah.

AW: ...Fort Osage.

RH: And I wasn't teaching there anymore.

AW: Right.

RH: It's just that, you know, for some reason that was controversial. Anyway, it was—it was wild.

AW: Oh, sure.

RH: [laughs]

AW: Yeah. So also speaking along these lines of a public role and just various roles, I guess—because when we’ve spoken in the past, we’ve kind of used this time period, the mid-nineties, as a jumping off point. So I’d be curious to talk about—

RH: Sure.

AW: ...what it is that you started doing after you joined GLAAD? And where does this all lead?

RH: Well, let me just back up and say, a major event happened in 1995. GLAAD was in the middle years there, you know, ’94, ’95, ’96, ’97, ’98. But a significant event happened in my life in 1995 which is where I met my then partner, now husband, Rick Fisher. And he was here in Kansas City on vacation. We met through a mutual friend. We had two dates in one day if you can believe that. And then he left to go home to New Jersey where he lived, so we started a long-distance relationship. A year later he moves here to Kansas City, and we start our life together.

So, when he came into my life, then my activism took on, kind of, another tone—in that, before it was always, you know, I was fighting for gay people. And now I was fighting with him by my side that—because we’re a family now. And you have to recognize us as a family. Right? So, the first battle I had with him was in 1995 with my family of origin. You remember my coming out story where they didn’t want to acknowledge it. Right?

So, we lived apart for a year. But Rick was always good about, “Okay, when can we see each other again?” And he came here frequently to visit. Like, you know, every couple of months he would come here and we’d visit. So, he planned a trip to be in Kansas City in November of ’95 for Thanksgiving. Of course, he was still living in New Jersey. So, I talked to my parents about, “Okay, Rick’s in town. This is a man I’m dating. I’d like to bring him to Thanksgiving dinner.” And I thought it was going to be okay.

My mom, I thought was going to be okay with it. But for some reason, after I left—I had been over to their house talking to them. I guess mom and dad talked and dad wasn’t comfortable with it. So mom tells me later she’d just prefer it if he didn’t come to our Thanksgiving dinner. I could just come and he could do something else for a few hours. Because, you know, that just wouldn’t be good.

So, I thought, *Hmm... Okay. Here’s this man coming all this way to see me, and I’m just going to tell him, “Could you just find something to do for two hours on Thanksgiving while I go see my family?”* I thought, *No*. So I made a stand with my family and said, “Okay. If he’s not invited, I’m not coming.” And, of course, my mother gets all dramatic and says, “Oh, this could be your father’s last Thanksgiving. His heart’s not

very good.” [*very dramatic voice*] And, you know, come to find out later, he died a year and a half later. So, you know, he did have one more Thanksgiving in him. But I just thought, *No. I’m not going to put up with that.*

So we went over to another friend of mine’s house for Thanksgiving. And I remember at the time thinking, *This feels weird. This Thanksgiving I’m not with my family.* But I knew I was doing the right thing. Well, that was the only year I had to do that. Because after that Rick was invited to Thanksgiving dinner—you know, he was part of my family then that my family recognized. So I had to take that personal stand with my family that one time.

Then in 1996, because I was involved with GLAAD, Channel 4 did a story on gay couples. They featured three of us. Lois Reborne was one of them. And Michael and Robert Rinewinger [phonetic 01:21:07] were another one. They were the most featured, Lois and Joan. But we were the third couple featured. So that was Rick and I’s big, you know, media splash as a couple on TV in 1996. And we told all of our friends about it. And from then on, that was the first of several newspaper articles or TV shots that we were both in. But that was kind of a big deal at that time.

And then something happened in 1997 that I’d like to talk about as well. By this time Rick had moved to Kansas City. He had started his job with the Heartland Men’s Chorus as their Executive Director. And he had a conference in Toronto, Canada. And I went with him. This was over Labor Day, 1997.

AW: And you were back with the Heartland Men’s Chorus now.

RH: Yes. I’d come back to sing with them in 1995. And gone to their GALA Festival in 1996 in Tampa with Rick along with me. It was his first GALA conference to be in attendance. So we were there as a couple.

So, he starts working for the chorus. Actually, he started working for the chorus in 1997, like, in March of ’97. So, this was several months later in September. It was basically his first conference. It wasn’t the big GALA conference but it was a conference that GALA puts on for people like him, people that, their job is with the chorus. And I went with him.

I remember that was the year and the time around Labor Day, September, that Princess Di had her little accident. So, that’s what I remember about that trip is like, that’s when I learned that that had happened. In fact, it’s funny. We were walking to church on Sunday morning and it was the headline in the paper. And I thought, *These tabloids, they’re just*—You know, I didn’t believe it. And when we got to church and they mentioned it, I was like, *Oh, I guess this really did happen.* So that’s kind of what I associated with that trip. But that just kind of gives you the timeframe of this happening.

What is significant about this event is people—activists talk about they have battle scars. This is one of my battle scars that I carry with me. And it’s, you know, it’s mostly healed

now. But this is where I felt injured by my government for not recognizing me and my family. And it's emotional and I want to tell you about it.

So, in fact, what happened—it resulted in me writing a letter which I have here. I want to share with you if I can find it in all of my papers.

[searching through stack of papers next to him on tray]

Toronto has a great subway system. So, while we were there, we rode the subway. And one of the things that you can do is buy a pass, an all-day pass, or you can buy an individual ticket. So one day I had bought a lot of individual tickets and thought, *Gosh, I should just buy a pass so I don't waste so much money.* So the next day, I bought a pass the first time. And then I only rode the subway once. So, I like, wasted my money. So, it's like, gosh. You know, I didn't know what my day was planned.

But then like, the next day I thought, *Well, I think we're going to ride the subway a lot.* We'll buy a pass. And it was a Sunday. And Rick was with me, and we went up to the subway to get a ticket. And the man said—I asked for a pass—and he goes, “Are you traveling together?” And we said, “Yes.” And he said, “Oh, you'll just need one pass then.” And we kind of looked at each other. It was like, *Okay.* And we read on the back of the pass that they give a pass for two adults on weekends or holidays traveling together. So, in other words, they were recognizing us as a couple, as a family. Right?

So, Rick turns to me and says, “See, we are a family.” You know? And instantly we thought, Canada, you know, they're just on top of things. They just have it together where the U.S. doesn't have it together. Right? So, we instantly had respect for Canada who recognized us as a family just through their subway system. Right? Two adults traveling together.

So, it was time for us to go home. We were at the airport, and when you're in a foreign country you have to go through customs and then immigration. So we had our customs form. And at the top of the custom form it read “One form per family.” And the first question was, what was the family name. And I thought, *Oh, gosh, Rick and I really should change our name to be the same.* You know, same name so we can really be a family.

So I told Rick, I said, “Well, it says one per family. We're a family. We only need one form.” And he looked at me like, are you going to start trouble? You know, he's like, this is not the time or the place. But he knew who I am, right? And he knows it's important for me. So we had filled out one form and I said to him, “Well, fill out your form just in case we need it. But we're not going to present two forms. We're just going to present one form.” Right?

So before we get to customs you have to—the first thing you do is you go through immigration. So, we went up to the counter to this man behind this desk, this glass desk. And here's the conversation that we have. So, he says, “Are you traveling together?”

And I say, “Yes.” And then he says, “Are you related?” So, Rick and I looked at each other like, *Well, how do we answer that?* And then I said, “We’re partners.” And he had this funny look on his face. Like, partners? Like, he didn’t understand what I was trying to tell him. So, me, being this 1990’s gay activist says, “It’s not legal to marry in the United States.” I kind of said it like, you know, that’s what I have to say because, you know, I can’t call him my husband because it’s not legal to marry in the United States.

And when I said that in that kind of tone, then he’s like—immediately had a change. And he says, “Oh, you’ll have to come up individually then.” And so, I was like, a little surprised. So Rick said, “Okay, what do you need?” Because Rick always is the one that has everything together. So, he had to get out the airline tickets and the boarding passes that he had. And so, he gave those to me. And he went back in line.

And I continued there with this guy. So, this is the rest of the conversation. “Do you have a birth certificate?” And at that time, this is 1997. This is before 9/11, right? So, you didn’t have to have a passport to go to Canada. You would, you could just get in with a driver’s license and some other identification. So, I didn’t have a passport. I just had a few of the things. And so, he said, “Do you have a birth certificate?” And I said, “No.”

And then he starts grilling me. “Well, where were you born?” “Harrisonville, Missouri.” “Well, what’s the name of the hospital?” And I said, “Well, I don’t know. I think they just had one.” And he said, “What’s the capital of Missouri?” And I said, “Jefferson City.” And he said, “Where do you live?” And I said, “Kansas City.” And then he said very condescendingly... Because one of the IDs I had was my voter ID card. Because I had heard that a voter ID card was considered identification. And so, he said, “Just for your information, a voter ID card is not identification.” You know, he just said it like I was just the worst piece of you know what, right?

I got done with that and went onto the customs. So, let me just read part of this.

[begins to read from paper]

“At that point I wanted to say more but I didn’t because I didn’t know what kind of authority he might have to detain me. So I proceeded to customs. My heart was beating rapidly and I felt shaky and trembly inside.”

[stops reading]

And I think that’s the fight or flight response. You know, when you’re just, you’re ready to run or do battle. So, I was just like, shaking. And so, I kind of went through the custom process with Rick. Rick had come up. And I was, I was in this state of confusion and anger and rage and powerlessness. That’s, kind of, what I was feeling, all those things. And so, I knew it was injustice.

So what I did was I wrote this letter, which I'm holding here. And I sent it to everybody I could think of. I sent it to my congress people. I sent it to customs. I sent it to immigration. Because I thought , *That was wrong*. So, I get this response back, and I just want to read a portion of it.

This is from the Immigration Office, dated November 28th, 1997. He says, [*reads from letter*] "It appears from your letter that your main issue is that the immigration inspector did not allow you and your partner to be inspected together. That decision should not be interpreted as related in any way to a service regulation policy or attitude regarding the constitution of a family, nor was it in way influenced by your lifestyle. Simply stated, inspectors in exercising their judgement and discretion often prefer to inspect individually in order to protect the confidentiality of the applicant and to maintain the integrity of the inspections."

Well, what kind of bull crap is that? You think they allow married couples to go up individually to respect their individuality and confidentiality? No. Hell, no. [*voice raises*] They discriminated against me and Rick because we were a same-sex couple. When I wrote them and told them what a problem it was and how unfair it was, did they apologize? Hell, no. All they said was, you know, they have a right to do this.

So I didn't even get an apology from my government for being mistreated like that. And there was no satisfaction in that. I just felt for years that I had been mistreated. And it really hurt me and angered me. But what could I do about it? Who was I supposed to tell about it? I'd written a letter to everybody I could think of and nothing was done.

So that's part of the injustice that I fight and that spurred me on to fight—that we should not be treated like this. My government doesn't recognize me as a family. And at that point, you know, I, as a gay person having sex, I was a criminal because the sodomy laws were still on the books. You know, it wasn't until 2003 when *Lawrence v. Texas* happened that I was no longer a criminal. And I can remember when that decision was made. I'm a runner. And I went out and ran with a rainbow flag in my hand going, *Okay, I'm no longer a criminal*.

So I tell you that story just so that you can see how real it is. This is not an issue. This is, this is how I experience my life as a person living in a country where they don't recognize me as having a family because I'm a gay person. So that's why I fight. You know, it's certainly better now. Rick and I are married now. I can't even believe that they allow gay people to marry. I still can't believe it. But that's what I was fighting then and will continue to fight.

And now, of course, the issue is, 'I can discriminate against you because of my religion,' you know, because 'I have a right to my religion and my religion doesn't recognize you.' It's all these religious laws like Governor Pence signed. So, you know, the battle still goes on. We still have to fight. We can't be complacent. Because they have to recognize you as a family.

So, I'm sorry. I got on my soapbox there for a moment. But— [*laughs*]. That's the story I wanted to tell.

AW: No. This is the place for a soapbox. So, yes. That was, you know, very good. Thank you for sharing.

I'm curious to find out, looking back at that time—if you say that you still can't believe it now, where was the issue of gay marriage at that time, in terms of—did you think it was a possibility at all? Was it something that you advocated for? Or was it just almost so far down the line that it wasn't—

RH: Well, you know, we were always fighting a promo in—Missouri has introduced MONA. Missouri Ordinance for... What is MONA? Missouri Ordinance Non-Discrimination Act? Yeah. Missouri Ordinance for Non-Discrimination Act—I believe, for years, to add sexual orientation to Missouri's non-discrimination laws. And so, that was kind of always the fight. Wasn't marriage so much as I don't want to be fired from my job for coming out. I don't want to be refused accommodations. So, that was, kind of, always where the movement was in trying to—

And then HRC, Human Rights Campaign, understood that workplace protections were what people could understand. What they could agree to more. And so, they started with ENDA, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, to try to get that nationally passed. So, that was, kind of, always what the goal was—to try to protect people in the workplace.

And so, the marriage thing, you know, it's funny listening to the debate as the court cases came up. You know, you would hear this debate like, "Well, those activists that decided that, you know, it should be about gay marriage, they're just, you know, full of it, and blah, blah, blah, blah." Some people just didn't understand why that was where the movement was going.

Well, the other side of that coin is, nobody in the movement decided that's what we were going to be talking about. People had lives and people wanted to be recognized as a family. And they fought their own court battles. You know, in Hawaii they almost had, that was the very beginning of when they were going to recognize same-sex couples in 1993. And, of course, what happened was DOMA—1996—that President Clinton signed. So, it was just the fact that people wanted to be recognized as families. And they were having their own court battles about that.

The first gay couple that had a battle was in the 1970's in Minnesota, you know, when they took it all the way up to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court decided not to hear the case. So, marriage, the whole reason that came was just because that's what people were experiencing in their lives. Nobody made this decision that that's where the movement's going to go. That just kind of naturally came about as people started—I mean, as people started adopting children. And there needs to be, you know, two parents for this child legally recognizing them. So, that's kind of where it came from.

And like I said, when DOMA was overturned, that was incredible. But then there was this organization that wanted to take it all the way up to the Supreme Court. And there was a big conversation at the time like, “This is not the time to take anything to the Supreme Court. Because we don’t have the votes.” And so, if you take this up to the supreme court too early and they say no, it’s going to be a long time before—

And so, there was this battle between these different gay organizations, gay activist organizations about, is that the right thing to do? And thank God it came in our favor. But, you know, it was a five to four decision. It could have gone the other way and we could still not have had gay marriage at this point. But I’m glad it did. It allowed Rick and I to get married. We got married in 2014 before the big court decision. We got married in California when it was legal there.

AW: Oh, I didn’t know that.

RH: Yeah. It was great.

AW: Well, let’s just say that as far as the late nineties and in the early 2000’s, are there any other key things that you’re still wanting to talk about—

RH: Oh.

AW: ...as far as—

RH: Just, I will just mention a few things. Just because—And I’ve had time to be reflective about my life. And a significant thing happened in—Well, I’ll mention going back to 1998. The church and how church treated people was a big thing with Rick and I. And so, in 1998 Rick and I helped bring Mel, the Reverend Mel White, to Kansas City for a worship service at Pride. So that was one of the things that I feel really good about. To bring the whole—to make Pride more than just about what entertainer’s up on stage but about what’s important in our lives. And that we’re involved in churches too. And—

AW: And for context, who was or is Mel White?

RH: He wrote a book called *Stranger at the Gate*. He’s a minister, a gay man that was a ghostwriter for Jerry Falwell. And he had his own struggle and wrote about it, about how he came to terms with being a gay man. He married and had some children. And it was a big thing about, you know, try to get the churches to understand that they should accept their gay and lesbian members and children. So, he’s kind of a national figure. Now he started the Soul Force organization to try to bring justice to the religious communities.

But, from there, in 2001 I joined the Four Freedom’s Democratic Club which was a club here in Kansas City that was a political organization. We would try to bring endorsements or make endorsements for political candidates so we could tell the gay and lesbian community how to vote and what candidates were friendly to our causes.

And back in the early days, it was a lot of times where the politicians would be friendly and on our side. But they said, “I don’t want anybody to know this because I’m going to get some no-votes if you make this public.” So we—it had to be, kind of, hush-hush. That I’ll support your issues, but don’t put my name out on your literature. You know, it was kind of one of those things. And eventually, that kind of turned around.

That was also the year that I became a voter registrar. I went down to the Kansas City Election Board and got qualified to do that. So I would register voters at all the Pride celebrations with Four Freedom’s Democratic Club. I kind of was—it’s always hard at Pride. Okay. “What group do you march with? Or what group are you with?” You know, “I’m with a lot of groups.” But I would always register voters because that’s where the power is. You’ve got to elect people that support you. Right? You can’t just talk about it. You’ve got to do something. You’ve got to do action. And that’s the very least thing you can do is vote. But you’ve got to be registered. So, that was, kind of, where I kept my focus for many years at Pride is trying to get people to actually get out and vote and feel like they’re a part of this community, this society where you can make change.

AW: And also, clarification. The Four Freedoms is like the number four, right?

RH: Yeah.

AW: Yeah.

RH: Yeah. It’s taken after a speech by FDR where he talks about the four freedoms. And I’m not sure why somebody decided that was our name. But that was the name. And we supported many gay-friendly candidates here in Kansas City. And eventually people wanted our endorsement. The thing that—I’ll tell you two things about Four Freedoms Democratic Club. In 2002 we have an openly-gay man running for a seat. And we have, because they had reorganized the districts, we have a person, who I’ll just tell you their names.

Terry Norman was an openly-gay man who was running first time. The person that held the seat, Marsha Campbell was a straight lady, ally. This was like her, going to be her fourth term in the Missouri legislature. This was in the district that was around Kansas City. I don’t remember what the number of the district was. But there’s where the battle came. Okay. This lady has been on our side all these years in Jefferson City fighting for our rights. Right? She’s an ally. Straight ally. Who do we endorse? Do we endorse her? Do we endorse this gay man? Because there needs to be gay people out in public in Jefferson City. Right?

AW: Right.

RH: Big controversy. You know? It split the community. I happen to agree with my friend Tim Van Zandt who, at that time, was the first openly-gay person in the Missouri

legislature who said, “Marsha has seniority. She will be able to do more for you because of her seniority. And she’s been our friend.” He recommended that we stick with her. Which, the club voted to endorse her. And a bunch of people were really upset and formed their own political organization called the KC Pride Democratic Club. And so, for many years there were two LGBT political organizations in Kansas City, kind of, battling it out—So, politicians, they had to go to both organizations to try to get the gay vote. [laughs] So that was one of the things that is the legacy there. What else was I going to say about the Four Freedoms? I think that’s really all I wanted to say about Four Freedoms.

AW: Okay.

RH: I will say—Oh. I knew there was one other thing. The thing that changed was when, in 2006 Jolie Justus, an out-lesbian got elected as a Missouri senator. And when she got elected, of course, we endorsed her. The next year, in 2007, there were a slew of mayoral candidates in Kansas City. It was an open election. All those mayoral candidates wanted our endorsement.

AW: Right.

RH: Because they thought, *Kansas City just elected an openly-lesbian State Senator. You know? Gay people must vote. We want to have their vote.* So all those mayoral candidates went before our committee and wanted our endorsement. So that was like, our shining victory. It’s like, okay. Now they don’t want to hide behind, you know, ‘I’m really your friend but don’t put my name on your literature.’ Now they wanted it. So that was just the change from—in the 2000’s—from, you know, “Shhh” [*puts finger to lips*] to, “Yeah, okay, I can talk about you now.”

AW: Right.

RH: Yeah. Yeah.

AW: Big change.

RH: Yeah. So—let’s see. The other thing I’ll mention, just in 2004, that was when Missouri passed its constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman. So I worked really hard with organizations and went door to door to try to knock on doors and get people to—You know, that’s where you have to have the hard conversations. How do you feel about two men or two women making a family? That was a really hard effort to try to kill that. But, of course, it won.

AW: Right.

RH: That’s just some of the things I’ve done. There’s— [*pauses*]

AW: Well, I'll tell you what. Most of all the interviews have kind of jumped off in the nineties at some point—

RH: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

AW: ...and everything. And if there's anything regarding more recent stuff that you want to talk about at a future date too, we can always do that. But I suppose since we have, I think gone a little over two hours fifteen minutes now—As far as—

RH: [*laughs*] I—let me just, there's just a couple of things, other things. I don't see what year [*looking at paper*]. I'm trying to think of what year it was in here. There was a time when at work—I got a great job at the postal service. I was on their Diversity Committee. It was led by a lady, and that was her title. And we were just trying to recognize different groups of people and that sort of thing. But because I was on that committee—This is so weird how it happened. But each department would have a department meeting. And the department where I was working, the head person came to me and, and said, “Do you want to do a talk about gay issues?” And I was like, “You really want me to talk about that?” And so, I said, “Yeah, if you want me to talk about it, I'll talk about it. So, that was a big moment for me, coming out at work in front of all my co-workers. And just basically telling my story. I was doing the same work that I was doing in my private life. But all of a sudden, this was now at work. So, that was a big moment where I felt like I was coming out and making a difference. I mean, this is how you change people's minds, right? You, you come out to them.

AW: Yeah.

RH: And—

AW: Do you recall—ballparking it, like, when that would have been? I mean, was that—

RH: That would have been—

AW: 2000's?

RH: That would have been—I know what job I was in at the time. So, let's see. That would have probably been the late nineties.

AW: Oh, wow.

RH: Yeah. When I had that—and I think it was just this department head was openminded and knew I was on the Diversity Committee and knew why I was on the Diversity Committee. Because I'm a gay man, right?

AW: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

RH: And I had a partner at that time. Right? So he just thought people needed to understand that. And so, that was just part of his department meeting was my little moment where I got to tell my personal story.

AW: Right.

RH: So it was something just to—you know, 1994 I come out in the paper. All of Kansas City knows. Now all my work knows. It's like, you're always coming out. But it's always something you can keep doing to new groups of people. So that was just something—and something that I've learned is that, yeah. You think in 1994, okay, you don't have to mention it because it's in *The Kansas City Star*. But, no. You have to still keep coming out everywhere. You know?

AW: Right.

RH: But it's easier, of course, when you have a partner because it's part of your life. If you're a—

AW: Yeah.

RH: ...single LGBT person, why would it come up unless it's somebody you're dating or something? But when they're a part of your life, that's what I mean when I say the tenor of my activism changed. All of a sudden now I can talk about my family, where before I couldn't talk about my family. But now I can talk about my family. And how are you treating my family? Right?

AW: Yeah.

RH: So, that's the difference.

AW: Okay. No. That's, I mean, we've covered so much today.

RH: *[laughing]*

AW: Maybe we'll bring it to a close as far as something you'd talked about earlier though, as far as, you know, the fight continues or whatever. I mean, here we are. And we'd spoken earlier about discrimination ordinances and things that have been introduced at the federal level. There's still no protections at the federal level. There's still—

RH: Hm-hmm. *[affirmative]*

AW: ...you know, multiple states that don't have any statewide protections, and, of course, many municipalities that don't—So, as far as your outlook moving forward and whether or not we're in a time that is going to continue with forward progress? Or is this a time to be concerned? And, I mean—

RH: I think it's a time to step up again because they always say you take three steps forward and then take two steps back. So what you saw happen in the world was when the Supreme Court did its thing with both DOMA and allowing gay people to marry in 2015, then there was the backlash. And that's when you had the religious laws about, 'Well, this is against my religion.' So, it comes back to trying to say, ? "Okay, no. You can't have everything that you think you have because I have a right to discriminate based on what my religion teaches me." Of course, they won't use the word discriminate. They just say, "My deeply held religious beliefs. I don't think I should be made to make that cake, you know, for the gay couple."

So, it's that kind of pushback that we're in now. So if you're an LGBT person, and you think, *Okay, marriage was the last thing and you could just sit back now and your life is fine....* Think again. Because you have to keep fighting because the forces that want to oppress you are still there. We've won some battles, yes. It's better, yes, now. Yes. We have a lot of out-gay people. That's one thing that Harvey Milk taught us is that you have to come out. And that's one of the things I didn't mention in my story.

But, you know, Rick and I got married in California. And our marriage certificate is from San Francisco, the City Hall where Harvey Milk was shot. And so, you have to keep coming out. You have to keep fighting. You have to keep standing up for yourself because those forces, even though it's better now, they're still there. And you can't be complacent. You have to keep speaking up and defending yourself and pointing out injustice wherever it happens. And now there's, kind of, injustice in a lot of different places. But you need to use your voice and speak out in whatever way you can to make it a better place for everybody.

AW: Very well put.

RH: *[laughing]*

AW: Yeah. I'll tell you what. I think that's a great ending here. So, as far as the GLAMA Oral History Project, today, February 3rd, 2018. Randy Hite, thank you so much for everything.

RH: Thanks for your time. It's been great talking to you.

AW: My pleasure.

RH: Great.

[End of audio]