

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID NEUBECKER

CONDUCTED BY ANNE GRAHAM AND HEATHER OSWALD

EDITED BY AMBER SMITH AND MARY KATHERINE WATSON

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LGBTQ Oral History Series  
Interview with David Neubecker  
Conducted by Anne Graham and Heather Oswald  
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Location: Audio Video Technology Studio

INTERVIEWER: It's October 23rd, 2014. This is Anne Graham and Heather Oswald, archivists with the Kennesaw State University Archives. We're interviewing David Neubecker in the studios of the Audio Video Technology services at Kennesaw State University, as part of the Museums, Archives and Rare Books oral history project. So, David, can you talk about your family and your background?

DN: I was born in Atlanta and at the age of four, my parents moved out to Cobb County. I mean, they were very young parents when I was born. My mother was sixteen, my dad was nineteen and he, fortunately, had gotten a union job. So that kind of helped us squeak by, but it was a meager kind of existence through my childhood. We moved out to Austell, and most of my life I spent in that south Cobb part of the area. We would move every few years from house to house, always trying to buy up a little bit each time. And so I wasn't in any particular school at any one time, but kind of jumped from school to school in the South Cobb area. I have one sister, Dina, that's two years younger than myself. And so we, like I said, settled there in Cobb County and lived up until I moved in with Jon up in Smyrna.

INTERVIEWER: Also, can you talk about your relationship with your parents?

DN: Sure. My mother was a stay-at-home mom for most of the time growing up, but it was a difficult position for her, I think, just because she didn't come from -- She was a foster child growing up and so she didn't have a lot of modeling for parenting skills. And so it was an interesting life growing up in the household. I think we tried to fit into the stereotypical mold of her staying at home and providing, and she did volunteer at the school and she acted as room mom and did Tupperware parties and Stanley parties – it was a house cleaner they used to sell. And then my dad, of course, worked in the factory as a paint mixer. He mixed paint for years. And so we lived in a tract housing development that had just been built where every single house looked exactly like the other one. The only thing that was different was the color of the house.

And yeah, the neighborhood kids, we had a playground in the middle of the neighborhood and my dad would come home. He would spend time on the weekends with us, but for the most part, the relationship wasn't as

close with him. He tried to get me to enjoy fishing because he was a fisherman and a hunter. And that didn't work well at all. There were a couple of memorable moments with my dad. The first was my realizing I was gay. And with my father -- I had a crush on a boy in the neighborhood in this tract development and his house was behind our house. So we shared backyards or the chain link fence. And I had a super big crush on him at five years old.

And I remember my dad, seeing him shaving in the mirror, in the bathroom, sitting on the toilet seat. Just as vivid as yesterday. And I was watching him shave. And I said, "Dad." I said, "If think a girl is pretty I say, 'she's pretty,' but what if I think a boy is pretty?" because I didn't have a word for that. And I knew pretty wasn't the right word. I remember that so vividly. I don't remember his response, but I do remember and it became evident that it wasn't something I was supposed to talk about. And so I kind of buried it away and kept my crushes to myself. I was quite flamboyant as a kid and the women in the family seemed to think that was just fine. I would hang out in the kitchen and talk with them and gossip about family members, and the guys I don't think knew what to do with me, all my uncles and all that stuff because they were all quite macho.

I remember that my mom -- I got to be about ten years old. My mom and dad started letting me stay at the house by myself. I remember her getting so mad at me because they had left and I took her sheers down. I don't know if you know what sheers are, but the curtains you can just barely see or you can see through and they're sheer fabric. And I made this great dress out of sheers. I had wrapped it all around and I thought I should have been a fashion designer, I think at that point. And I paraded around that house in those sheers and of course, they were all wrinkled when she got back and she was quite upset with me about it. But they had to put up with that those kinds of antics.

And I think they handled it pretty well. And I was so surprised years later when I finally came out that all those years of me wearing her curtains and all the decorating I did and my room was always perfect and at Christmas time I would always ask for things to decorate my room with, they didn't realize I was gay. There wasn't a connection. I don't know if it was denial or what was going on there, but the coming out process was difficult when we got to that point, years later.

My favorite holiday was Christmas. And so not only did I fully decorate our house in Christmas decorations, I would even save my allowance to buy decorations. But then my grandmother would not decorate. She always waited for me to come over. And that was a special thing that I did with her, going over to her house and decorating. And then when she died, years later, she gave me all of her vintage Christmas ornaments. So to this

day I still have this wonderful collection of 1960s Christmas decorations that I just really love. And so I've continued that tradition with my kids as well.

INTERVIEWER: So you said you had two stories about your father. What was the other memory you have of him?

DN: Oh, I did say two. Oh gosh, the fishing trip. So he really wanted -- trying to connect with me. Fishing was very big with my dad and we'd go down to Sweetwater Creek and we would fish and he tried to get me to like it. And first, I couldn't stand the thought of killing the fish. I mean, that was hard. And so I would never bait my hook or any of that. I just kind of liked the boat rides and sit on the side of the bank, but he got so furious. And I think my last fishing trip with him was when I was still quite young and we had gone and picked up all the bait from the bait shop. And he had bought worms that day because the minnows, he already knew I would set free so that I think he had given up on.

And so today we were just doing worms, and he's fishing and he turns around to get a worm. There's no worms left. And he's like, "Where are the worms?" Well, I had tried, I don't know why I did this, but instead of letting them run into the ground free, I had taken all of them and put them into his beer can. And so I had fed them all down into the hole of his beer can to hide them from him. And so not only did I get rid of all of his worms, but I also ruined his Budweiser. So that was about the last fishing trip I had with my dad.

INTERVIEWER: So you had mentioned that your parents didn't realize that you were gay, but you got kind of subtle cues not to mention it?

DN: Yes. I mean, I was quite flamboyant, like I said, as a kid. When I walked and I didn't know, I had a walk. Who would know as a child? But I remember my parents getting on to me about walking the way I walked, which was quite -- I think my hips just went from left to right, left to right. It was just way too over the top, but it was natural for me. It was who I was. Mannerisms, which, sometimes, today I still I use my hands at times when I talk and little things like that.

And I think they were trying to, if you want to call butch me up, or make me conform to what they thought was appropriate for someone in that era for a male kid. But I just, I resist it. I don't think there was anything I could really do about it. It was who I was. But I do remember that it was -- I don't think my mother was trying to be cruel. I think they were just trying to help me in their eyes. And so I do remember being kind of told not to walk that way, not to talk that way, things like that.

INTERVIEWER: So can you talk about any family members who influenced you?

DN: My grandmothers, I think -- I take bits and pieces from each of my family. It wasn't an easy childhood, as I said, but I can find bits and pieces from each of my family members that I think have helped shape me into the person I am today. My mother, from her, I think I have my desire for everything to be in order and to be neat, obsessive-compulsive, almost. And I certainly see that from my mother. My father, I think I've gotten a work ethic. He, in spite of how difficult life was, it was a struggle growing up financially, he really worked every single day and stayed at the same job my whole life. The only time he left that job was when the tornado came through in '75, I think it was, or '74. We had a massive tornado that came through.

I think I was in first grade. And it tore his plant down. He was working in Atlanta. It was the same tornado that hit the governor's mansion and he luckily survived the tornado, but he was out of work for some time and took odd jobs, laying carpet and whatever he could do to provide for the family. And I think I really respected that about him. He may not have been able to show a compassionate side and caring side but he provided. And so I gained that from him and with my grandmothers -- My mother, even though she was a foster child, she did re-engage with her mother. She was in-and-out, constantly going back to live with her mother and then going back into foster care. And so she had a relationship with my grandmother, with her mother, and I knew her quite well. She was pretty feisty and gruff and just a nice lady and she was protective of me. And I was the oldest grandchild on that side of the family. And I felt loved by her, even though she wasn't maybe necessarily the traditional kind of grandmother.

The other grandmother was quite traditional. She had the garden and I would help her garden in the backyard and she cooked. And I remember she would always have biscuits and sliced cucumbers and vinegar sitting on the table. That was a staple every day at her house for guests that would come by and we would just sit there and cackle and laugh. She almost looked like Lucille Ball in some way. She had -- I thought it was natural red hair. Later, I learned it wasn't. Bright red hair. And she wore it in a bouffant, up. And in later years, it got lower and lower. And she wore red lipstick and she was just quite a character. And she loved cooking and I still have her cookbook and like I said, all of her Christmas decorations, and she was just quite a character.

And when I came out, both of those grandmothers, they really were the pillars in the family that set the tone with how I was to be treated by the rest of the family. And to this day, I'm not very close to my mother's side. They've kind of scattered. And I think a lot of that has to do with the fact

that even in early age, all of my mother's siblings were split up and back and forth. So I think that caused the whole family just to kind of split up. The Greer side, my dad's side is quite close and even growing up, we would all caravan down to Panama City every year. And this had started when my dad was little. My dad, I think he said it started in the 1950s or something, before the expressways. Because he said that they would have to drive down the highways to get to Panama City. And it started out as a fishing trip. And then when we came along, it became more of a vacation and we would drive and stay in the same hotel every single year. And I quit doing that when I got too cool for it, by the time I graduated high school and couldn't be bothered with Panama City and really had kind of turned sour on the whole idea of anything that -- I was trying to distance myself, I guess, from my southern roots. And so I boycotted Panama City for quite some time.

And then when I had kids, I started thinking about how important those trips were to me and so I've started going back. And so I drive now from Chicago, every year, down to Panama City with my kids. And we stayed one year in the same hotel I did as a kid, but our family's gotten so big now that we've gone to other hotels that are still those 1950s motels, but bigger. I think last year, we only had thirty-five or so. Year before that, we had fifty-four, but slowly, the generations are dying off and it's harder for some of them to get down, but it's still very special to me and my family.

INTERVIEWER: How large is your father's extended family?

DN: My father had seven brothers and sisters, and my mother had seven brothers and sisters. My dad, it was all boys and one girl, and my mom, it was all girls and one boy. And the funny story about my parents and the two families, they actually were quite intertwined and connected in some weird way. My mother happened to be in a foster home that was a close friend of my father's family. And so my father met my mother through the foster home that she was staying in and somehow or another, the families became just quite intertwined. And there were even some years in Panama City where my mother's side, my aunts and uncles, that would come down and it would be even larger. And they would sometimes kind of mix and mingle with holidays as well, and things of that sort.

But for the most part, because of the size of the Greers, they've kind of kept things just for themselves. We would have -- Flat Rock, I think was the name of the park, we would have a family reunion at a state park every year for the Greers. And then we'd always have Thanksgiving at my grandmother's and we'd have Christmas Eve at my grandmother's. And so we just had a very set set of customs that we would do with the Greers. And I think that's probably why I continue it today, because as I've gotten older, I realize how important all of those things are to family.

I did want to mention one other thing, too, that I think is unique about the family. On my mother's side, even though they were scattered, I did have a great-great-grandmother that I knew. They lived a long time on that side of the family. And she lived to be, I think, 105 years old. And because my mother had me at such a young age, and my mother's mother had her at such a young age, everyone was having children at such a young age through the generations that when I was born, we actually had five living generations. And that made quite the news when I was born. And I still have newspaper clippings of them celebrating five generations of our family.

And when I was nine years old, I had all my bones broken in both of my legs through surgery. My legs had grown very strangely. And at the time, they felt that the best way to correct it was to break all my bones and reset them. And I never will forget that Granny Pierce, was her name. And she acted as the nurse for me that year. And I would sit there in my grandmother's apartment, where she lived, with my grandmother, and she would nurse me. And I couldn't walk, I was in full body cast from the hips down and I introduced her to potato chips. She had never tasted a potato chip in her life. So we spent that summer eating potato chips. And she would not drink Coke. She thought Coke was quite sinful, but I was allowed to drink those. But having connections with all those generations, I think on either side of the family, I think really has kind of helped shape me into the person that I am today.

INTERVIEWER: So we kind of talked about it a little bit, but what were your perceptions of being gay as a child, or did you have any?

DN: The only perceptions that I had -- Paul Lynde, on Bewitched, and believe it or not, I actually really liked him. I would cackle and laugh at his antics and how outrageous he was. And I absolutely to this day love Bewitched so definitely Paul Lynde sent influence. And I would also say that my family, even though I got a negative vibration from them that it was not okay to be gay, they still had gay friends. My father's sister worked in a beauty shop in Mableton, Georgia, and she washed hair. And one of the hairdressers named Mike, who is still alive today, was her best friend. And everyone in the family knew he was gay. It was not a secret. And he was quite stereotypical in that manner, if you can think of 1970s hairdresser in Mableton, Georgia.

And there was always an -- When they would talk about him, they would kind of excuse it. Well, Mike's okay. He's okay. But you can always tell that they felt there was something wrong with it, but he was the exception. And then on my mother's side, my aunts were into softball. And so they had many, many lesbian friends and some of them were coupled up and it was quite open and it was accepted. But again, just for them, it was okay. I

don't know. It seems strange to think back, but it seemed like they would make the exception for the person that they knew, but the idea of the gay community, there was something wrong with that because that's what they had been told. My mother's side, we were at a Primitive Baptist church, wood floor, and it was pretty intense and we quit going to church at a young age, but they still felt the obligation, I think, as a southerner and they identified as a Baptist at that time, to follow, to tow the line, to follow the beliefs that the Southern Baptist had about gays and lesbians.

INTERVIEWER: So when did you realize that you were gay?

DN: I think I really do go back to the age of five when I had that conversation with my father in the bathroom about the neighbor and my attraction to him. I think that was the moment that I realized I was gay, but I also realized not to talk about it. And so I knew I was attracted to boys my age, but I didn't take it past that. And I think when I talk to people, they always find it interesting that I was such a late bloomer. When you think of the sexual component of being gay, that part never occurred to me. I knew what I was attracted to, but it didn't go past the attraction. I didn't understand the dynamics of sexuality and sex. And so I didn't really have my first experience until after high school.

I went through high school, again, identifying by that point as openly gay, but never having actually acted on it, I guess you could say. So yeah, and I think as I entered high school, I became quite open about it. I was lucky enough that the high school, Pebblebrook High School, where I attended, they switched over, I think it was 1983, to the Cobb County Center for Performing Arts. And that was quite great for me because I'm sitting in class and they're making this announcement. I'm like, "That means there's going to be a lot of gay kids coming to this school." And I was right. There were a lot of kids from the district, from around Cobb County's different high schools that came to Pebblebrook for the performing arts component. And they were quite creative, all the stereotypes.

And we kind of put together our own little community. It was gay enough that there were different communities within the gays at the school. And so it was a fascinating dynamic in high school because you still had Pebblebrook, the high school with the big monster trucks in the parking lot and the guys with the dip in the back pockets, and the hats and all of the things you could think of the southern high school. And then you have these gothic kids, which I kind of identified with more, guys wearing makeup. We were wearing makeup in high school and it was quite out there. And I talked with some of my friends just recently when I knew I would be taping this and I said, "Do I remember this correctly?"

And we talked about what it was like in high school as gay kids. And there were definitely instances of bullying and harassment. I don't want to minimize it in any way. I mean, we really couldn't leave a classroom without being called faggot or being hit on the shoulder as we walked down the hall. But given that the two sides had kind of been pushed together into this high school, I think overall, it wasn't as difficult of a life as you would think in the 1980s, in a southern high school. We did have some friends, one friend, his head was pushed through a window once. He was very flamboyant. And I think he was also quite flirty with lots of guys and they would get mad at him about it. And so his head was pushed through a window at school. And then there was another guy whose head was flushed in the toilet and then people would be thrown in trash cans.

And that's tough. I mean, it's a tough situation for sure. I managed to escape a lot of that somehow. I don't know. But aside from those three incidences, there was a kind of a somewhat understanding that we were to co-exist and to this day, I still go to the reunions and I have many friends that I keep in touch with from high school. And from our graduating class, I would say many people would identify as being very gay supportive, who are straight and married. And so I think that I was kind of in a special place in time there in Pebblebrook in the eighties.

INTERVIEWER: So you talked about being able to be sort of sorted out, did that include having openly gay relationships or is that something-

DN: What I think of as my first boyfriend was a guy at Pebblebrook, and again, I wasn't sexually active. So in no way, want to present that that was occurring, but we gravitated toward each other. And I think we did have just an intense connection and love for each other. And we exhibited that by wearing matching outfits. So I have actually a photo of -- So, one of my friends recently just sent me of me and Chris sitting beside each other at lunch, matching Members Only jackets on, and again, no one said anything about this. And we worked at this department store called Richway at the time. And it's kind of what Target would be today. And we were both cashiers and we would not work.

I can't believe they let us get away with this. We would not work unless we were allowed to be right beside each other. Our cash registers had to be beside each other so that we could talk while we were ringing the customers up. And again, we look like twins, we were matching, talking, and then ringing everyone up on the cash registers. And we spent every moment together. I mean, it was such a intense relationship in that regard. But then by senior year, I think I was wanting to take it -- and I don't think he was there yet, as far as his identity. And we haven't spoken since then. We've never spoken since that day. Yeah. So I find that kind of sad, but one of the other things that was interesting about the time period with me

and Chris and the other people at Pebblebrook, we had also started realizing that there were gays outside of the Pebblebrook arena.

And so we started meeting them. They were already at Osbourne and Campbell and South Cobb and the different high schools in that South Cobb area. And we started hanging out. We found a club up on the Marietta Square called Our Place. And it's where the Gone With the Wind museum is now. And they actually were welcoming to punks, new wave kids, and many of us were bisexual. And that was the term. I was gay, but they were bisexual. And there were some others that identified as gay, but most of the guys are bisexual. But we would go there a lot. But as I got older, and when I say older, sixteen was the age I got a car, and Chris had gotten on to -- He was a computer whiz at that time and had gotten a hold of a bulletin board and a dial up. And which I thought was quite cool. And he had found a gay bulletin board and he connected with this huge group of gays in the city of Atlanta. And so unbeknownst to my mother and his mother, we were driving to Atlanta.

And so we started driving to Atlanta at sixteen and they thought we were hanging out at Rocky Horror Picture Show or our place. And we were in some of the toughest parts of Atlanta hanging out because there were no places for gay teenagers to go. And so we would be literally in Piedmont Park at two in the morning where guys are cruising around to pick each other up. And here we are sitting on our car talking, and the other Cobb County students from the other schools had learned about this. And so they started coming down. And I have photos that I have just recently come across some of those moments, where you've got all these high school students who are identifying as gay or lesbian, or at least they're friends of ours, and we're hanging out in these just tough cruise areas of Atlanta because we had no place else to go. And that was a place that we felt some connection to a broader community that we wanted to be part of. So, I'm glad that we've gotten to the point now, at least, where kids can congregate in safer places. Luckily we were never hurt, but it could have turned out really badly.

INTERVIEWER: So, did you ever interact with any of the individuals living in Atlanta or was it really just that you --

DN: We did. Yeah. Chris befriended one guy who was twenty-nine, which we felt was extremely old, but he seemed nice. Again, we were on a computer. We didn't even know this guy. He seems nice. So, we decide that, yeah, he said we could stay the night at his place. I can't remember the name of the apartment complex. Well, yeah, that seems fine. So, we pack our bags and we go to this twenty-nine year old guy's apartment. Thankfully, he was nice. We both slept on sofas in his living room. He took us on the tour of all the gay spots in Atlanta. So, yeah, we interacted.

But again, you know how unsafe it was for us to put so much trust in people who could have not been very nice people. But that's where we learned about Ansley Mall. And at the time that was quite a gay area. And Westminster Avenue, I think was the name of the street, which was another cruise street. We learned about where the bars were, although we couldn't get in immediately. We certainly worked our way in eventually.

So, he kind of opened the door to what the older gay life looked like in Atlanta. And so by the time he had introduced that life to us, we would walk up and down Peachtree Street at night. And you wouldn't even recognize it. But at the time Peachtree Street in Midtown was all three story buildings. It was much lower, no high rises around. And the Cabana Hotel there, which Doris Day owned. And they had a pool in the front. I mean, it was all just quite fun. There was a Krystal right next to the Backstreets Bar. So, we would get our burgers at Krystal, and we would just walk the strip. And it was bar after bar after bar. And it was crowded and we loved it.

And I remember one night I was with another friend. I was with a girlfriend from Pebblebrook. And we came across this bar called Illusions. So, we weasel our way in. And we were just so excited about it. We're sitting there in this bar. And they have a show. So, we're like, oh, this is going to be good. And this person comes out fully dressed, and she starts singing the Eurythmics. And I looked over, and we were both amazed. We're like, Annie Lennox is in a bar in Atlanta and it's not even publicized. How lucky are we? Well, we didn't realize we were in a drag bar. And this was look alike. So, we kind of learned that after a little bit. But we loved Illusions. And they were one of the bars we could get into. And so we would go there and watch the shows. And we weren't drinking. That was a neat thing about it. I mean, we weren't wild to the point like we were drinking. In fact, we didn't know what to order. I mean, we were just in there to enjoy ourselves and to be part of a community.

And there was another bar called Weekends, and that was right across from Illusions. And this was all the Cobb County teenagers. We had all devised a plan and it worked, where one who was enough got in and they would stamp. Well, he would run right back out to the back parking lot and quickly, we all would dab our hands. So, we worked this so we could get in. And this is just amazing. So, we would go into Weekends. And this was the time RuPaul was working there. And I remember it just as vividly as could be. She had this grocery cart. And RuPaul lived right around the corner off of 10th Street. And he put all of his dresses and everything in the shopping cart. And he pushed it on up to Weekends and just kind of park it there. And they had this little box in the corner of the bar that he would perform on.

And so we were just dancing. And there was a balcony above us, and we'd hang over the balcony. And he's got his own little space. And then I remember he started advertising for Starrbooty, was a movie that he was self-promoting in Midtown. And the flyers are all over the neighborhood. And we were just fascinated with the life. And of course not knowing he was going to move to New York and make it big and all that stuff. But it was such a fun time to be young and gay in Atlanta. And I miss those days so badly because from my perspective, it was just a wonderful time.

INTERVIEWER: Just changing gears slightly. Could you talk about your relationship with your sister?

DN: Yes. We were not close. I think it was a tough, tough relationship in that I don't feel like we had a structure in place in the family to really teach us how to interact well with each other. And my parents also weren't really good at parenting at that point. And so my sister, I think, unfortunately got the bulk of maybe abuse and --

Does that mean something when there's a recording light on?

INTERVIEWER: It definitely draws people toward it. Look at the light!

DN: Now am I talking too much so far?

INTERVIEWER: No. No. No. There's no such thing.

DN: This isn't on, is it?

So, the relationship with my sister, because my parents were so young when we were born and she's two years younger than myself, it was difficult growing up. I wasn't a straight A student. I wasn't excelling terrifically in school, but I did well. And I was an easy kid. I didn't really get into trouble or anything. And my sister, I think, went in the opposite direction. She always seemed to find herself in trouble, and my parents didn't react very well to that. And so I have vivid memories of how difficult her life was and some of the things that were said to her. And it was tough seeing all that and reflecting back. And as we grew up, she became more of, if you want to classify, like a headbanger. She started smoking in high school. She did eventually drop out of high school. She had a child at sixteen, and then ended up with four children. And she, today, has an addiction problem. She never finished her schooling.

The day before my prom, I remember Cindy and I were going to the prom together. And for some reason I had taken my parent's car to get last minute things for the prom. And I had this old beat up Camaro. It wasn't anything nice, but it was what I had been able to save up for. And my

sister had taken the keys while I was out at Lenox Mall shopping for last minute stuff with Cindy. And she had stolen my car. And she drove it through a fence, and it was a chain link fence. So, she pulls it back out of the chain, because it goes under the chain-link fence. And the scratches just scratch through the whole car windshield and everything. Both mirrors ripped off. So, she thinks, "Well, I'll just park it back in the driveway. No one will notice." So, I get home and you can see it as you're driving up. I'm like, "What has happened to my car?"

And it was that kind of situation where it just always seemed to be something. And she just never could get above it. And we used to fight horribly and violently. I mean, knives being thrown, just horrible, horrible situation. And I could not wait to get out of the house. And I think that was part of, by eighteen, me just getting out of there. And I'm shocked that I have any relationship with her at all to this day, but we do. I mean, I think once we were able to move out, and I was able to kind of put things into perspective and kind of understand what had occurred in her life and how our paths had turned the way they did and how things that influenced our decisions, I was able to kind of understand her a little bit better and have a relationship with her. And I would say that we're close today. She comes up to visit. I visited with her. But it's tough to actually really have much of a connection on a deep level with any of the family because of the problems that have continued in their lives. I always feel like I'm having to rescue them or help them. And it's been hard with all that, with the addictions and all. I have a closeness, but I keep them at a distance at the same time, if that makes sense.

INTERVIEWER: Going back a little bit to your high school experience, did you ever have any issues with teachers or other authority figures?

DN: The teachers were not supportive, I will say. There was no safe spaces in the school. I came out to my parents on the beach in Panama City. Cried all the way home, my parents did. They were so devastated. It was the longest drive home from Panama City. And immediately they wanted to put me into therapy. And so they contacted, because we didn't have much money -- So they went to the county, the social services agency, and hooked me up with a psychiatrist to change me. And the first thing he said, he said, "Do you want to be gay?" And I said, "Yeah." What kind of question is that? And he said, "Well, then we need to work on your parents." And how enlightened that was at the time that he understood that it wasn't something that I was going to really be able to change and I didn't need to change.

And so we had a few family meetings. And I think it just frustrated my parents more to know that this was something they were going to have to accept. I don't think they were there yet. And so my dad did kick me out of

the house. I went and stayed with my grandmother for a bit, Granny Rose. And then I stayed with an aunt for a bit until he was able to calm down because I mean, he was really, physically upset about it to the point where I didn't feel like I could safely be at the house. And eventually it calmed down enough where I could come back home and continue at school and everything. And I think we got to the point where, okay, it's who you are, but we're not going to accept it. We're never going to accept it.

And I remember coming across an article in a gay newspaper, 'cause at that point I'm going downtown to Atlanta. And I'm getting all the gay rags and everything. And so there was a letter on the back of this newspaper that a mother had written about the suicide of her son. And she was kind of pouring her confession out in this letter. And I remember clipping that out for my parents. And I said, "Is this what you're wanting?" And I think it really shocked them. And after that, I think they pulled back a little bit, and they realized that it was too much for me to handle, the way they were acting.

And so by the time I moved out of the house, I graduated, no problems with my parents. I just needed to be quiet about it. I couldn't be open too much. The rest of the family wasn't to know or anything. And I moved in with -- Gosh, at that point, let's see, I was still in high school. We were going downtown to Atlanta. I was growing tired of going to the cruise spots. And I knew there was more out there because I'd seen there was more. I'd come across a gay organization called Friends Atlanta. And they did volleyball, normal activities. I thought, I could really enjoy this. And so I talked to my friends and they thought I was crazy that I'd want to go spend time with older people in their twenties and thirties. And so I remember them dropping me off. And I walked into this all-men social club, and they're just talking and all that. Of course, I think they were just dumbfounded that a sixteen-year-old or seventeen-year-old at that point came in. And that's where I met Dick Rhodes. He was bartending there. And he was still in his late forties, I guess, at that point. And then Jon was there as well. And I was overwhelmed with how many people were there, but they were all there.

And so I found out about the volleyball. And so I started kind of doing that kind of stuff. And so I'd go to Piedmont Park and play volleyball with them. That's when I actually met Jon. We played volleyball together, not very well. But we met and started dating and I think I had just graduated high school by the time I met Jon that summer. And we moved in as soon as I felt that we were at that point and moved into his place in Smyrna. And my parents were a little surprised because he was closer to their age than mine because there's only sixteen years difference between my mom and myself and there's eleven years difference between me and Jon. So, that raised some eyebrows. But Jon was a caring, compassionate, friendly

guy. And they could tell that he wasn't a threat and he was not a dangerous person. And they accepted that. And so he was my friend at all the family gatherings for a while. But he became part of the family, even years later when Jon and I divorced and everything, they would still invite him to family reunions and I always found that to be funny.

INTERVIEWER: So, you've talked in great detail about your process in coming out.

How old were you when that happened? When you took that trip to Panama City?

DN: Well, there's different levels of coming out. I came out to myself at a very young age, came out to my peers and to my family when I was sixteen and to different people through high school. But the big coming out came, I think -- Was it 1991 or 1989? It was the year that Jon and I had been approached to be part of a newspaper article. We didn't really understand. We knew they were doing a study on what it was like to be gay in Atlanta. And of course, Friends Atlanta was the social group, social men's group. And so they reached out and we're like, that sounds interesting. Of course, we'll do it. And so they interviewed us. And they're like, "Do you mind if we take a few pictures?" I'm like, "Sure. What's wrong with a few pictures and all that stuff. I'm comfortable enough with myself. I'm comfortable if my name shows up in the paper."

Well, that Sunday, we get a phone call. I think we got a phone call in the morning. I don't remember exactly how we discovered, but we discovered quite quickly that we were on the front page in full color with us arm-in-arm like American Gothic almost on the front page of the paper with the headline "Gay in Atlanta" over our heads. And we were getting calls from South Georgia, our friends were down there. "I was at the grocery store and I just saw your face all up and down the newspapers. They were stacked there." So, we knew it was going to be big that day. And that was Pride weekend. And so when we were going to the Pride event, people were approaching us, recognizing us immediately. So, we realized then that we had really come out.

And my family tells me a funny story that one of my aunts, whom I'm quite close with now, they were just aghast that I had done this. And she goes over to my Granny Rose's house and walks into the kitchen and she slams that paper down on the table. And she says, "What do you think about this?" And my Granny Rose looks at her, she says, "I think it was a lovely picture of Jon and David." And that, again, set the tone. And my other grandmother being more gruff and all that, she actually made phone calls to the family. And she said, "I just want you to know, I have no problems with this. And I want you to be nice." She verbally told all of her children to be nice about it. And so that was my full coming -- I don't think you can come out much more than that at that point.

And so since then, I've just been quite open. And what I learned from that experience was that it was worth putting yourself out there, especially in those early days when there weren't very many images of what a gay couple would look like. And they seemed to be quite interested in just the mundane things about our lives. And I think we realize the value to being more public and open. We could educate people about just how normal and ordinary we really are.

INTERVIEWER: Going back to when you came out to your parents, was there any particular impetus or reason for deciding at that time you wanted to tell them?

DN: I think it was just my desire. I had this teacher, a sixth grade teacher, Karen Kleinschmidt. And she came from Ohio. And didn't have very many role models, as I had mentioned, as a kid of someone that really, really took an interest in me for who I was and care for me. And for some reason, she and I clicked in sixth grade. And she was quite young, twentysomething year old teacher, full of energy. And she would pick me up in the summers and bring me to her classroom. I'd help her get set up. And I just idolized her as a teacher. And so having her help was certainly -- I'm sorry, I'm losing my thought. What was the question again?

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely. If there was any particular reason you decided to tell your parents when you did.

DN: So, I think her kind of building that foundation of who I was as a person and giving me that self-worth, that started the building blocks of me kind of taking ownership that I'm okay with who I am and what that looks like. I think she helped in a lot of ways just to help me get through those years that were hard in school too, with bullying, even though she wasn't any longer my teacher or anything like that. People don't realize how much of an impact a single teacher can have on a kid's life. But I kept in touch with her all those years. In fact, I still keep in touch with her today. I spoke with her this week, and she's coming to see me tonight. And she really empowered me and shaped me to be able to come out. And she, of course, didn't know that that was what was happening at the time. But just knowing for who I was, I was worth something and was okay, I think, meant a lot and was able to allow me to do that. Hope that makes sense.

INTERVIEWER: So, in coming out in a very public way, I guess, your final coming out, did you notice any differences in the way you were treated later?

DN: Yes. Jon and I, obviously we lived in Cobb County, and there weren't any organizations in those early, early days in Cobb County, because we would later found Cobb Citizens. But we were getting quite active in the gay community in Atlanta. And we were active at the time. And Act Up.

Act Up was one of the early activist kind of organizations. And you have to realize at this time frame, the gay community is being ravaged by AIDS and Friends Atlanta was no different than any of the other gay organizations that were predominantly men. And people were dying constantly. I mean, you look back on how many friends you were losing that point and it was just numbing. And I think that we were empowered to do more and to be more open and more out. And we were certainly participating in Act Up demonstrations to try to bring attention to that. And that was spilling into our lives here in Cobb County.

And I remember one day we went into a restaurant on [Highway] 41. It wasn't the Hickory House, but it was something along those lines. It was the place we'd always eat it. And I had a T-shirt on with two men kissing, and it said, "Read My Lips." A very radical and in-your-face kind of t-shirt. Today, people wouldn't even blink at it. But at the time, it was quite out there. And I remember us being yelled at in the restaurant. I mean, I don't think they were cussing, but they were just telling us how awful we were and us looking to the management and stunned that we were being verbally yelled at by customers and the management didn't respond. They just sat there quietly. I mean, it was tough.

Bumper stickers. We would drive around Cobb County with a bumper sticker on the car. And at the time, it was a pink triangle. And that was enough to elicit just nastiness by people in cars. So, we quite quickly learned that if we were going to be out and open, that we were to expect people that we don't know to treat us badly. I don't really remember anyone treating us nicely or having good responses about what they were seeing when we were out in Cobb County, unfortunately.

INTERVIEWER: So, did you feel like you were living two lives?

DN: Yes. I think the Atlanta experience is going into the city, working in the organizations there in the political groups and attending the -- That was our safe zone. But I think we were comfortable enough with ourselves, and it was just the kind of personalities, I think, Jon and I had, that even though we knew that it was dangerous and that it was tough, that we couldn't afford to live in Atlanta, we were really kind of here, and this is where we're going to have to live until we could afford anything else. And we were just going to make the best of it.

INTERVIEWER: So, I think you touched on it briefly before, but can you talk about how you became involved with organizations in the gay community?

DN: There weren't a lot of gay organizations back then. Women's groups had their own organizations. The men's groups -- And there were maybe a couple where they would mix and meet. But in 1987, there was a call for a

National March on Washington. And Cathy Woolard, who would later go on to be the head of the city council in Atlanta, she worked at the time at the Inman Park Trolley Barn, I think it was. And so she was the organizing the Atlanta contingency to the March on Washington. And we knew Cathy. And everyone was excited. The energy, the idea that a bunch of gay people were going to get together and march was quite exciting to us. And you have to keep in mind that back then -- We had had a large gathering of people during the Anita Bryant protest, which happened years before I came out.

But since then, the community was kind of quiet here. And I remember in '86, as an example, when the Hardwick decision came out -- Now, that would have been in June of '86, so I would have just graduated from high school. And I was just so incensed that the Supreme Court would uphold the Georgia ban on sodomy, essentially outlawing gays and lesbians that I went down to the Russell -- I forget the name of the building, but it was the federal courthouse building, to protest. And you would think that that would have been a big deal, and it would galvanize our community. And I think there was twenty-five of us at the most. And that was kind of what we expected. I mean, it was just a very complacent, quiet group here.

I remember a pride one year was at the State Capitol and maybe a hundred. I mean, it was such a small number. And you kind of knew everybody, just that small. When I talk, I start forgetting why I started talking about this stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Just how you became involved with organizations.

DN: Yes. So, with the organization -- Now I'm back on track. So, it was small here and the idea of going to Washington and being part of this bigger picture was exciting to all of us. And so we got up there and it was everything we had imagined.

There were hundreds of thousands of gays and lesbians, and I looked, in every size and shape and age. And there were gay bands from other cities that was just opening and energizing. And when we came back, we were all on fire, and that really lit the gay and lesbian community. Shortly thereafter, you had Act Up starting, and after that, of course, Queer Nation. The Human Rights Campaign Fund at the time, it's now the Human Rights Campaign, but at the time it was HRCF, they had their first dinner. I think it was in '88 here in Atlanta.

And the political establishment started coming in, and we had hundreds of people at that black-tie affair. And we were just amazed with ourselves that there was actually a real community of size here, and organizations were popping up and we were getting more and more organized. And from

Friends Atlanta, we stayed with Friends Atlanta, obviously, because that's where all of our friends were. I mean, we had really built a close group out of that organization, but we knew there were enough organizations that we needed some kind of umbrella group to communicate to all of us to each other what we were doing.

And so, then we pulled together and formed MAGLO, Metropolitan Area Gay and Lesbian Organizations, and Jeffrey Layman was the head of MAGLO. And it was a once a month meeting where representatives from every gay and lesbian group would come to the Peachtree Branch Library there on Peachtree Street, and we would go over what we were doing in our groups. I mean, we were organizing like nobody's business, and it was wonderfully empowering. And at that point, you were able to see the other organizations, what they were doing, to get more involved with them and help out, and it was just an exciting, exciting time. And I really do see that moment, that period of after the March on Washington in '87 as the moment when, really, the movement really became something substantial in Atlanta.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see that using that to coordinate political powers actually --

DN: Yes. We were working, I want to say that it was Wyche Fowler's campaign. It was interesting, the political establishment, they weren't quite ready to publicly be supportive of us in many instances, maybe a few council members. I think Mary Davis was a city council person at the time, and she was comfortable having publicly said that she was supportive of our causes. But most of them were quietly supportive and wouldn't be public about it, and I remember there being large tiffs within the community over that. And even today, I think there's still that component where you have some gays and lesbians who are okay with politicians maybe quietly supporting our cause but not being very public about it. And then you had the other side of the community that said, "If they're not willing to stand up with us publicly, then are they really with us?"

And I remember those discussions and different meetings and how difficult it was, especially with some of the protests that we would be doing. Because you had the, at that time, Lambda -- Gosh, I forgot the name of the Democratic group, but at that point, we had established a gay Democratic group that really just supported Democratic candidates and the cause of the Democratic Party. And they were going for that mainstream, let's be a little more structured in how we deal with the politicians. And then you have Queer Nation on the other side and Act Up who were in the streets, and if the politicians weren't towing the line or were working against us in any way or weren't supporting us, they would be protesting. And that really caused some rifts.

INTERVIEWER: So, do you want to talk a little bit about actually founding Cobb Citizens?

DN: Cobb Citizens came out of -- It came out probably primarily from the resolution that the Cobb Commission had passed. Gordon Wysong and Bill Byrne. But before that, I mean, Jon and I, having lived up in Smyrna, I mean, we were already starting to reach out and trying to find people who are identifying as gay or lesbian in Cobb County, because we knew they were here. It was just a matter of trying to find them. And so, we were casually having potlucks here and there and things like that, trying to reach out. We would host events for groups in Atlanta and hoping that other gay and lesbians that were in Cobb County would see it and say, oh gosh, there's one closer to us. Let's go to that potluck.

And so, really, Cobb Citizens really took shape when the resolution, the anti-gay resolution, was passed by the commission. I think at that point, there was a feeling that we had to do something more than a potluck. We had to get organized in Cobb County. It's one thing to be yelled at by a passerby in a car or talked down to negatively in a restaurant, but when the politicians who are supposed to be representing you are publicly telling you that you're not worthy to live in the community, that takes it to a different level. And so, at that point, we formed Cobb Citizens Coalition with some other couples, both lesbian and other gay men, that felt that it was needed.

INTERVIEWER: So, had you known those couples before Cobb Citizens Coalition?.

DN: No. Yeah. It really brought us all together. So, we formed new friendships and allegiances, and in fact, even after we moved out of Cobb County and moved into the city in '92, they were still here in Cobb County working with Cobb Citizens to continue the work that needed to be done here.

INTERVIEWER: So, you talked a little bit about family members who've been an influence on you. Were there other peers or other people that you met who you met?

DN: My teacher, my sixth grade teacher, certainly was a huge influence, that I'd mentioned earlier and her giving me that foundation. And she also, what she did, too, that she didn't realize, was that when she would go travel places, she would bring me back flyers and brochures and I would hang them up in my room. So, I was opening my eyes to what New York was like and all these other cities, and so I think that helped me when it was time to leave Atlanta. It didn't seem so scary. I knew she had done it and she had left to Ohio to come down here and that I could stretch out and move across country on my own and be okay with that.

Jon certainly was a huge influence. I think, when I look back at my life with Jon, I don't know that I would've had the ability to go to school after high school. My idea of life when I was in high school, my goals in life at that point, in all seriousness, was to get a factory job on Fulton Industrial, which where my mother at that point had started working, and to find a trailer someplace. And that was the goals I had set, and that was how high I thought I could reach. And when I met Jon, not only was he my partner, but he really instilled a belief that I could do more, that I could do better than that. And I had already started working out of high school because college was wasn't even in the picture at that time, and he helped push me to give me the idea that I could attend school. And that's how I enrolled here at Kennesaw.

And it wasn't easy. I had not planned for it in high school, so it was definitely a struggle in those early days attending class and working and just trying to do well with my studies but my confidence grew. And I think with all the activism and meeting the different people that I was meeting at a time that that also built to instill an idea that I could do whatever I really wanted to at that point, and that helped. I mean, at that point, you have to realize that we were going to HRC dinners where Coretta Scott King's sitting there beside us and we're talking to her. It had jumped in two years from Pebblebrook High School, I was in a different world, and I was really starting to understand what that world looked like and what my possibilities were.

And we're dancing next to Maynard Jackson, the mayor of Atlanta at a time, in Inman Park Barn where Cathy was working and we were having a -- I think it was a New Year's party. And he stopped in, and I'm dancing with Jon, I'm like, we're dancing next to the mayor here. And so, it was just a collective influence of having those people around me who were mostly older than myself, but they were helping me understand that I could do more than I realized I was capable of.

INTERVIEWER: And so, I think you talked about a little bit, getting started in community activism. Would you like to talk any more about how you got started in that?

DN: I started school here [Kennesaw State], and at that point, it was pretty much, we were just with Friends Atlanta and going to MAGLO meetings as representative. At one point, I think I became vice president of Friends, and so I was literally organizing events and sending out the newsletters. I typed the newsletter. I mean, it was all very old school and go to Kinko's and get it copied and mail it out. No emails or anything like that. So, they gave me the foundation to understand how organizations worked.

And so, then, by the time we came back from March on Washington and we started -- And the convention, the Democratic Convention, we were friends with Dick, Dick became a delegate to the convention. That was all quite exciting for us. And then, we had hosted some Act Up members from New York and they were looking for places to stay in Atlanta, and so Jon and I decided to host Act Up in Smyrna, Georgia. And so, they came and stayed with us and just really listening to them, the things that they were doing in New York at the time. We were really understanding what needed to be done here in Atlanta.

And so, I think that probably Kennesaw wasn't ready for me when I came on campus, and I didn't realize that I was going to really get active here at Kennesaw. But I'm sitting here spending my evenings, taking classes, and again, always mindful that I'm not the only gay person in the room or on the campus. I thought, there's other gays here. I know it. And how am I going to find them? And so, I thought, well, naturally, you got to start an organization. You got to let them know about it. And so, since I was spending so much time here at Kennesaw classes, I thought, well, it makes no sense to not do an organization except for where you're stuck most of the time. And so, we put together, and I thought, well, it's got to be a fun name, and it's got to be something that's going to get people's attention, and all that stuff, so we came up with the name GLUE [Gays and Lesbians United for Equality].

And I remember just putting those flyers up, well -- I started understanding the politics within the school and how to get an organization started, and I can tell you, it was not -- They weren't necessarily negative and mean about it, but they certainly weren't going to be overly helpful either. They were quite straightforward with, this is how you do it. So, we really struggled. I think I started putting flyers up first, and they were hard to keep up. I mean, almost immediately you put one up, and by the time we walk back down the hall after class, they were gone. I mean, it was just so quickly because people just -- they weren't going to have it. But they were up long enough for me to find at least a couple of other people, and that's all I needed. I just needed a couple of other people.

And so, we were able to put the guy -- I literally think, I know there was two of us. It was me, and I cannot remember the female's name. I want to say her name was Jan. And she was really nice. And we thought, well, we can do this, and then Chet came along. There was enough of us that we knew that we had something. So, then we had to get a sponsor, and so that was really tough trying to find a faculty member who would even consider helping us. And we asked around and we searched.

And there were not any openly gay faculty members here on campus, but there were gay members of the faculty, so we approached them, thinking of course they'd say, sure, we'll help you. Well, that was not the case at all. They wanted nothing to do with the organization. They would quietly support it, but they could not jeopardize their position on staff or didn't feel like they could. And so, they wouldn't sponsor us. I went to sociology, and the professor in the sociology department put me in touch with the psychology department. And I want to say, and I can't remember her name, it was Dr. -- It started with a W.

INTERVIEWER: Dr. Wachniak?

DN: Dr. Wachniak. And there was another doctor, as well. There was two females. Dr. Wachniak, she may have been the sociology -- Was she sociology?

INTERVIEWER: She was.

DN: She was the first one we approached. And then, the chair of the department of the psychology -- Well, I think sociology and psychology may have been tied together at that time, and the chair of the department, she said, "You should speak with her." And we reached out to her, and she said yes and we were thrilled. And she was nice. I mean, she was really nice about it, and they were helpful in everything. But it was still hard. I mean, we were still battling, trying just to get the publicity out about the group, and there wasn't much they could do to help with that. They would keep it on their doors. I don't know if the professors still do that now on their doors or not, but always posted things on their doors. But that was still very limiting to how many students we were reaching. I think we started running it at that point in the Etcetera Magazine in Atlanta and at the Southern Voice. And then, eventually, I think we were able to get things into the Sentinel, I think was the name of the newspaper. Is it still here?

INTERVIEWER: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DN: Yeah. So, that helped. But even with the publicity, what we quickly learned was that many people, like Jon and I had done, had separate lives. They may go down to Atlanta and have their weekends with their friends or gay friends and all that, but their lives in Cobb County and at school were quite different. And so, I think it was a big hurdle to get past to get people who felt comfortable merging those two worlds at that time, but that didn't really deter us. And so, even though we were a small, by '91, we were ready to get into the parade downtown. We were quite proud of ourselves.

Because at that time, I don't think a group outside of downtown in DeKalb County, I think Fulton County and DeKalb County were the only counties that really had any gay connections at all. So, the idea that Kennesaw, that a group of students, no doubt, from Kennesaw, Georgia would be in the parade I think was shocking to the other parade participants. And keep in mind now, Kennesaw at the time, and I don't know if they still have it, but they had gotten tons of publicity because they required every homeowner to own a handgun. So, this is the environment in which we are working within. And so, people for both sides, people up here were shocked that we were doing what we were doing and people in the gay community were shocked at what we were doing, but we were doing it nonetheless. And we were having fun doing it. So, we were small, but it was fun.

And I remember the tables, at the beginning of school here each year, they would have a fair with all of the student organizations, and we're like, well, we're a student organization, so we should be able to get -- So, we set our table up, and of course, keep in mind, we're still dealing with the AIDS crisis. That is a huge issue within our community, the gay and lesbian community. So, I don't think they quite knew what to do with this group that not only is gay and lesbian, it says it all over their table, but they have condoms out and they're just very, very much open about what's going on within their community. I think that was tough for a lot of the groups to take. There were lots of complaints, I remember, from some of the other organizations, but they really couldn't keep us out. I mean, because we were following all the rules that were set up by the university, but we knew that we weren't welcomed necessarily by everyone here.

And at that time we had also tried to get Southern Voice on campus, which was the gay and lesbian community paper at the time, and they were really nice. They were, I think, quite taken that we wanted to have the paper all the way up here. And so, it was almost like the Berlin embargo drop, where we were running stacks of papers from downtown to the campus and setting them up in the student center. And they were being thrown away almost as quickly as we were able to fill it up, but we just knew every time we went downtown, we had to grab more papers because we had to at least try to keep it populating. And I remember at one point, and I can't remember where the box was, but it was set on fire. I mean, it was just that nasty. It was either the box or the flyers that were set on fire once, but that was the kind of environment. Certainly, the message was getting across that we were not welcomed here, but it didn't deter us. It didn't stop us at all. And we did make friends though, too.

I mean, at one point I ran for the student government, Student Senate, I think, is what it was called. So, I'm quite proud of myself again to be the first openly gay, which seems so strange to think that that was important, but a member of the Senate. And I really found that there were other

students here that were going to be my ally, and there was a female that worked in the student organizations, like the student center. She managed all the groups. And she was quite friendly and helpful, as well, in getting us through that period. And there was one particular female student, I don't remember her name, but she also really seemed to trumpet our calls and tell the other members of the Senate just how important it was that we have a seat at the table and all that stuff.

We didn't get much accomplished during that time, I don't think, other than the fact that we were just helping to educate people that were here, and we wanted to be here and that we were proud to be here and deserved to be here. But it still took a toll. I think by the time '92 rolled around, I was just completely burnt out. I tried to do too much. And it was too frustrating with the amount that we weren't able to do that I just felt that it was time to leave. That, and also all the threats that we were getting because of the Cobb Citizens Coalition, because by that point, not only were we dealing with this stuff here on campus, but we were also dealing with Jon and the Cobb Citizens and the public role that he was taking as spokesperson for that group and us fighting the county commissioners. And that had upped the ante of violence toward us to the point where it really felt like it was just time that we had to get out of Cobb County, and so we left.

INTERVIEWER: The individuals that you met and became part of GLUE, did they become involved in Atlanta activism at all? Or are those too separate?

DN: No. Again, it was a small group, and remember, Chet -- The main people that were active in GLUE in the earliest, earliest days was Chet, Jan, myself, and anybody else that came, they would come and check us out and all that, but we could never keep anyone else really active. And I think that part of it was just the environment that was taking place here on campus. Chet was a writer, and that was really where his passion was at the time. And so, he didn't really have time or interest, I don't think, in getting involved in the organization downtown. And Jan generally wasn't, I don't feel like, she was an activist herself. That wasn't who she was, at least from my perspective, and so she didn't seem to be active in any of the organizations downtown either. And we kept in touch with Chet for some time, but once we left Kennesaw, I don't think I really ever saw Jan again.

INTERVIEWER: And can you talk a little bit more about what it was like to be a gay student on campus at the time?

DN: It was tough. I mean, it was isolating. The environment here at the time was very different than it is now anyway. I mean, it was a commuter college. Most students at that time would come here, get out of their car, after you fought forever for a parking space -- I don't know if that's

changed or not, and so you're just, I think, beaten down by the time you found a parking space. And you would walk all the way to class, and you attended your class and then you went home and that was -- So, I think probably a lot of the organizations suffered from involvement anyway, because of the way the campus life was set up here. We just had the extra level that it was a gay group and it was just so out of the mainstream for the time.

So, student life, there wasn't much of it, really, other than going to the student center to maybe eat some cold pizza -- I think Pizza Hut was here at the time, and they had some -- it was almost like a cafeteria, like a lunch lady kind of place. It was a very different environment than it is now because it wasn't a place people really stayed in, and I don't even know that, for the most part, most students even formed any kind of relationships with their peers here on campus, other than the ones who were really dedicated in the other student groups. So, I think it was, as far as being a gay person, I can understand why it was so separate because it was so separate for most students anyway. You had your school life and your work life, because most of us were working when we weren't going to school at that time. And of course, today, that's a totally different picture here on campus.

INTERVIEWER: So, did you continue college after you left college Kennesaw State?

DN: I did. So, we moved out of Cobb County, and I'll just talk a little bit about -- First of all, before we touch on that, with the Cobb Citizens Coalition, when I talk about the threats that we were receiving, I'm not talking about just people screaming at us in a restaurant. At that point, it had ramped up to phone calls in the night telling us that we were going to be killed. We had the FBI or the police, I can't remember which one it was, working with us just to monitor, make sure that we were staying safe because I remember someone coming out because we thought a bomb had been planted in our car and they were checking our car. I mean, it was just such a level of stress that Jon had started carrying a gun, which I was very much against guns, but the level of concern over our safety had ramped up to the point where it was really, really hard to stay in Cobb County at that point.

And I think, also, the fear of our safety, but emotionally, it was hard. It was just hard to live in an environment where you feel like you're hated so much. And so, we did find a condo downtown that we could afford, and we left. So, when we did that, I ended up attending Georgia State. I applied to school at Georgia State, and by that time, I had finished all my core classes up anyway here at Kennesaw. And I entered their School of Education. They had a good program at the time, and so I was happy to do that. And campus life there was different than here, and I really didn't get

involved in campus life on campus at Georgia State. And I think part of that was because of the burnout that I had experienced in dealing with the campus politics here.

But what I did discover was the fraternity, and so at the time, there was a fledgling group of guys who wanted to start a gay fraternity, but there was no school, really, that any -- There was no large enough gay population at any of the schools to really warrant a full-scale fraternity, and so these guys put the call out and a group of us all got together. And we created a gay fraternity, Delta Lambda Phi, that actually serviced all of the metro area colleges. And it was fun. I mean, I never experienced Greek life, and I don't even think it was really anything compared to what Greek life was like in the other frat houses. But we had two of the guys were a couple, and they had a beat up old apartment on Piedmont that acted like our frat house.

And the similarities, it was an all gay men's fraternity, which was very different, but there was lots of drinking going on. And I wasn't a drinker. Again, when you think back to what I was talking about high school, I didn't smoke, didn't drink. I was just quite easy and well-behaved, I guess, in that regard. And so, I remember sitting on the sofa in their house and watching all these antics and the guys and drinking and talking to a couple of the other brothers there sitting on the sofa with me, and we're watching one of the brothers tumble down the stairs and he didn't spill his vodka. And it was a vodka fraternity. I mean, there was tons of vodka. And that was the kind of antics. And there was tons of drag. I don't know what in the world was going on with the drag. But no, a lot of the brothers, I mean, it was an absolute blast.

And I remember like Christmas parties we would have, which is not politically correct today, but we had a redneck Christmas, and we all dressed up in these -- the tackiest redneck clothes you could possibly wear. And I had found a plastic Christmas tree skirt, and I put tinsel all around it and I had built --

It was the tackiest drag you'd ever seen. Christmas balls on the ears and we had the bathtub full of ice and all of our booze was in the bathtub. I think we had string cheese. And we had found a cedar tree. We cut a cedar tree down from a yard and that was our Christmas tree; it was decorated. It was just fun.

So, finally, I was connecting with guys my age, that were also in school, be it not the same school. Some of them were Georgia State students, but not all of them. I was kind of getting a first taste of being with just guys in a social setting and just having fun. It was just a wonderful time and it was a great group.

I ended up eventually becoming vice president of the fraternity and it lasted, probably, I would say, I graduated from Georgia State in '95; I would say it lasted maybe two more years after my class left and, like many organizations, it just kind of faded out. The national fraternity is still there, but -- That produced lifelong friendships. I'm still in touch with many of those guys today. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

INTERVIEWER: So you mentioned earlier that at one point you also became vice president for Friends Atlanta. Is that a group that would have been generally older and you were one of the younger ones?

DN: Yes, I was the youngest member by a far margin. I would say most of the men in Friends Atlanta were thirties, maybe late twenties, thirties, and forties; thirties and forties would be the main demographic and then the seventeen year old. But they took care. I mean, they were really nice guys. I think people can come up with all sorts of images of what—them trying to come onto me, but it wasn't that way at all.

I mean, they really kind of took me under their wing and they were just nice. And that produced a lot of great friendships as well. We hosted a jamboree, a camping trip up in the North Carolina mountains, and rented a camp up there. And that was a big controversy when we rented that camp because they didn't want a gay group to rent a camp.

And we finally found a camp that would rent to us. I think it was an Episcopalian camp. And we did an all call to men's groups all around the country and held this huge camping weekend up there. And we'd go whitewater rafting and dinners out; and because the gay community wasn't public, I mean, just the fact that we were all gathering in these sizes at that point was, it was exciting. It was fun. It was a really neat experience.

INTERVIEWER: And going back a little bit to your time in Cobb County, two questions, first being, can you tell us a little bit about what role you played in the Cobb's Citizens Coalition?

DN: I think that my focus more was on the campus group here at the time, because those were happening kind of close together and I was still working and going to school. So there was a lot on my plate at that time. I think the way Jon and I worked at that point was -- Certainly we were helping each other. He would come to public, like when we would march in the pride parade and things like that. He would come and support the student group in any way he could. And he helped me certainly with flyers and things of that sort. And if we were having gatherings at the house and all.

And I was kind of acting in the same role with Citizens Coalition. I was helping in any way I could, but he was really more the front man and that point, I was still pretty shy about talking to people. I hadn't really come out of my shell yet. So the idea of talking to the press, that was all still very new to me. And he seemed to be more at ease at that time to do that.

INTERVIEWER: And finally, can you talk a little bit about when you took care of Cody?

DN: That's a tough story. I talked about my sister earlier and her battles with addiction. And so when Cody was born, he was the third child that she had and I knew she had an addiction problem. And I had just graduated from Georgia State and I had just gotten my first teaching job. I was teaching first grade. I had taken a job in January because I graduated in December. Cody was born in December.

And I had taken my job. And two weeks after he was born, I get a call. I don't remember if it was my sister who called or if it was a social worker, but essentially, Cody was not going to be allowed to live with my sister because he had been born cocaine positive, and asked if I would be willing to take him.

And I get myself into this -- I just said yes, I guess, there's no way around. I just said yes. And keep in mind, I hadn't even spoken to Jon about this. And I have just taken a two-week-old baby into our home. And I guess it was because I knew he wouldn't care, I guess, or he would be supportive.

And it was love at first sight with Cody. He came to me and I was quite scared to raise a two-week-old and I had no daycare. I was just starting a new job and life was chaotic trying to get settled in the city and find my way there. And there were just lots of changes at that time. And here I have the responsibility of a two-week-old and I think I did just a great job. And Jon did as well.

We showered him, and so did everyone else, all of our friends, with everything that he needed; and it was just wonderful. It didn't hurt that I had just graduated with a degree in early childhood education. And so I kind of knew what I was getting into and I worked through the classroom day and couldn't wait to get home to him.

And I found a sitter nearby, a lady that was quite a Christian lady. And I was so worried about what she was going to say about two men raising this baby. And she was just wonderful about it. And I remember the first Father's Day and her making a card from him, from Cody. Of course, he was only a few months old at that point.

And I did everything a proud parent would be, everything you'd ever do with a kid and we had tons of photos and great clothes. We'd take him to all sorts of different things, and trips to see Santa. Just everything a parent does. And then at the same time, I'm trying to manage my relationship with my sister. I've just taken her child and that wasn't easy. And so it caused a lot of friction, especially with her husband who felt that he should not be punished by the deeds of my sister.

And so when the time came, I would attend the court dates and make the reports about how things are going, and that I had done all that they were requiring as far as doctor's visits and all the things you do with a child. And, unfortunately, things weren't progressing on my sister's side. She wasn't doing what she was supposed to be doing, but the courts, at that point, they just want to, I think, to close the case.

And so, I had to fight. I hired an attorney because I did not want to give Cody up, or leave then the only house he'd ever lived in. And he was walking at that point. I mean, it was just the three of us. And we had to go before the judge in Cobb County, because she was living in Cobb County at the time. And I had prepared the case, and I pointed out all the issues. Here are the things that you required of my sister, and she hasn't met any of these requirements. And so he should not be going back to her and they couldn't get past the point, the fact that two guys were raising this kid. And so they said, no, he's going back with her.

And they took him away from me, and I kept all those papers. I mean, I was just so hurt and so angry over losing him. And that really, I think, started the unraveling of my relationship. By '98, the relationship had disintegrated and I couldn't live in Atlanta anymore. I could not be that close and seeing him live in the environment that he was now living in; and going over there and him -- I still have that bond where he just wants to be with me and everything, but he can't be with me and it became too painful to be here.

And so that's why I left to move to Chicago. And kept in touch with him, as I did with the rest of the family. My sister and I surprisingly were able to make up in each of these instances where we were having these issues. I'm sorry. And so I kept in touch all the years and would go back and visit. And Jon would bring Cody up to visit me in Chicago. And then when Cody was old enough, he'd fly solo. And I kept a very strong connection with him.

And then just recently, he became a senior in high school and I get a call that he needs me again. And so I fly down on a moment's notice and to go to court. And this time it's in Douglasville and he's old enough; he's seventeen at this point. And they ask him, "What do you want to do?" And

he said, "I want to go live with my uncle." And so they granted me guardianship, and I thought, my goodness. Bookends. I'm there at the beginning of his life. And now as he leaves childhood and becomes an adult, I'm back with him.

So I took him up to Chicago and he enrolled in high school there, and it was tough. I still get angry because I think about all those lost years. And if he had been with me that whole time, how different his life would be, because what I realized was that I had an impact in his life, but I didn't have enough of an impact. And to expect him to be able to come into my household, which now has two kids already, and we have a way of doing things, that's very different from the life that he grew up in. And we have rules that he didn't have to follow. And it was too stifling. It was too hard for him. And he just wanted to come back to something that was comfortable and was familiar.

And so he finished out the school year. And by the time he finished with us, he, and this was, again, a kid who had no plans on going to college. And by the time he graduated from OPRF in our neighborhood, we had gotten him to the point where he was able to apply to Michigan State, which he was accepted to; to Kennesaw, which he was accepted to; to Arizona State, which we were accepted to; and to UIC, which gave him a scholarship.

And I had a conversation. I say, "Cody, you got a scholarship to UIC here in Chicago," but again, it was just too much and he turned it down and he came back here. So I'm glad that I did what I did, but I think the regret was not being able, because of outside circumstances, being able to really control that any more than I could.

INTERVIEWER: Going back to a bit of a broader question, can you talk a little bit about your perception of the gay community in Cobb County versus Atlanta, especially later as you moved into Atlanta and really saw the differences.

DN: When we left Cobb County, we had such negative feelings about the county and what had happened, that we really didn't want anything to do with Cobb County after we left. So we got fully involved in the Atlanta community and worked on political campaigns and with social groups and with Pride and immersed ourselves there in that large vibrant community.

And we were actually kind of amazed when we would hear that anything was happening in Cobb County, I think later on, there was a gay bar that opened on Franklin Road. And so we were like, what? Gay bar in the Cobb County? That's odd. But we would never visit it. I mean, it was too difficult to come back to Cobb County and we just avoided it at all costs.

So we knew things were happening. We kept in touch with Lynn and with Cherry Spencer-Stark of the Theater in the Square, and her husband and all the people who were active with us during that hard time fighting the County Commission. But we never really came out to visit them.

I mean, there was definitely a emotional wall that we put up at [Interstate] 285 and it wasn't really until I was well into adulthood and had moved to Chicago even before I could bring myself to come back and kind of retrace the houses I had lived in as a child and revisit my high school and kind of come to terms with Cobb County and with what had happened here.

And I think that, as an adult, I was able to look back and understand that while there was a lot of pain, there was also a lot of joy in different ways and that you kind of have to take the pain and the joy and that all of that collectively kind of makes you the person that you are.

And so I look at Cobb County differently now with that kind of grown up perspective and can kind of accept, and I'm amazed; I'm just amazed at how large the county has grown and how diverse it has become. And how they're tackling that diversity. I think that's a real struggle for Cobb County right now, and how to make that work with all these different populations together. And the fact that there is a gay community in Cobb County now; I think that is great, too.

And I can't even tell you how amazed I am with Kennesaw State, having come back here last year and to see how large the school has become, how organized and that it's a full-fledged university now and the size it is, but then you look at the gay and lesbian component and what they've been able to build here with the faculty and with the students they have today, and I'm just amazed. I mean, absolutely floored, I became so emotional after visiting last time. And even, I think, this week being back on campus and to think where we were and where it is now is just phenomenal.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about the movement or the change in the Pride celebration from the very small celebration in the beginning to how –

DN: Yes. I can talk a little bit about that. I talked about how the community was in Atlanta and it wasn't a political community. And by that point, I'm looking at New York and Chicago and San Francisco, and they're getting these huge parades. At this point by '93, we'd gone to two March on Washingtons, and thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, and you come back to Atlanta and you've got five hundred people.

And yeah, I'm thinking that there's got to be something that can be done about this. And at the time with Pride here, it was a close group. It was a

group of men. And I would affectionately just say they were a bunch of bodybuilder guys. There was like a group of bodybuilders. They were all just built to the hilt and they were friends with each other for the most part, from what it seemed. And they organized Pride. That was their thing.

And I think they did it because at the time nobody else really wanted to. But they got into their comfortable rut and so they did the same way every year and it wasn't growing. It wasn't expanding. And I used to just get so frustrated. I don't know what it is about me looking at things and thinking, okay, this is where it is, but this is where it can be, and wanting to take it there.

And they had no interest in me helping them out because they've got it all down. They had their group of friends. And so I wasn't going to have that. I was never going to take that as an answer. And I was friends with Jack Pelham at the time. And Dale Biggers was the organizer of the parade group at that time. And Dale and I were friendly with each other. He didn't see me as anything other than just like a chihuahua barking and aggravating them.

And so I was just so mad and I was talking to Jack Pelham, who's the editor of Etcetera magazine, which is the bar rag is what, affectionately, I call it. And I said, "There's got to be something that we can do about this." And so I said, "Okay, we're just going to announce a meeting." And so I ran a Pride meeting in Etcetera magazine, and I think Dale and them were just shocked, like, what is it they're doing with a Pride meeting because we're Pride and there's a meeting, and so -- I remember hosting that meeting with Jack and, and Dale and them walking in, and it was full of people. I mean, people really wanted to change. And so, just having that meeting, I think, was the impetus for them to realize that there were people in the community that wanted more, and it was not just me and it wasn't just Jack or anyone -- But it was a room full of people. And then we had ideas and we're willing to do the work.

And that was really the only involvement. I mean, I didn't really go any further with it than that because at that point, I didn't feel like I needed to. I had a room full of people and I had just gotten them together to talk. And then that next year, I mean, it wasn't huge -- I think they had five thousand or eight thousand, but it was a huge jump from what we had before, and then each year, it just built.

And the group that formed out of that meeting really brought a level of professionalism to the organization and built it to what I had knew it always could be. So I was very, very excited about that. And then loved Pride after that.

INTERVIEWER: And you said you believe that was '93?

DN: It might have been '92 that that happened, because I'm trying to think back, but it would've been around that time period. And if you look at the time, you'll see the time when Pride jumped from a few hundred people, and then it jumps to a lot. And it was during that year where we held that meeting and kind of pulled it away from Dale's group and it became its own organization.

And I'll tell you the story about this. I did the same thing in Chicago. When I got to Chicago, the same kind of thing was happening there. And almost to the letter, I mean; a group of people that had always done Pride, was running Pride. And I thought another -- Because at this point, and I had seen Atlanta's and I thought, oh, well, Chicago's not doing it right. They may have the numbers, but there's so much they could be doing, like cabaret at night. And I thought that there could be so much more and they had no interest in me at all either.

And so what did I do? I put a little thing in the paper and let's have a Pride meeting. And it went in the opposite direction. I did not have the support of the community. I did not have any people show up to the meetings. There were people that would show up and give their ideas, but there wasn't the same level of energy. It was a different community.

And I really got drug through the press in Chicago over that. And I kind of learned early on that every community is different and there's a different way you do things in different communities; and I learned a lot from that experience. Our parades are huge, but they're different up there in Chicago than they are here.

INTERVIEWER: And can you also talk about your involvement with the Pride of Peachtree?

DN: Coming back from the March on Washington, the first one and the second one, there was a gay and lesbian band movement occurring in the country at that time. And most of the major cities at that point had gay and lesbian marching bands. And at Pebblebrook, when we talked about being a performing arts school, I was in the band.

I mean, that's really about the level of talent that I had and ran drum line. I was part of the drum line and it was fun. Oh, yeah, I just loved playing drums. And I loved watching the Marching Abominables. I don't know if you know of them, but they're out of Inman Park. And there was a bunch of adults that would march around at different parades here in Atlanta. And the crowds always enjoyed them.

And I knew that you had this gay band movement occurring in other cities. And I thought, well then, we have to have something here in Atlanta, because the other cities have it and there's enough adults, obviously, that seemed to like band still. And so again, going in and looking for the catchy name and all that stuff, like I had done with GLUE, I'm thinking, okay, what can I call this? And so I came up with Pride of Peachtree because Peachtree being a main street and where the parade goes. And primarily we would be for -- We were marching for their parade each year. And so I ran my little ads for people who wanted to get your instruments out of the closet, I think was the way we would run the ads. Yeah. That was the tagline.

And it was actually a good group of people that came out and we sounded horrible. I mean, it was so bad, but it was fun. And we would practice at the library's meeting space; they had a separate meeting space, completely removed the library so we could practice. And then from there, I think we moved over to Inman Park, from what I remember. We practiced there.

It was hard running a band because I didn't pursue music as my degree and I couldn't conduct. So I had no skill set for this. I've started this organization that I can't really run, so I was really dependent on other people. And so I found someone who had the talents to be a conductor and director, and he did that and we enjoyed it. We would do bar raids, which was really fun.

We would talk to the bar ahead of time so they knew we were coming; the patrons didn't. And we all had our little Pride of Peachtree shirts on, and we had our instruments and we would start marching into the bar, playing music. And they would, of course, part, and we called them bar raids. They were bar raids. And that's how we would get the name out and we'd collect money—donations. And we would hit bars all over the city doing bar raids.

And then there was a fundraiser one year, while we were still active with the band in DeKalb County. Again, AIDS is still an issue in the community at that time. And they were raising money, I think for AID Atlanta at the time, and it was a drag queen basketball game. And why we don't do these things today, I don't know.

And so you had these guys playing basketball in full drag in this high school gymnasium in DeKalb County somewhere. And we did the halftime show. And so, we play up in the stands to the game and then we get down and we had choreographed this cute little -- and it was absolutely just so much fun. We had flags, we had guys twirling rifles in the band.

And tragically, the conductor was in a car wreck sometime after that and never recovered. I mean, he went into a coma, I think it was; and then passed away. And there was no one else to run the band. I mean, we did not have anyone else that could act as our conductor. And we tried finding someone and it just didn't work. And so we fell apart after that. And that was the end of Pride of Peachtree.

But during that time, we had attended national conferences. We had performed on a cruise ship with the other gay bands across America. We had done all sorts of just fun things. I mean, for the moment that it existed, it was a lot of fun. And then years later, another band did come onto the front because clearly Atlanta needs a gay band. And I think they've been really successful.

INTERVIEWER: What years was Pride of Peachtree?

DN: I would have to look back in the papers. It would have been the early '90s as well, because by the time I had really gotten full-fledged into the fraternity, the band had already fallen apart. And I was involved in the fraternity by '94, '95, so it would have been before that.