KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID NEUBECKER

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

INTERVIEWER: It is October 24th, 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 museum's archives and rare books oral history project. So David, can you talk about your move from Georgia?

DN: In 1998, I was in Atlanta, still living with John. John and I, our relationship had started to change and evolve by that point. So we were still living together, but we were living more as roommates at that point. He had started dating someone that we both knew, which I was completely comfortable with, and I had started getting used to the idea of for the first time as an adult being single. I had just gone through a really tough battle with losing my nephew through the court system and it was very painful to be here in Atlanta and not have him as part of my family living with me. At that point I thought it was just a good chance to make a move. I had been visiting. I had a friend, a close friend, Dan Zanella who lived here in Cobb County and he had been transferred to Chicago some years earlier.

So I would travel up there. And the first time I went to Chicago, it was a strange situation where you're driving. You come to the airport. And I was excited to see him and we're driving down the expressway and the skyline was like the Wizard of Oz. I fell in love with the city the minute I saw that skyline. That's all I really talked about the next few years was plotting that move to Chicago. John had no interest in moving to Chicago. He had lived in Indiana and just hated the cold. So as a teacher, since I was teaching at this point, I started spending my summers up there. So I would go up to Chicago and I would rent. I always tried to find a friend of a friend of a friend to couch surf, I would call it, just rent a couch for the summer.

And they were never nice places. I remember one summer, there was a guy, a friend of a friend and I didn't know him. He offered me his couch for the summer, which I don't know who does that kind of stuff even in these small studio or one bedroom places. And he had a one bedroom place and it was right up against the L tracks. In Chicago our trains are elevated. So the train literally is driving by your window every few minutes. And I thought, well, that sounds interesting and it's cheap. So I'm like, yeah, I'll do that. So I spent this summer, and this was the most

memorable of all those summers. I'd spend my days at different museums doing research and preparing for my school year, upcoming school year and the lessons that I'd be teaching the students and living in this one bedroom with a stranger sleeping in the bedroom and me sleeping on the sofa and every few minutes, all the walls shaking and the pictures on the walls shaking.

I couldn't hear the TV for a few minutes. It was really an interesting experience, but I still loved it. Even though it was a crazy and so different from how I was living here in Atlanta, it felt right. So at that point, I packed everything up. I had a little Volkswagen Cabrio convertible at the time and talked to John and I'd been recruited by a company out of Kansas City. They -- had worked my way through college with Corning Labs. That's how I paid to attend here at Kennesaw. One of my coworkers had been recruited by this startup out of Kansas City called Cerner. Cerner was on the cutting edge of hospital information systems and putting all the medical records online and that being seamless. They were looking for people who understood laboratory systems and how things work in labs, hospital labs and so forth, and also could deal with people.

She had told them about me and they really wanted me to join the company. And I said, "Well, I'll only join the company if you'll let me live in Chicago." And they said, "Well, okay, we'll let you live in Chicago, but you realize that you have to travel every week." So for the first year I lived in Chicago on the weekends and Sunday night through Thursday night I was in a different city living. So I got a chance to live all over the country for a while. My first assignment through Cerner was in Fargo. I was at Lenox Mall and it was Christmas. I think it was either the day after sale or it was Christmas Eve and I was getting last minute pieces. I knew that an assignment was going to be coming up and I get the phone call.

They said, "Well, we have your assignment. We found the hospital that you're going to be working at." And I said, "Well, where is it? I'm very excited about this." And they said, "Fargo." And I'm like, "Oh." I said, "Really, where is it going to be?" They said, "No, really, it's Fargo." So I thought, well, I'm at Lenox. Let me see what I can find. So they didn't have anything that I, in my mind, I would be wearing in Fargo for a winter. And so I think I am going to Burlington or something. So I showed up in Fargo in stereotypical Fargo winter clothes, which was the huge kind of Russian-esque hat and the big fur pelt collared coat and everything. I just looked like a fool. They thought I was making fun of them. And after we got past that, it was really a great experience.

I can say that I've lived through a Fargo winter now. Then I lived in Hays, Kansas for a while, which is in the middle of the prairie and Kansas City, of course, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. So I really got to see some

interesting places around the country, but I got tired of traveling. That was tough being on the road and I didn't feel like I could really connect with people in Chicago. So I found another company that was a Dean Foods, and they were impressed with my resume and they asked if I'd be interested in joining there. I did and then they put me on the road again. So now I'm back on the road and I'm traveling to all the dairies around the country. They're not in much larger places than I was in before, but I got to see a whole new set of small towns in the country, and stayed with them for a couple of years, and really stayed with Dean Foods until 2004.

Around 2004 is when I got a call from Lee one day at work. He was my partner who I had met in 2000. And he said, "Hey, the Mayor of San Francisco is letting gays and lesbians get married." He said, "Do you want to go to San Francisco and get married?" So I thought, well, how romantic is that? So of course, we flew out to San Francisco. We can talk about that in a moment, but when I came back to Dean Foods with my marriage certificate and I planted it down in human resources and said, "I'd like to sign Lee up for spousal benefits," they didn't seem to agree on that happening. That caused a bit of a controversy and I ended up having to fight that. We came to an agreement, a separation agreement that required me to stay silent on the subject because I had produced a lot of media coverage that they didn't want and there were protests in Dallas, which was where the corporate headquarters was.

Then we had our own protest in Chicago against Dean Foods not allowing us to have spousal benefits. So then when my year of forced silence was about to end, they had made the public announcement they were going to be extending spousal benefits to all their employees. So in the end I felt that everything worked out fine and it allowed me to move on and prepare for my new life and starting a family.

INTERVIEWER: So you talked about, you taught. What grades did you teach?

DN: When I graduated from Georgia State, the first position that I took, and I graduated in December, which is a tough time for teacher to get a role, but as a male in early childhood, which is the elementary grades, and also I had graduated top of my class. We didn't really have class rankings but based on my GPA and six consecutive quarters of Dean's List, I figured out where I fell. So it was easy for me to find a position. I was hired immediately in the middle of the year with a school called Humphreys Elementary, which is on the South side of Atlanta. And the teacher had kind of, I guess, for lack of better words, had abandoned her role there. So the children had just had subs for quite a long time, I guess, before I arrived.

It was a tough position coming into a classroom where the children really did not have any set schedule or structure in the classroom and they had challenges at home as well. I think it was a tough, tough role for a new teacher to find themselves in, but I made the best of it and learned as much as I could from that role, but I also quickly realized that I couldn't stay there and be happy as a teacher. There was just too many challenges for someone fresh out of college. So I started looking around at my options and there was another school that had a position opened up in Buckhead, Sarah Smith. It's behind Phipps Plaza.

I later found out that they said they had like 150 resumes, applicants or something, some crazy number for this one position, but it was a very, very well-regarded school. It just clicked. The interview went wonderfully and the principal offered me a position there. I absolutely loved that school. The environment was just perfect. I was able to be somewhat out at work and I loved the position there as a teacher and probably had I stayed in Atlanta I would've stayed as Sarah Smith for some time just because it was so comfortable, but like I said, I really needed to get out and move on.

INTERVIEWER: So can you talk about your relationship with Lee, your current partner?

DN: Yeah. So Lee and I were both happy single men in Chicago. He had just left Boston and moved to Chicago, and of course I had moved up to Chicago from Atlanta and it was just by chance that we met each other. I had been out with some friends and we had had a dinner party and one of them was a bartender at a leather bar in town. So he said, "Why don't you guys all meet back at the bar later on and hang out with me while I work?" And I thought that sounds like fun, but I had some downtime before, before things would start getting going at the bar. So there was a little neighborhood bar called Big Chicks that was across the street from his condo. And I thought, well, I'll just go over there and hang out. I'm not much of a drinker so when I go to a bar it's usually just Coke or things like that and I just people watch.

So I get to Big Chicks and it's just packed as could be. And I look across the bar and there's this really tall, later I found out six foot six, blonde guy that looks like Prince William. I think my jaw just hit the floor. So being a very shy person, of course there was no way I was going to approach him. So I studied him from afar and all that and thought, well, maybe I can make eye contact with them or something. That wasn't working. There was like two hundred people there, and he gets up and leaves. I'm beating myself up in my mind and I walk over and I just sit down in his stool and sulk. And all of a sudden, I hear someone say, "I think you stole my stool." I look up and it's him. I said, "I'm sorry." So we started talking and it was just great.

So then he says, "I want to go to another bar," because he had just happened to find a parking space. He was driving by the bar and he just happened to find a parking space and pulled off just to check it out because he had never been there before. He's like, "I wasn't going to stay here. Do you want to go with me and we'll go to another place?" So I said, "Sure. Yeah," because I thought this is the guy that I wanted to meet and here he is and he's talking to me. So I get into his car and I think we got out of the parking lot and he's like, "Let's just skip the bars." So I'm like, "I'm game for that."

So we went back to my place and the next morning, we joke about this now because he said, "Well, let's go out for brunch." So we go to brunch and I'm looking across and I'm still processing what's happening. This is not something that I do a lot. And then, but then I'm like, what is his name? I didn't even know this guy's name and I thought, well, how am I going to find out his name without looking crazy? And there was no way at that point. So finally I just said, "What is your name?" Of course, he started cracking up and told me. We learned that we both loved Frank Sinatra music and politics. There were just so many connections that came out of that brunch that we started dating.

But because we were both happily single, we didn't want to go too fast. So we would only see each other x number of times a week. We had a very strict because we didn't want to push things. So after about a year, we decided that we would move in together and we did that and then we lived in my place. By then I had rehabbed at condo on Lake Shore Drive and he moved in with me in this tiny one bedroom overlooking Lake Michigan. That wasn't enough room for me and a six-foot-six guy. So then we found a three bedroom that overlooked the Holstead Street, which is across the street from Sidetracks. We were in the thick of gay culture in Chicago. And it was fun. We had a great time in those early years in Chicago, but we both wanted to start a family. So slowly we plotted to settle down and start that new journey together.

INTERVIEWER: So how long had you been in Chicago when that happened?

DN: I hadn't been there for very long because I was traveling. So I really, by the time I met Lee, I had started at Deans a month or so before that. And before that I was only there on the weekends. So I would say that I really felt like I was full-time in Chicago just for a month or two, and the same with him. So it was just all by chance that we connected the way we did. And the fact that we're still together is just amazing and great.

INTERVIEWER: So I'm going to ask you a difficult question. Talk about your children.

DN: Oh, that's so open-ended. So we started looking at different ways. I guess I have to take a step back before we start talking about the children. I have to talk about my in-laws first because I come from a family with a sister, of course, and she's had four kids. So my parents, they're fine with grandkids. They've had them already, but Lee was an only child and he came out to them and it was tough because they processed that differently than my parents did because they also mourned the loss of having grandchildren. That was tough for them. But once they got past all of that, they became full-fledged supporters of Lee and the gay rights movement. So they ended up founding a chapter of PFLAG [Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] in their hometown in Michigan.

And when I first met them, he finally, I think we were only maybe two weeks into dating when he said, "I have to go out to my parents. Do you want a ride?" So I knew I had hooked him at that point if he was taking me to Michigan to see his parents. I was a little nervous about it though, but I get there and he had kind of warned me about his parents. So I thought, well, what am I in for? I get there and his dad's Cadillac, because they're outside of Detroit so you have to drive American cars, the tag was G-A-Y-S-O-N, gay son. That was his Michigan tag for his car. And he could not have been a prouder father. He took every opportunity to talk about the plight of gays and lesbians and how unfair our lives were.

So I was just stunned at what I had stumbled into and they were just wonderful. We've just hit it off so well. So they would take us places and get us to do things in Michigan, HRC [Human Rights Campaign] dinners there and all the gay stuff they were involved in and they required us to participate. And Rosie O'Donnell was doing cruises then. She was in a relationship with a lady named Kelly and Kelly had started a cruise business, a travel business aimed at LGBT families and Mike and Jan, my in-laws, had started going on these cruises for gay families. There's tons of families with kids. They would take over whole cruise ships. It's thousands of people and it was magical for them and they would come back from a cruise and they would just talk and talk and talk about their experiences.

So finally they talked us into going on one. So we did. We just fell in love with the whole idea. We both had wanted kids. That was one of the things that attracted us to each other too, but to be surrounded by LGBT families and all sorts of different families, families who had adopted, who had gone through the foster system, who had become blended families and who had gone through surrogacy. So then we started thinking, well, how are we going to start our family? That took probably, I would say a year of research on whether we were going to go the international route. We had a lot of different choices and we pretty much decided at that point that we were going to go through Guatemala because we had friends who had done that and we met on the ship.

And the doors of different countries were closing quickly and Guatemala was still an option, but that door closed right before we were ready. As we were getting ready to start the process the door was closing, and we just didn't want to take the risk of trying to start a family and then our hearts being broken by not getting the child that we wanted. So my mother had been a foster child and so I was familiar with the pain that she had experienced as a foster child. She told me just sad, sad stories about Christmases and the loss of true stability in a family. So I thought, let's explore that option. So we started looking around and we came in touch with agency in Oak Park, Illinois called Hephzibah. There was a director there over family services named DaVita Williams.

She and I just hit off really well. She was a lesbian and she really helped us through that process of becoming a foster family and what to expect with children who've gone through the system and all the things that they've faced and how to handle that and to make them feel safe again. So we had to take classes to get licensed and we took all of our classes. They interviewed us and said, what type of child would you ideally like? So we were thinking, okay, we want a baby and preferably Caucasian because we felt like they're already coming to a two dad family, which is one thing that's going to be very different, and do we want now to mix ethnicities in there as well? Is that going to be another thing that they're going to have to deal with? So we were trying to look at what's going to be easiest for the child. So we had figured baby, Caucasian, that's going to be easy. We'll do just one. We'll be fine.

Of course that's what pretty much everyone was looking for. She's like, "Oh, it's going to take years so be prepared to wait." And we're like, "Oh, that's okay. We'll wait." So we were running a computer forensics company at this point and I was working out of the front desk as the receptionist, answering phone calls, doing office work and keeping the office running. So I get a call one day. We still had a little bit of house inspections to go through before we finally got our certificate to start fostering, but I get a call and it's Hephzibah and they said, "I know you've got still another visit for us to inspect your house, but I think we have two children for you," is what she said.

I'm like, "What do you mean two children?" So I was so floored because I wasn't expecting this phone call. And she said, "Well, we don't know a lot about them because they're just being transferred over to us, but," she said, "they're three and four." And I wrote. I was writing all this down because I was like, I cannot forget all this because I got to tell Lee all this stuff. She had their names and she gave me their names and she said, three and four-years-old. She said they'd been in five homes. And I thought five homes? What's happened to these children? What's caused this to happen?

So she gave me what little information they had, but one of the things that really stuck in my mind was the fact that in each of those homes they had been told that was their forever family and that they were going to be adopted and this was your new home. And then that home would fall apart when it got too hard and then they would be ripped out and put somewhere else. I thought that's just not fair for kids that age to be so broken by a system. All these adults have failed them in their lives.

It's funny because I still have that paper with all those notes. It was one of those things that I kept and I look back. It just held all information I had about these two kids. And this was a Wednesday and I said, "Well, this is so much to take in." And she said, "Well, we need to know by Friday morning because they need to be placed by Friday morning." And I'm like, "We haven't even got our final inspection done. We don't have bedrooms set up yet." And she said, "We can get the final inspection done if you're interested." And so I quickly went to Lee's office and my heart's racing and I tell him this, and we're looking at each other with our eyes as big as saucers, like what are we going to do about this?

And we both said yes. So we called her back and we said, "We'll do this. We can do this." You know? And at this point it's just fostering, we're just fostering these children, but they are open for adoption because it's clear at this point they're not going to be able to go back to their birth parents because of the circumstances there. So I never will forget. We lived in Uptown, in Chicago at that point in a house. I sent out a mass email to my neighbors and I said, "We've got two kids that are coming and we're not ready." And the whole neighborhood got together and put their bedrooms together for us. We were bringing beds in and childproofing all the outlets. We were doing everything like crazy, and I was just so touched that the neighborhood all helped us get ready for these two little kids. And the morning they came, we had a little banner on the front, which I kept. It just said, "Welcome Home Michael and Braiden."

And they came in and they were so scared. They'd been through this routine before and it has never turned out good. We kept everything really calm. I took very few pictures. I snuck a few pictures that day. I had been told, try not to make this too different for them because it's tough as it is without you trying to make it more than it is. We had been told what their favorite snacks were. We had all their favorite foods there in the house and, they were very surprised that we knew their favorite foods.

It was so nice, but scary at the same time. They were scared, we were scared and, it was tough. It was really, really tough. The first two years was tough. Understandably because they had really learned not to trust adults because there was no adults that they could really ever depend on.

We knew at that point, it's going to take a long time to build that trust back up. That's how the kids came to us.

INTERVIEWER: Do you want to talk a little bit about their lives?

DN: I said it was hard. When I say it was hard, it was really hard. I remember they were constantly testing us. What we discovered early on, and this is what I talk to now with families who are taking that same journey of starting a family through the foster system. They're going to test you to see if you're really going to stick by them. And you're going to really stick with them and be their parent. I would be driving down the road, I remember one day I was just exhausted at how much energy they had and in everything that they would be doing acting up and acting out. I'm already exhausted. I'm driving home with them in the backseat, and they started throwing their shoes at my head. Trying to hurt me.

I just lost it. I started crying. I was just tired. I thought here, now I'm getting pelted with shoes on my head. I pull over and start crying, [laughing] pure exhaustion. They said, "What are you crying about, you cry baby?". [laughing] I thought, can I do this? That was what I considered my lowest point. I call the agency and I'm crying on the phone. They talked me back up to where I need to be, and I didn't have any help. They'd always encourage me to have respite, someone to come in and just give me a break once in a while. I finally accepted that and it really helped. I would not give up on these kids. Lee and I were, were determined to show them that no matter what they did, they were going to be with us.

So we started regular life, we got them enrolled in a school and settled in the neighborhood and routines. It wasn't until adoption day, which is what they told me would happen. It wasn't until the adoption day that they really trusted us, that we weren't going to go anywhere. As that day approached, Illinois requires that you wait two years. You have to foster your children for two years before you can legally adopt them. We timed it, so that we were able to adopt them and have our court date the exact same day as the day that they came to us. To the date, two years later, we went before the judge, which is usually a very simple ceremony and all, but the Neubeckers don't do anything simply. We packed the courthouse with friends and people from the agency that we knew, and the principal from their school and their teachers came.

Everybody came to witness the creation of this family. The judge was stunned, he just stopped the proceeding, and he talked about taking a village and how touched he was to see that this family had so much support. He spoke about that and he took the decree and he tapped each of them on the head and, pronounced us as a family forever. Everything

changed at that moment. It was just like a big weight had been lifted off them. They knew they were stuck with us, as we say [laughing]. That's when it got much easier. It's still challenging as a parent, our lives did change. At that point, we were living, like I said, Uptown. We had left Boystown, which was where all the bars were, because we didn't think that was a great place to raise a kid.

We were Uptown. City life was hard with two kids because I was the over-protective parent. When they would go biking, I wanted to be right beside them. Then it just felt like their leash was awfully short. The school was a challenge as well. We had found the best school that we could, and I had to become very active in the school and even sat on the school board, which we call the LSC and won a slot on that. We were extremely active in the school, but it was still difficult to make it work in the city. We started searching for communities outside the city that had an excellent school system, a community that we'd feel comfortable in that we could still get into the city cause at heart city people and, we decided to move to River Forest. That's where we live today.

INTERVIEWER: Do you want to talk about Braiden's essay that was used?

DN: We're in River Forest and it's a rigorous system in their schools. One of the requirements in fourth grade is that the children learn how to write a persuasive essay. It's just one of the things that every fourth grader has to do. The time came for that process to start, and it coincided about the same time that the president's inauguration was taking place. I remember for some reason, I guess it fell on a holiday or something, but for some reason she was home watching the inauguration with me and we're sitting there watching it. He mentioned gays and lesbians being allowed to marry whomever they love. She yelled out "Yes!"

We had been to marriage rallies and things like that. Cause the issue was there, but we always downplayed the issue because we didn't want the children to feel unsafe or like their family was not as good as another family. We really always downplayed the issue of marriage in our family. They knew that we had had a wedding in San Francisco in 2004 and in their eyes, as far as they're concerned, we were married. As the issue started gaining press, they started wanting to know what that meant. We would give them just as much information as we thought they needed to know to answer their questions. But that moment I realized that this was something that was weighing on her mind, that she would have that reaction.

I asked her about that and started listening to her thoughts. I was stunned at ten years old that she had put any thought into it. I guess she really had listened to the answers I'd give her on her questions before and everything.

I encouraged her. She keeps a journal and I said, "You should write some of the stuff down in your journal." She did. I mentioned it to her teacher and it became the basis for what she did at school for her persuasive essay. When it was all done, she said, "You need to really read your daughter's essay."

She sent it home and I started crying. I know you must think I'm just crying all the time, but it was so emotional because I could not believe the words that she had put down on paper from a perspective of a ten year old. The title was, "Why My Two Dads Should Be Allowed to Get Married." She wrote about her life as a foster child and how she had been in five different families. She said, they treated me horribly, they always promised that they would keep me safe and they never did. Then she goes on and talks about all of our quirky qualities and all the things that we do to make a family and make her feel safe. It was just all from her perspective, it was just unbelievably touching.

I shared it with Lee of course, immediately and started sharing. I shared it on Facebook. It started growing legs, I would say, and, people started seeing this. Then our local community paper picked it up and they reprinted it. And gave her her own little column that day in the paper. Before we knew it, the essay had caught the attention of a national group out of Washington. They were working on marriage equality for the upcoming Supreme Court cases. They said, this is a perspective that we haven't seen yet. And he said, we'd like to fly you out to Washington DC. So we were stunned. Lee couldn't go because of client commitments. He and Michael stayed behind, but Mike and Jan, his parents who are active in PFLAG. Braiden and myself flew out to DC and held a press conference with these former congressmen and women and leaders in the movement on educating the public on why we should receive a marriage equality across the country.

She's sitting there talking with Congressmen and she went and visited our Senator's office and had a meeting with their staff. I was just floored. It was amazing. Here this ten-year-old is working the halls of Congress for her family. I was so stunned thinking about where she started in life, not feeling like she had a voice and didn't have any control over her own life. Then here at ten, not only does she have control of her life, but she's taking control of her family and standing up for us. And I was just in awe over what was happening. It was such a great thing for her to experience, I think.

We got back to Illinois and we were getting ready to fight for the marriage equality bill to be passed in Illinois. We were asked to go down to Springfield and talk to some people who were on the fence. We went down there and I think it was twenty representatives that she met face-to-

face with. She would sit down in their office with me and she would present her essay. She's just very straight -- she didn't know any other way to do it. She'd just say, "I'd like you to support marriage equality" and, they would, go around. "Well, my constituents don't really support it," and she said, “But why?” Then they will try go at everything.

She'd say, "I don't understand". From her perspective, it made common sense. This is a family, these are my parents. I think my parents should be married. I'd like my parents to be married. Why don't you think that they should? I would crack up in my head looking at them, trying to explain their positions to her. I think that it really made them really examine what the heart of this issue was about. It was funny because they all for some reason felt like they had to give her something. She ended the day with I don't even know how many stuffed animals. She was just like carrying, I was carrying, she was carrying. We had so many stuffed animals was that they were giving her and she named all of them.

Some of them she'd name after the congressmen or the rep that she had met that day. It was just a great experience for her. So we went back and of course her paper had been tied to the Supreme Court case for Prop 8. When that decision was handed down, her knowing that each justice had read her essay was very empowering to her. Then the attorneys that have been representing the plaintiffs in each of the cases as they make it to the appellate courts, would always email us. They would say, "Can you give us an update on your family, cause we'd like to continue to add your story to the amicus briefs." We'd give them an update with what was going on in the family and let them know how the kids were doing and all that.

I think it just gave that different perspective in the case. I kept all of this in her little memory box, because I think one day she's going to look back and just be amazed that she's played this little role in such an important case. It's all been really fascinating. She did end up getting to act as a page on the floor for the house reps in Illinois, and then even sat in their chair one day and got to cast a vote. They had all just kind of rallied around her. There's a little article in one of the papers. It says “Page for a day” and shows her sitting there looking in charge of everything at the desk. It was just great, a great experience for her.

INTERVIEWER: How did your family celebrate when marriage was legalized in the United States?

DN: At first, when we got a message that they were going to vote on it, we raced down to Springfield because we wanted her to witness it. And Michael, of course I don't want to not include him. He was active as well, but him being younger, he was active in different ways than Braiden. As a family, all of us went down to Springfield to watch them vote on it. The

speaker of the house gave us box seats overlooking the podium to see this. We got there and we were ushered with other activists that had been working hard on the issue into these private seats. We waited and waited, and it was an all-day affair. I mean, we have little kids. It was a long time and they were so patient.

I remember my son, they called a vote and we didn't know when the vote was going to be called. We just knew it was supposed to be called that day, ‘cause it was like the last day of the session. I remember it really stopped, but every time that they would do a vote, he would say, "Is it our turn next?", and we'd say, "Not yet be patient, it's coming." He was eight years old and frustrated and wanted to be done with all of this and just kept saying, “Is it our turn next?” Then people started whispering around the chamber that it wasn't going to be called. They didn't have enough votes. And they said, well, let's get the families out of here. This is not something that you need to experience.

We said, no, this is part of democracy. We're going to sit this through. We sat there and the sponsor of the bill, who's a friend of ours, he gets up—Greg Harris—tears are in his eyes, and he's looking up at all of us and he loses it. He’s just so devastated that he's brought us down there to experience this, and he knows he can't deliver because the caucus just started unraveling from all the pressure. He said, "I can't." He gives a really elaborate speech. When we all realized what was happening, we all stood up and we started chanting "Call the vote, call the vote." It just was shocking to the chambers to have this resonate and they're trying to calm us down. And we're all just saying, "Call the vote, call the vote."

We felt like with the pressure of all of us there, that maybe that one last vote would show up and, and it didn't. We were back in the streets talking about how much of an injustice this was to our families, that we couldn't secure those rights. It wasn't until the next session that it finally got passed. Of course we celebrated that then and the first thing I think that the kids were really excited about was not so much the idea of protections and social security and all that stuff, but what they were going to wear to the wedding. So we started planning that out and we're members of Unity Temple, which is a historic Unitarian Universalist Church in Oak Park. That's where we attend church. It was natural for us to have our ceremony there. We started planning our wedding, which was in June of this year.

INTERVIEWER: You alluded to it before but can you talk about getting married in San Francisco?

DN: Lee called me that morning, it was all quite a surprise and we boarded a early bird flight out the next morning. February the 18th of 2004, flew to San Francisco, got there and immediately went straight to City Hall.

There's a long line stretching around the block because this is the only place in the country that gays and lesbians are allowed to get married. It was just so fun. We're in line. We had our suits on because of course you get married, you want to wear a suit to look your best. There were all sorts of couples from all over the place, mostly San Francisco and California. We waited patiently. As we're waiting in this long line and it's slowly moving, people would just come up, they would offer drinks.

I remember this one old Asian lady came up just handing us out a little rose and, such gestures of kindness shown by the people of San Francisco that was just very touching. Then there was this flower shop even came up at one point and handed me a bouquet, a real like wedding bouquet. I was stunned by this, a rose is one thing, but a bouquet. And he said, we've been getting calls from all over the country. People wanting to be part of this and they're paying for bouquets for the couples. Ours said "With love from Seattle." We kept it. I keep everything. I had my little bouquet.

We're in line. It's getting later in the day and we're creeping up, we're still outside at this point. They come out and they try to give updates and all that stuff. We're probably five away and they come out and they said, we're closing down. There's no more room inside. We know how long this is going to take. We thought, oh my gosh, we came all the way out of here, all this way. We waited all this time and it's not going to happen. The couples all around us, this was Representative Duffy's assistant who came out, and Representative Duffy was the -- Supervisor Duffy in San Francisco was the supervisor who held the seat that Harvey Milk held over the Castro. His assistant came out and apologized that, we weren't going to be able to get married that day. All the couples around us said, "You have to take these guys they're from Chicago, they came all the way here. You have to let them in." And they did.

We were so touched that these strangers that we had just met that morning, put their selves aside and let us go ahead. They whisked us away. Actually he ended up taking us straight up to supervisor Duffy's office. We met with him and, we got to — which was just for, as a gay man to talk to the supervisor who held Harvey Milk's seat. To be in that office, where such tragedy happened in everything with the killing of Harvey Milk. There's so much history in that building. It was just amazing to us. They took us to the rotunda area that's where we had our wedding. Of course our family wasn't able to be there. So we had them on cell phone, and they got to listen to the ceremony.

We were whisked downstairs to get the certificate and a polka band had showed up. I forgot about this part. We danced, all these people who were getting married are dancing and singing. All the clerks are so thrilled. It was just such a wonderful experience. As we left, we went back to the

hotel that we had rented. We rented a little place in the Castro, a little Victorian Inn and I will never forget, we took photos of this because it was just so poignant. We get there, as we're looking out, this huge rainbow came out across the city and we thought, how perfect has this day turned out that this is the way it would end? So we had to snap all those photos because it just didn't seem real. That's how our first wedding took place. I will say that after that we came back and his parents threw us a reception so the family could participate. We held it in a banquet hall right outside of Detroit. It was about as typical of a wedding reception as you could have. We had my family come up and Lee's family, and we probably had about 150 guests. We had a friend of ours who is a priest with the Catholic Church who blessed us. It was magical having all of our family with us, celebrating the start of our journey officially together.

INTERVIEWER: Just to clarify, was this before or after Braiden and Michael came to—?

DN: This was before, in '04. They came to us in 2007. They came to us August the 10th, 2007. So this was before.

INTERVIEWER: Since it was just such a perfect experience when it was later struck down, how did that feel?

DN: You didn't ask me about the honeymoon [laughing]. I'll throw that in there. We went to Maui because that's where a couple should go, I think, on their honeymoon and had a wonderful Hawaiian honeymoon and toured all the falls and took the road to Hana and all the things that you could do on Maui we did. And got back. There was discussion on what was going to happen with those licenses. We knew that it was on shaky legal grounds. Sure enough, one day in the mail comes up very nicely written letter from the City of San Francisco notifying us that our marriage had been nullified because of a ruling by the California Supreme Court. They would be glad to refund our fees, or if we would like we could donate our fees to the fund to help secure marriage equality rights, which is what we chose to do. Legally we didn't have any legal standing anyway, in Illinois at that time. We knew that the minute we had left San Francisco, that it was a piece of paper in the eyes of Illinois. It gave us maybe something that we could fight with, which is what I did with Dean foods.

It still wasn't being treated the same as any other marriage certificate by a heterosexual couple. We knew that was going to be the case and it would still be a long journey for us.

INTERVIEWER: So we've talked a lot over the last two days about your relationships over the years. Can you speak a little to how they've affected you and how you've developed as a person? It's a really easy question. I wanted to throw you a soft ball.

DN: Wow. When I met Jon, I've had two major relationships in my life as an adult, it was Jon, which I met as a teenager. I was seventeen when we met. And then of course, Lee whom I'm currently in a relationship with. Those were the two main relationships. Jon eleven years, Lee and I have been together for fourteen years. And then that small window between when I was happily single, I dated. I wouldn't say I dated a lot, but I did date. And they all happened to be German nationals, for some reason. And I happened to marry a Neubecker, which is German as well. I don't know what that means. But I did manage to maintain good friendships with all of them, which I think is great. And I've taken away something from each of them, but honestly, the two, Lee and Jon would be the ones that I think helped shape me.

With Jon, I met Jon at a time when I was learning who I was as a person. And really, I didn't think very much of myself. I didn't have anyone really in my life to tell me that I was worth anything and that I was capable of being anybody. And I really think I was just a lost kid and I don't know what I would have become or if I would've really amounted to much without him in my life. Not only was he a great partner, but he gave me the ability to believe in myself, and that's a huge gift to give somebody. I talked with him recently about that, because we've remained friends, we grew apart, as I understand and got to know myself and learn what I wanted in life, it didn't always necessarily fit with what Jon wanted in life.

He was eleven years older than myself and I think he had already been down that journey and decided that this is where he wanted to be in life. And my journey was taking a turn and we were both realizing that. And I think with the loss of Cody and everything, it just made my decision that much easier. But, he seems to think, I think he's right, that the relationship probably wouldn't have lasted even if the incident with Cody had never occurred. That I just had really gotten to the point where I was a very different person than I was at seventeen. And we both recognize that now.

I credit him with making me the person I am. And that he showed me that I could do whatever I wanted in life and he supported me through that. And those were the tough times, those were the times when we would go days eating this macaroni and cheese with cut up sausages. I still joke with him about this. Because, we didn't have any money. It was tough times with me attending school here and working in the laboratory and his job. And living in Smyrna, we just didn't have much and it was tough. I'm just so thankful that I had him as part of my life at that time. And then, of course, when I met Lee it was a different situation. I was confident enough to move across the country and I really didn't want a relationship at that point. I was quite happy, I was single. So, when I met Lee, it felt different because I wanted to be with him because I loved him and was attracted to

him. And it wasn't that I needed him to make me feel better or anything like that. And so, it was a different kind of situation.

I think that it has fallen into an interesting place in that, when people ask about our relationship or our friends, when they look at how we live, they describe it as the typical 1950s housewife and husband, if you want to try to put us into those kind of weird buckets. Lee started and founded the company Forensicon, which is a computer forensics company, and anyone who does a startup, it takes many hours and you're really pouring your whole life into the small business. And that's why I kind of put my career on hold because we wanted to start a family together. And that meant that, especially with two kids who had come from a background where they needed that something extra to make them feel safe and secure and meet their needs and bring them to where they need to be today, they needed someone who was going to be home all the time and dedicate just their life to them.

And it's worked. And it's probably unconventional, today, in many ways. I do the PTA stuff and room parent, and I was cookie dad for the Girl Scouts. I try to make decent home cooked meals. And he works many hours and he comes home and he's tired and he doesn't get to spend as many hours as he would like with the kids. That's our life right now, but it's, hopefully, going to change where he'll be able to be at home more. And I think at some point, when the kids get older and everything, I'll resume a career, but right now it's just making them feel safe and at ease at home. And I want to be able to look back on these moments, which are just really precious, and enjoy it as long as I can, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about how the AIDS epidemic has impacted your life, especially with your work with the NAMES Project quilt?

DN: It's something that I probably haven't dealt with much over the years. In preparing to discuss all of this with you guys I needed to reflect on my journey through life. I started putting together all of the organizations I belong to and I'd helped found and all the demonstrations we had participated in. I sat down and I looked at all of this stuff and I was quite amazed at how many things we had done and it was pretty impressive, I thought, for myself. And then the other night before coming down to speak with you guys, I woke up at four in the morning, just woke up, which is not like me, because I don't like waking up. And I started thinking about, for some reason, I thought about all of my friends that I lost during that time.

And it's like their names just kept rolling in my head. Names that I hadn't thought about in years. And I thought about, as their names came into my mind, I thought about the time spent with them and losing them. This

happened at a time, a very short window of time, in the late eighties, for me, I was experiencing this, when I'd become involved with Friends Atlanta and was friends with people of an older generation. And that was the generation that was really being affected mostly by this disease. I started processing what that meant. I realized I had just buried it, it was too painful to live through a period in your twenties where you're having to take care of people who are dying and there is nothing you can do to save them. And their families are abandoning them.

They're wasting away, there's no treatments. And people are afraid to touch you, they're afraid to even live in the house that you've lived in. I just could not believe, thinking back, at what that was like. I think it was just so, so horrible and painful and I couldn't deal with it, that I just closed it off. And it didn't hit me until the other night what I had experienced. There's just too many names to go through. And at the time, our community, what we did to not forget those people, we were putting together quilt panels, Cleve Jones had founded the NAMES Project, and people, as their friends were dying or their family members were dying, they'd create a panel that represented that person. However, they want it to be represented.

And sometimes the person as they were getting ready to die would participate in that. And sometimes it was just left as a way to cope with the loss, to pull together pieces of their t-shirts, I remember doing that kind of stuff. And political buttons or whatever represented the person in that moment. And then we'd ship it off. And the first March on Washington, they decided to display this quilt that had been pulled together from panels all over the country. And we're out on the mall in Washington. I don't even know the words to describe it, but to look across the mall, which is normally green and full of people and usually people enjoying a bright sunny day and it's happy, just to see nothing but panels that you know each one of those represents someone who died too soon was just amazing.

It was dead silent, I remember that. I remember it was just so painful that you could just hear the birds chirping, because you didn't want to talk. And people would just kneel down when they would recognize a panel and just sit with it. So, it really brought it into perspective how much it was just devastating our community and the lack of help that we were getting from anywhere. The government wasn’t helping us. Our president wouldn't even mention the word and families didn't want to talk about it. It was just too shameful. And people used it as a weapon against us, to keep us from securing our rights. And so we get back to Atlanta and we're energized by all the people that we've met and what we've seen in D.C., and we're working, but at the same time, we're just so mindful of all the people that we're still losing from this illness.

And so they decided to bring the quilt to Atlanta, Memorial Day weekend, I think it was, of 1988 and it was going to be at the World Congress Center, Georgia World Congress Center. So Jon and I volunteered and I thought I can do this. And we get there. We were asked to wear all white, I remember that. And our job was just to hand out tissues and try to offer some support to people who came in. So, we stood there and did our job. And at the end of the day, I was just so absolutely exhausted by the grief in the place and just everyone mourning and releasing all that they had pent up over the losses we were experiencing. And these panels meant so much more because so many of them we knew. We knew these people that were represented in these panels.

And so it was really tough. My cousin, I get a call one day and I had been out to the family for some time, and I had a cousin, Keith Davis, who was older than myself. And my family is very large on both sides and tons of cousins. And Keith was always a nice cousin, but older than I was. And when he graduated from Pebblebrook, he moved away and I thought, that's fine, that's what people do. And I get a call from him and he's living in North Carolina and he comes out, and he tells me he's gay and all that stuff. And I thought, well, that's great and we talk a little bit and all that. And I don't hear from him again for a while. And next time I hear from him, and you go some time -- I had always wanted to visit him because now I've got a gay cousin, that's quite exciting, all that stuff.

But it just never seemed to work out. And I thought, well, I'll see him at some point. Next time I hear from him, he's at Georgia Baptist Hospital. I'm just stunned by this phone call now. And he tells me that he has AIDs. And I'm processing all of this and I said, "Well, let me come up to see you." And he doesn't want me to come up and we talk about that. I'm still kind of young, I don't understand, why doesn't he want me to be there? And looking back, of course I get it now because I'd seen it so much. He doesn't look like he did before, he's wasted away. He's seen the press and the way people are treating those who are dying and he just doesn't want to be remembered that way.

And so he had shut himself off from the whole family. He blocked anyone from visiting his room. We were not allowed to go visit him. So, I never got to see him before he died. And it really affected me hard because I really felt cheated that the family had been pretty supportive at that point, of me and my coming out. And I thought, had he just tried to give the family a chance. We would have rallied around him and we would have helped him through this. And I felt that he didn't give us a chance and it hurt. And, I mourned the loss of a cousin who really fully understood what I was going through and got me. There wasn't going to be anybody else in my family that was just like me. And so that was tough to lose that too. So, he's buried up here at Windy Hill Road and [Highway] 41, next to his

parents. He died at age twenty-eight. So, when I come back to Atlanta now I go to his grave and I just sit with him. And that's all I have.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that coming out in the era of the AIDS epidemic in any way influenced your coming out process or changed it in any way?

DN: Say it again.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Do you think that coming out in the face of the AIDS epidemic, did that in any way influenced the decision to come out? Was there an extra layer of fear about coming out as a gay man?

DN: It didn't at the time because I came out in stages. I had already come out to myself, practically at the age of five. I already knew who I was. And then at sixteen I came out to the family, which, at that time we still didn't really know much about was happening. And I remember writing at Pebblebrook High School, I was pretty out at this point, I wrote a summary of a newspaper article. My English teacher required us clip something out of the newspaper and I used every opportunity I could, I wanted to talk about somebody gay. I had this, up until recently, and I wanted to donate it to the Archives and it was one of those things that got accidentally thrown away. But I had written, I'd clipped an article about a new gay cancer, I think was the way that they were labeling it in the paper, and I wrote about that.

I was fascinated with it. They were still trying to understand how it was being transmitted and all that stuff. I was curious about it all, but there was just so little information and it wasn't happening, supposedly, in Atlanta at the time. And I wasn't really part of that community fully anyway. So, I didn't really feel like it was affecting me. It was something I was definitely wanting to learn about, but I don't remember having a sense of fear yet. I think it was just too early. And I didn't make a connection. I don't think any of us really knew what we were facing at that point. But realizing that I had written that, it kind of reminded me just how out there -- And one of the other papers I'd found at the time too, just touching on that subject, was I had done a critique of A Kiss of the Spider Woman, I think was the name of the film, which was a very gay controversial film at the time as well. And I wrote a review about that too.

So, any opportunity I could write about something gay. Teachers probably were just scratching their head over what they were having to read. And I wasn't even a very good writer. So, that was the sad part of it all. I don't think I fully understood the impact of what AIDS, HIV/AIDS, meant to our community, until I met Jon and his generation, which were all older. And those were the guys really, unfortunately, who were really most impacted by it. And with Friends Atlanta and those guys, so many of

them, they had become infected before we even understood what means there were to protect themselves.

So, that was shocking to me. And I was in a relationship with Jon, in a monogamous relationship. And so, again, I didn't feel like I was personally going to catch the illness, but it was so unfair and just so hard to be that age and have to live through the loss of so many of your friends. Some of the guys that, I found out later, that I had hung out with from my high school days, in that group of gay kids from Cobb County, I had found out a couple of them had died. But, at that point I hadn't really been friends with them for some time. So again, it was sad, but it wasn't as close to me as the friends that I was experiencing on a day-to-day basis that was dying.

INTERVIEWER: Looking back on the steps made by the gay community in terms of rights and acknowledgement, are there things in your activism that you would've done differently?

DN: No, I can't think of anything that I would. It's interesting, I think that Jon and I were in an interesting place with activism, in that I felt that there were two distinct camps of activism that were occurring at the time. You had your street activists, which were ACT UP and QUEER NATION, primarily. And then you had your suit and ties. And they were the ones who would donate money. They would go to the dinners, HRCF dinners, and work within the mainstream of it all. And, we felt comfortable in both of those communities and that caused some problems. I think there were lots of trust issues with how to deal with us, because we didn't fit comfortably in either of those boxes. We were kind of spilling over into both.

And so we were hosting people from ACT UP, from New York at our homes and we were having die-ins with them. A die-in would be where we would literally go into the street. Maybe we would want to really bring attention to the issue of HIV/AIDS at the time, and the lack of funding that we were receiving to help with this illness. And we'd look for a busy intersection and we would die in the intersection and we would just fall out and cause traffic jams. Just anything to just get people to stop and think about what was happening around them. And that really incensed the other side, when I say the other side, the suit and tie crowd. Because they felt that level of street activism, making people get angry and think about it and pushing it in their face, that was counterproductive to what they were doing. And we disagreed. We always felt that you needed both sides. You need both sides. You need the people who are going to reach those that need that in your face moment. But you also need to show a side of your community that can sit at the table and have the discussions and

reach those who aren't reached the other way. And so we've always kind of looked at that as a two-prong approach.

INTERVIEWER: What are your perceptions on current activism in the gay community?

DN: It's interesting because I always wondered if we would end up with kind of like that gay Martin Luther King figure in our movement. And it became apparent at some point that that wasn't the way our movement was going to be. That we were just going to have a lot of people who maybe started out in the streets or in low level areas in their local communities and just work their way up to a national scene. And, that's really the way our movement has really worked, I think. And it's been fine, sometimes I wish that Harvey Milk had survived, and I wonder what it would have been like. Would he have been able to meet the needs? And could he have addressed such a diverse group as the gay community? Because we are all very, very different from each other. It just so happens that what holds us together is that we love people of the same sex as our own.

But it's like herding cats, sometimes, in our community. And I don't know that one leader can really represent everyone. But I'm really pleased with where we are. I think it's all occurred very quickly. I think that looking back when Jon and I were so active here in Atlanta, marriage rights weren't even on the table. I mean, certainly we felt that we needed marriage rights and we deserved those, but there are so many things before that. At that point, we were even just trying to survive, literally, with the AIDS crisis looming around us. And so the idea of asking for marriage rights was just so far down the line that I didn't think I'd ever seen in my lifetime, to be honest with you.

And I think that also, it was one of the things that attracted me with Chicago. When I left the South and realized that there were some places in the country where it wasn't a daily battle just to secure basic rights. They had already had, they had repealed their sodomy law in 1969, the year after I was born. And here I am in 1986, screaming at our federal building because the Supreme Court had upheld it here in Georgia. I just felt that maybe moving to Chicago, not only for all the other reasons, but that I could take a break from those basic battles. And I think where I am now with it is that, we've gotten to a place in some states, and I like to include Illinois as one of those states, where we've secured protection from discrimination in employment, and housing, and public accommodations. And we've made our schools very safe for students who identify as LGBT. And we've got adoption rights securely in place so our families are adequately protected.

And now we've secured marriage equality. And I was thinking about this the other day. We've checked all those boxes off. Everything seems to be

done. There's more work of course, to do, to fine tune it and to fully become an equal part in society, but the big stuff is done. And I think like the civil rights movement, I think it's really important that those of us who live in states where those big items have been accomplished, we've now got to help the other states who aren't there yet. It's imperative that we take time to reach out to those in Atlanta or Georgia or Mississippi or the Dakotas and help those communities secure the rights that they deserve.

And I hope that that's where we are as a collective community in the United States right now, that we could do that.

INTERVIEWER: So do you feel like that's where activism is headed at the moment, ensuring that the entire nation's security –

DN: Absolutely, without a doubt, I think that things are moving so fast with marriage equality. I really fully think that within a year that issue will be settled nationwide one way or the other, whether it's through a Supreme Court decision that will finally put the issue to arrest, or whether the remaining federal appeals courts will go ahead and rule in favor of marriage equality. And it will be settled in that way. It's going to be one of those two ways, though. And I would like to think that within a year that happens. So then what's left is the issue around adoption rights. And in what I'm seeing personally, is that as states are dropping their marriage bans, that the second natural step that's happening quite quickly afterwards is that they're allowing couples to fully start families through adoption and fostering. That happened just recently in Utah without any fight.

So then what we're left with is making our schools safer with -- And that's something, I think that we're going to be continuing to work on across the country, and hopefully at a federal level, and securing protections and employment, public accommodations housing. And I think that's going to have to happen at a federal level. And I think we're close. And I think that working across the aisle and helping to continue to elect people who understand and get the importance of those issues, regardless of what party they belong to.

I think that we'll be pretty close to securing that soon, as well. And then really what we're looking at next is what do we do with our seniors as they start to grow old? How do we take care of those seniors who are quite often in a different place than seniors who are heterosexual, in that most of them don't have children that they can kind of look back and ask for a helping hand. And what are we going to do as a community to make sure that they're taken care of and they get the needs met that they have in their old age?

INTERVIEWER: You just mentioned the diversity of the gay community, but there's often the perception that there's a monolithic gay community. For instance, there's no one spokesperson obviously for the heterosexual community, and no one would expect that. Can you talk a little bit more about your perceptions of that?

DN: Okay you'll have to start over. I had to take some water. That was way too much, all of a sudden.

INTERVIEWER: Do you need to take another?

DN: You got to drink after that? I don't even know.

INTERVIEWER: And she hits you with that.

DN: Yeah, I'm like, well, what was her name in the White House Press Corps that was in the front, for all those years? Helen, are you?

INTERVIEWER: I try. All right, I'm on my way.

All right. You mentioned the diversity of the gay community. However, there's often the perception that there's a monolithic gay rights, gay community, whereas on the other side, no one would ever expect there to be one spokesperson for the heterosexual community. Can you talk a little bit more about your perceptions of that and how that affects gay rights?

DN: You're going to have to give me -- I don't even know where to go with this.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I mean, we can cut all of this, but it's something that Jon brought up that we thought was really interesting.

DN: What did he say, let me hear this. Because we don't always agree on everything, so –

INTERVIEWER: Well and it's something you definitely mentioned in discussing –

INTERVIEWER: Herding cats.

INTERVIEWER: The gay community, and he mentioned that people often think of the, a gay community as one entity. And I think his point essentially with that was how it affects activism. And the fact that you have these incredibly diverse groups with different needs, but it's all lumped under gay rights, right?

DN: Yes. There is an issue there. I just don't know how to even approach it, because this is something that I'm struggling. Are we taping now because we can talk about this. I think I can be open and honest about this.

This is tough for me, because I feel like as our umbrella is expanding and -- When I was starting here at Kennesaw as an activist, it was LG. That was it: lesbian, gay. And we would fight over which came first. And a lot of times we always had to remember to put the L first, because we know we wanted to make sure they really felt, that the lesbians felt, that they really truly were included.

And then the B came, and then the T, and so we start adding, and it's been interesting because, I think with some in my generation, things are changing so quickly within the community and people are seeing themselves through different lenses and they identify differently.

And then you have sexual minorities that feel a kinship to the gay and lesbian community and feel that there's many overlapping connections that they jump on with us. And in many ways I think that's healthy, but I think that it's hard, for people, at least in my generation, to keep up with it.

I mean, even here at Kennesaw, before, like I said, in '91, we were just the gay and lesbian or lesbian gay group. And now it's the LGBTQI or IQ. And I don't even know for sure if most people wouldn't know what those represent. And I question whether or not that works in our community, and if we don't really need to maybe take a step back and educate ourselves a little bit, I know I certainly do, on how those mesh together and what the experiences are, those people and their needs.

And, you know what I mean, even me saying those people, I mean it's just that there's -- It's something that I think that we're going to have to kind of reflect back on ourselves, and get comfortable with, and help pull them along. I mean, it's a very complicated issue right now, and one that's not resolved in any way. And, and I can think, even like with the transgendered community, because a lot of attention now is being placed on issues around sexual identity or gender identity and those who identify as a gender other than the one they were born as. And I think that there's just so much that we still need to learn together as a community, to make everyone feel part of the movement, before we can go out and collectively help effect change on our part or basis, if that makes sense.

INTERVIEWER: Excellent answer to my incredibly muddled question.

DN: Well, and that was a muddled answer, but it's something that I'm still working on as a person, and I think that's healthy. I think that we need to be at a point in our community where it's okay to say, I don't understand,

or I don't feel that I understand your plight, and help me understand. I think that sometimes we're scared to do that because we're going to come across insensitive or maybe uneducated. And I think that those who are trying to join us in this struggle for equality need to also keep in mind that it's important to educate with kindness and not be so quick to assume that someone's maybe being disrespectful or hurtful, but maybe just take a moment to try to educate and do that in a way that will bring them along with your cause.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned living in both Atlanta and Chicago. Can you talk about how the communities in the two cities are different or alike?

DN: That's something to think about for a second. How they're different? How's the North and South different? I was amazed at how much further along the gay community is in the North versus the South and how we're perceived and how some of the things that I take for granted up there, I come down here and there's still issues.

An example, when I was over at the Student Retention Services room today, I asked about to the window and they said, well, we put film up so that it's kind of a two-way mirror situation. So we can see out, but no one can see in, because we want people to feel comfortable.

You know, I guess we don't think about that in Chicago. I mean, our gay center is all glass. It's got a full two sides is nothing but glass walls. So you can see everything that's happening in the gay center. So, it's interesting. I'm processing, what that means. And I get it. I understand that people are in a journey where they don't feel comfortable yet, and they're at a different place. And I know there's got to be people like that in Chicago as well, but it's certainly looked at differently. And so I kind of sometimes step back and think about that when I come across little instances. And then just with some of the things that I've done in Chicago with the -- I'll give you an example with the school the children attended in the city.

So they attended a school named Nettelhorst. It's a public school in Chicago. It happens to be in Boystown. And that would be the equivalent here to, say, Midtown. Maybe an elementary school that's straddling in there. So I sent the kids to school there, as many in-town families were doing, and would do here as well in schools. And so what we started doing around Gay Pride, ‘cause there were a number of gay families at the school. We were looking for some way to get the children involved in the issue around diversity, and celebrating Pride for who you are, and being proud of who you are and being proud of their community, which includes many gays and lesbians. So what we did was, we had tons of fabric and we had them cut up in strips of all different colors.

And we set up a project where the kids, all the elementary school kids, and there were six hundred and some odd kids in the school, would tie a color on the fence, along the fence on the street. And we had it set up so that as they tied it, depending on their color, it created a huge rainbow flag. And so when the wind would blow, the fabric would just flitter out into the sidewalk, and it just stunned the neighborhood. They were so touched. We had a little sign that talked about how we celebrated, all of our families at Nettelhorst, and hoping that they enjoyed our display. And I couldn't see that happening here. I think that Atlanta's in a different place, that if an elementary school supported their children showing just a simple gesture like that, that it just wouldn't be allowed, there'd be an uproar.

And so it's little things like that, that I noticed that they're different. The politics are somewhat the same. I had alluded to pride and how you get entrenched in the same people doing the same job. And we do things this way because it's the way they've always been done. And I think that's just a challenge in general with movements and in life in general, that people don't necessarily like change very much and just helping that along.

And certainly, I think, for Chicago, we have the advantage of size and just the sheer number of people and where they come from. And it adds a different element to what diversity means, and the fact that we really do have to learn to live with people who are different from ourselves. And maybe that hasn't happened to that same extent here in the South yet, where you haven't had large communities that have settled in. And I think that is happening here in Atlanta, more and more as the city continues to grow, but there are still differences, as I mentioned.

INTERVIEWER: In your observations, how have perceptions of the gay community changed over time?

DN: Perceptions? You know, as the AIDS epidemic has now become a manageable disease that people live with, that has certainly been taken out of the argument, I think. When I look back at some of the people who would protest against us and their signage, it was always focused around us being diseased, and that it was, thank God for AIDS and us dying, and you don't see that as much anymore. I think people fully understand that that's not part of the argument, and that it was not something that was brought on against us, and that it truly does affect other populations as well. And so they've had to move on to other ways to counter the movement that we have towards equality.

And so now the argument seems to be more around change, really. It's, let's not move forward with marriage equality, because marriage has always been between a man and a woman. And that should be enough. Or, the other argument being, what's best for the children? I think, again, as

they see more families headed by two women or two men, and those children are growing up and then you just see how wonderfully normal and wonderful the kids are, that that argument's kind of falling to the wayside, as well. And I just think that as each individual person continues to come out and feel supported enough to do that and have those one-on-one connections with their friends and neighbors and all that, that really, I think, has been the biggest plus in our community and in changing hearts and minds.

And certainly, that spilled over into media in the ways we're portrayed now, versus the fact that we weren't even portrayed at all, hardly, on TV back in the early days. And if we were, it was usually, in a very negative light. I mentioned as a kid, images of gays or lesbians on TV. I never remember seeing any lesbians on TV, but the gay men that I saw were always just over the top flamboyant. And you know, that's just such a small idea of what a gay man can be, because we come in all sorts of different mannerisms and shapes and sizes.

But for me as a kid, it was the Paul Lyndes, and there's nothing wrong with Paul Lyndes. They're great. And I can even identify on some level with that, but it's not fair to have that as the only image growing up. And so I am happy that today kids growing up, whether they're questioning their sexual orientation, or maybe they're just straight kids, but they at least get to see that we're really no different than anyone else. And that's been great.

INTERVIEWER: So finally, David, is there anything we haven't discussed today that you'd like to mention?

DN: I really can't think of anything that we've left off the table. Can you guys, is there anything that you can think that we need to talk about?

INTERVIEWER: Just that, the only thing that I would be interested in is, you walked around and did a tour of the campus today, and just kind of your thoughts on that?

DN: You know, when I left Kennesaw State College, I think it was still called back in '92, I never wanted to see this place again. It was such a painful experience. I was so burnt out by the experience, and not just with my experience on campus, but with Cobb County and all this stuff that was happening in this county. And it became a place where we just didn't feel wanted, welcomed, and we didn't care to be here. There were better places. And that was tough for me because this is my home. And I have always felt angry that someone like myself who grew up in Cobb County, for people to move into the county and then somehow tell me that I don't

belong here, because my lifestyle doesn't conform to their ideals of what someone should be or who they should love, I find incredibly insulting.

And it's bothered me, especially during the Cobb Citizens Coalition's fight against the commissioners, many of whom were not from this county, for them to tell me, who grew up here, that I didn't belong here, I just could not believe the gall.

And so when I left, I left never wanting to see this place again. And it wasn't really until I realized that people cared about what I had done here, that I gave the school any thought, because again, it was just too painful. And I think I approached it with some curiosity on what was happening here, that suddenly they would have an interest in what little involvement I had here on campus. And, of course, it was great for the ego as well, not going to lie to you there.

But when I got here, I was just absolutely amazed. I was amazed on so many different levels. I was amazed at how large the campus is now, compared to the days when I was here. And I was amazed at the buildings and the interesting architecture that seems to be springing up, and just the interest the community seems to have here, of building a true campus that's pleasant, that's nice to be around. And then it was just interesting, visually stimulating. And even like with the dorms, everything seems to be nice, and a place that you want to be at. And then there's the level of community. You know, when I was here before, you would get out of your car, go to class, get back in your car and leave, and there were very few of us who really wanted to even attempt to build community on campus.

And I know that there are still many students here that are what you'd consider, maybe commuter students, that don't live on campus, but you can't argue that there's not community here now. I mean, it's just, you see it everywhere you look. You see people hanging out and just enjoying each other's company, and there's just so many different activities here to do.

And they're addressing the needs of so many different micro-communities within the school. And they all seem to be coexisting wonderfully. And you know, there's going to be hiccups, and there are going to be those moments where you have to take a step back and examine biases and incidents that may happen with one community or the next, but that's part of, I think, an education and learning to live with people who are different from yourselves. And Kennesaw now is providing a space, not just for gay and lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and all the other sexual minority communities to have safe space, but they're providing an opportunity for so many communities, not just to have their own safe space, but to learn how to work with each other. And I think that in and of itself is the most

valuable piece of education and learning that's taking place on this campus right now.