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Tampa GLBT Oral History Project
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Cyrana Wyker: This is Cyrana Wyker. I am here with Keith Roberts. It is February 2nd, 2014. This interview is part of the Tampa GLBT Oral History project under my direction. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Keith Roberts: Yes, you do.

CW: So when and where were you born?

KR: I was born in Jacksonville, Florida. So I am a native Floridian but not a native of Tampa. I lived in Jacksonville until I went away to school. And my mom in fact still lives there. So, I go back to visit occasionally but after I finished I never lived in Jacksonville again. I went to high school, of course, in Jacksonville.

And something that's been in the news recently that's sort of interesting in that regard is my high school was Nathan Bedford Forest Senior High School, and the reason it was in the news recently is because it is named after a confederate general who was known as a founder of the Ku Klux Klan. And I have long regaled my friends with tales of going to a high school whose team nickname was the rebels and whose team mascot was a cartoon figure called lil' rebel, and whose school song played at all pep rallies and football games and the like, was *Dixie*.

Yes, the actually *Dixie*, and whose cheerleaders wore incarnations basically of the confederate battle flag as uniforms. (laughs) And none of that seemed strange to me, I

guess, until I went to college. I went to Stetson University, a small liberal arts school, well regarded liberal arts school in—actually kind of half way between Orlando and Daytona Beach in a small town called Deland, and started encountering people with broader views, which is of course exactly what college is supposed to do for you. And I started questioning the whole notion of all of that.

Anyway, all that is to say I certainly did not grow up in a virulently racist environment by any means. It was however the South. I don't know if you'd consider Jacksonville, Florida to be the Deep South or not. Again, I don't think it's nearly as—well, what I perceived was not a vicious racism, but it was pervasive certainly in ways large and small.

But I had a lot to break away from intellectually and spiritually as I migrated to college and all through my education, and I think I did a pretty good job of that actually. I used college as an opportunity to break away from my roots. Largely I still regard that as a healthy progress in my development, but in the process I also think I broke away in ways that—well, let's just say that later in my life required some reintegration. And I certainly navigated that successfully as well as this stage.

People have long commented knowing that I'm from Jacksonville and people whom I've been acquainted with who know something about Jacksonville have long commented that I don't have a hint of an accent that suggests that I'm from Jacksonville. And I recognized that that's part of the breaking away that I did. One way or another I managed to lose that.

Um, going to Stetson University was sort of an inevitable trajectory for me. It was far enough away from Jacksonville that I was clearly away from home, but was not outside my comfort zone. But again as I went through my college years my comfort zone expanded as it is supposed to do. It expanded pretty dramatically for me, because I really consider my upbringing to have been pretty parochial and that is, by the way, no disparagement of my parents, who were very loving and tried their best.

My father was a TV repairman. My mother didn't quite finish high school. So it was not a background that was full of obvious opportunity. But in any case I left it behind but not for reasons that have anything to do with its having been a bad upbringing. I had, like I said, a loving family. Certainly, no regrets there. My father did die when I was a senior in high school—I'm sorry, a senior in college.

So just a week or so before my twenty-first birthday. At that point I had experienced a great deal in my college years. First of all I took my first trip—well, let me back up a little bit. I had a girlfriend starting in my freshman year of being in college and she and I

ultimately got married. I understand looking back on that as a gay man that I was taking an easy route in hooking up with somebody with whom I was obviously very compatible and who is a very lovely human being and very intelligent, and who liked me.

But in any case, I didn't—I wasn't comfortable with the usual mating and dating season and the whole routines associated with that, because my heart wasn't in it for reasons I didn't yet understand. So, it was sort of the easy path to latch on to someone, start dating as a freshman and ultimately get married a few years later.

pause in recording

CW: Okay.

KR: Of the four years that I spent in college I spent almost half of that time somewhere else. At the point when I went away to school I had never traveled outside of the South. The farthest I had gone had been the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina on annual family vacations. So the first time I ever got on an airplane I was eighteen years old.

It was the summer between my freshman and sophomore years in college. And I flew to Boston to visit my then girlfriend, later wife, Lorie. She had a very different background from mine, which was also certainly part of my growth at that stage in my life. She was an Air Force brat, so she had lived lots of different places. Her parents were both well-educated people. Her father had been killed in Vietnam.

I never knew him. But she was from a background where a great deal of travel and more exotic sorts of lifestyle was the norm. So, she was in Boston working at Tuft's University, which was her parent's alma mater, and I went to visit her and that was my first exposure to a big city. It was my first, as I said, travel on an airplane jet, and the horizons were broadening. We spent a weekend bicycling around Cape Cod, I remember. And driving in Boston traffic was a revelation to me. (laughs)

CW: (laughs)

KR: In any case, in my sophomore year then I was eager for more travel. One of the great things about Stetson was they offered a variety of study abroad opportunities. In particular, they had a semester system that involved a fall semester that ended at Christmas, and then what they called a mini-mester, a winter term, that was about five or six weeks before the spring semester started.

And it was during the mini-mester term that a lot of the study abroad opportunities were provided. And I ended up signing on for one that went to what was then the Soviet Union. So, needless to say that was my first trip abroad. When I landed in New York to make the connection that was the first time I had ever seen snow.

CW: Oh wow.

KR: And then when we got to Moscow, I saw a lot of snow, (laughs) because it was January. That was really spectacular. Then my junior year I took advantage of an opportunity that was offered through the political science department, and I was a political science major, to spend a semester, the fall semester, at American University in Washington.

So, I spent half of that academic year in Washington D.C. I was sort of absorbing all of that culture. And what I remember perhaps most vividly about that was the delight I had in realizing that what was national and international news was basically the local news in Washington. It was the air that you breathed sort of, which was a very cool experience.

Lorie, my girlfriend and I got married early. We got married in February of our junior year in college when we were both just twenty years old. And one of the reasons we pushed it ahead to that date is that we planned to study abroad for our senior year. Lorie was a French major. I had studied French, not as extensively as she.

And we made a plan that's actually to spend our senior year on another Stetson sponsored program to study French in Switzerland at the Université of Neuchâtel. And so we got married in February of our junior year. That would have been 1972, and, ah, beginning in late August of '72, we were on our way to Switzerland.

Along the way we spent about a week in Cornwall, England, at a bed and breakfast that had been recommended to her by a sorority sister of hers, and had a really, really spectacular time there.

It was sort of a delayed honeymoon. And then made our way to join up with the rest of the contingent at the Université of Neuchâtel in Switzerland. This program in Neuchâtel was not an American University. It was a program for students whose native language was not French, but those students came from all over the world, which was great, and certainly many, many colleges around the United States.

And in addition to the wonderful experience of living in Switzerland for the better part of the year, we also, of course, had an opportunity to travel a great deal in Europe. We traveled to Greece on a 56-hour train ride that I'll never forget. It was horrible.

CW: (laughs)

KR: But then spent three days in a little Fiat driving around the Peloponnesus in a car that could hardly make it up the mountains on rutted dirt roads. We went to Madrid at New Years. In the spring, we traveled to Florence and later to Denmark. Just had a really wonderful time. Went to Paris, of course, a couple times. I did come to speak French fluently.

CW: Oh wow.

KR: Probably about halfway through the year. I had to rely on Lorie's notes for the first part because I was a little bit lost. But when you start dreaming in French, they say that's when you know you're fluent in the language. There was a brief shining moment when I could claim fluency in French. Of course, without the opportunity to utilize as the years go by you lose that unfortunately.

One of my tasks, even though— Oh, just to back up and make the connection, my father's death actually occurred after I had been in Switzerland about a month. And obviously the people who ran the program there were very understanding, but I took about three weeks time away. And Lorie, of course, came with me. We had to fly back to the United States for that, the funeral and obviously my mother.

My sister was still living at home at that time. And by the way, I do have a younger sister by two and half years, who's been happily married for, gosh, since 1974, I guess, has two grown nephews with her own families, who are delightful. But it was just my sister and my mother then, of course, and they did come to visit Lorie and me in Switzerland in the spring, which was a great opportunity for all of us.

We took them to see lots of things. Of course, my mother likewise had never been out of the county, nor my sister at that age. But I was getting ready to say that one of the tasks I had in my senior year even though I was abroad was to apply to law school, because that was my intention to go to law school. And I didn't want to go to a law school in Florida. I didn't even apply to one.

I had felt like I had spent so much of my life there, and my horizons were expanding, and I wanted to continue to be somewhere else in a different kind of environment. And I was intrigued at that time, in early to mid-seventies, there was a lot of social upheaval. Of course, the Vietnam War had just wound down. On a side note, people who were around at that time will remember that the Vietnam draft was a huge issue, because the war itself was an issue at that time.

And at one point a lottery was instituted, because of the, I guess, largely because of the consternation about the fact that it was the poor kids who were getting sent off to fight the war and the rich kids with their college deferments etcetera were able to avoid it. I was certainly no rich kid, but I was lucky enough to get a deferment for college. Then deferments for graduate school were ended, which meant that I was exposed.

CW: Right.

KR: But I was grandfathered, because at whatever point that kicked in, I was going to be okay. But when they instituted the lottery my birthday came up as number five in the lottery, so that there was no doubt that if I had been subjected to the lottery, you know, my eligibility, my deferment would have ceased.

And I guess I experienced a lot of anxiety about that, because not only was I opposed to the war at that point philosophically, but obviously the thought of going out fighting a war was so alien to me as it was to many people who never the less had to do it. And I certainly recognize that.

There was nothing special about my circumstance in that regard. But yeah, there was a lot of angst about that, and fortunately the war was finally ended before I left college and had to face that. But, you know, it was certainly a huge thing that hung over everyone's lives at that time.

CW: Right.

KR: But what made me think of that was the fact that when I got about, set about to choose the place to go to law school, there was also a background of great social unrest stemming, of course, largely from the civil rights movement, but also urban decay, the plight of the inner cities. There were, had been, and would still be riots in major American cities originating in the slums of ghettos and neighborhoods of largely African American inner cities.

And I was intrigued by all that as something to not just study but assist with in my career, be a part of. And I ended up going to Rutgers law school in Newark, New Jersey. It intrigued me for a number of reasons. First of all, Newark was one of those cities that had experienced riots and the law school was located right in the heart of downtown Newark. But they also offered a joint degree program with the law school and the—I don't know if it was called the school of urban planning.

But anyway, it led jointly to a law degree and a master's degree in city and regional planning. So, I actually signed on for that program and spent— It was supposed to provide both degrees in four years rather than the five that they would take independently, three years for law school and two years for the master's program with some over lapping courses and what have you. I ended up doing it in three and a half. So, I didn't graduate from law school with my entering class, but I did graduate half a year later.

Um, Lorie and I had decided, and then we had a lot of conversations about this over time — Oh, I should mention that one of the other appealing things about the law school at Rutgers was we would be close to New York City. And I didn't know New York City. I had never been to New York City, but I was intrigued, again, about the very different sort of environment it would represent.

And in fact one of the— Besides the fact that I got a good legal education, being a reasonable train ride away from New York City also was tremendous, because I got to really know and fall in love with New York. And that too has been something that I've carried with me throughout my life.

It's a real joy still, to go to New York, and be absorbed in the rhythm and the excitement. I haven't been back there as often over the years as I would like, but often enough to keep up somewhat. Certainly, it's not like having the Broadway Theater easily accessible, but anyway.

CW: So, when did you graduate from college? What year was that?

KR: I graduated from college in '73, and so that's when I entered law school as well. And so that would have normally had me graduate from law school in '77, but in fact it was early in '78—

CW: Okay.

KR: —when I finished. And it was then that I moved to Tampa. Again, Lorie and I had decided to move back to Florida rather than— As much as I love New York, and as much as I can understand not only someone choosing to live there, but feeling like they couldn't possibly live any place else. I get that completely. It has its hardships. Hailing a cab in the sleet is a hardship. And, of course, it's very expensive as well.

So, we did decide we were going to move back to Florida. Not back to Jacksonville, I still felt it was too parochial a place. It's funny I had gone away to college just assuming that I would move back to Jacksonville, 'cause it's kind of all I knew, and a few years later it was the last place on earth that I would want to go back to. And honestly since then it's mellowed.

It would certainly not be the last place on earth I would want to go back to, but I can still relate to the sense I had of it at the time, it was just not something I was going to do. And I had a professor at law school, who himself was a southerner, an anomaly to be sure at Rutgers law school, who kind of took me under his wing. Ellen Smith was his name.

And he had spent a good deal of his time in Florida, and was acquainted with partners at some of the major law firms in Florida, one of those law firms was Carlton Smith— Carlton Fields, I'm sorry, Carlton Fields ___(?), now known as Carlton Fields, and Holland and Knight (?), and through his letters of introduction, I got interviews with both those firms for a summer internship the summer before I graduated and took the internship with Carlton-Fields, and ended up taking a job with Carlton-Fields when I graduated.

I was there for three years. The life of the big law firm really didn't suit me for reasons I wasn't quite sure about, but, again, looking back I realize that pretty much every aspect of my life was effected by the fact that I was a closeted gay man, or, not so much closeted as just not recognizing it myself. Something was wrong, and I didn't know exactly what it was, and it was affecting just my whole psyche and my approach to life.

In any case, I left Carlton-Fields. I actually spent a year teaching at Stetson law school, which is here, of course. They didn't have the Tampa Campus at the time. It was just in St. Petersburg. Filling in for a professor who was on sabbatical that year, and that was sort of an interim thing, and was meant to be. I actually enjoyed it. And then, I'm trying to think of the chronology.

It was sometime after— Oh, well, another important thing I guess that occurred in that period is I began seeing a therapist, a psychologist. Again, out of this sense that something wasn't settled, something wasn't right. And people close to me had suggested that it might be something that would be helpful. I ended up spending a good bit of time in therapy.

It was mostly once a week for a period of years, and then I'd take a break, and then I went back for a few more years, a number of years. And I have to say it was the very best and most important thing I've ever done for myself. I highly recommend it to people who at the right stage in their lives, and men, I think, that's probably in the thirty-ish sort of age range, thirty to thirty-five when your view of life starts changing and you need some grounding.

Anyway, it was through that process that I confronted being gay and it actually occurred fairly early. I had a very good therapist who knew how to open the door for me to acknowledge it without frightening me or freaking me out. Of course, that left the fact that I was married to a very lovely person and had in fact been married to her since before finishing college. I had never lived alone. I had never not been with family. I certainly had never ventured into even the single, even the life of a single man, much less the life of a single gay man.

CW: Right.

KR: And so there was a lot to deal with, and I can't say that I handled it very well. I hurt Lorie because of largely my own, I will say, cowardice, my own difficulty in just confronting what needed to be confronted and being willing to take the consequences. I tried to keep the ship afloat for my own convenience, I guess, even though it obviously was not at all convenient or comfortable in the long run.

I see that now, but at the time I just didn't have the maturity or the wisdom, or the fortitude to confront it in a way that would have been fairer or fair to her and to me, but especially to her. And I've always regretted the fact that I handled it as badly as I did. But we ultimately did get separated and, of course, divorced perhaps a year, year and a half later. And we remain in touch, thankfully.

We bridged that. She lives in Orlando now and remarried quite some time ago. But we touch base with each other on our birthdays and occasionally at other times. But just coming out meant, again, not just being a gay man in a world, where I wasn't, I had no idea what that meant, but also being single.

CW: Right.

KR: So, I had a lot of those things to confront. I moved into an apartment on Davis Island. I continued to practice law, but I had gotten a job as an assistant county attorney here in Hillsborough County, which fit in very nicely with my city planning background, because I was more or less in charge of things related to zoning and development regulation and land development, land use planning.

So, that very, very gratifying field for me to be in, and I ultimately took the same sort of position with the Manatee County Attorney's office. Commuted for a while and eventually moved down to Bradenton, although that was brief. Became the county attorney in Manatee County, but I was a little bit in over my head, and wasn't really willing to commit to being in Bradenton.

I kept coming back to Tampa on the weekends. Again, I was a gay man. And I lost that job, because of, you know, it was a political appointment and, ah, politics happened. And again, I was kind of a fish out of water there. I think I was also probably the youngest county attorney in the state. I was still pretty young then. It was— Oh, let's see maybe my mid-thirties by then, thirty-four, thirty-five, something like that.

So, I was a—and I really wasn't inclined to work the political levers, that was just never my instinct. I didn't like playing games of that sort, perhaps because I didn't feel like I was any good at it, or would be any good at it and I might lose. And so, I avoided all of that. It was after I was settled back in Tampa and there was some—I'm trying to piece it all together. When you get to be my age, you know, decades fly by not just years.

CW: Right, right.

KR: But um—

CW: So, you came out in Tampa then in the eighties?

KR: Yes.

CW: Okay.

KR: Yes.

CW: Okay.

KR: And as we get into the late eighties, obviously I'm living back in Tampa. I guess my entry into activism occurred when I read in the newspaper that a measure was being proposed to both the Hillsborough County commission and the Tampa City Council to expand their respective human rights ordinances, their anti-discrimination ordinances to include sexual orientation as well as race, gender, disability and the other categories that were already there.

And I was at a stage in my life where I felt that I wanted some meaningful civic engagement. I was settled enough in my role as a gay man to be willing to be very, very public about it, although it was still a big bridge to cross. Even though I was out living life as a gay man, there were many people I had known in my life as an attorney who had no reason to know that that's what had happened to me.

And so, I was going to be out on a much bigger stage, if I got involved in something public, but I did, because I guess a large enough part of me wanted to do that, wanted to make some sort of contribution. (pause)

CW: Activism.

KR: Yeah, so, I think it was the Hillsborough Human Rights Commission, which was a citizen body appointed by the, I'm not sure how the appointees arrived there exactly, but it was charged with ways to enhance the city and county's civil rights and human rights environment and recommended these ordinance amendments to the city and county, and that was my springboard for becoming involved.

There was a fellow named Bill Cagle, whom I encountered I believe at a gay pride event. And somebody told me who he was, that he was a member of the commission, and a member of the gay community, who was sort of at the forefront of introducing this legislation, and I made a point of going over to meet him and introducing myself.

And he I guess saw in— Because I was an attorney, and, I guess, articulate, and could be a good face for the cause, and, so, he was eager to involve me. And so, I kind of hopped on to something that was already underway, but I did become the public face in the sense that I was the one who was interviewed by the media regarding the issue as it became a newsworthy item.

I was the one who went on the Kathy Fountain Show to make the case, with some horrible homophobe sitting next to me, and that was—You know, we went to the city and the county one at a time, of course, and both bodies defeated the ordinance proposal that first time. But the effort to put it before them generated, first of all, a lot of news coverage as I alluded to, but for the first time a lot of awareness in the community that this wasn't just some abstract issue that was flickering on the national scene, but it bought it home.

And it was really the first time that it was talked about in the media, and therefore had to be talked about by politicians, because they were being asked about it. And they had to take a stand. And it was— Well, the hearings where those ordinance proposals were considered drew out just scores of people, many of whom walked to the podium and spoke of their own circumstances, many of whom were outing themselves publicly by doing so.

And many of whom truly did not know if they had a job the next day or how their families would react. There was—excuse me—there was a great deal of bravery in my point, and more bravery than I had been called upon to exhibit. I mean, I was just the talking head. I was the guy who went out there and was willing to speak about it publicly, but, you know, I wasn't worried about my job and I wasn't worried about my family and many of these people were.

And anyway, as a result of that experience, both being moved by the experience and also being very, very angry that your elected officials who represented you would slap you in the face that way, not recognize your right as a citizen to the same basic dignity and rights, privileges, responsibilities as every other citizen was offensive and jarring, it really—I think the movement locally was energized, absolutely energized by that initial round of rejections by the city council and the county commission.

People were angry and they got mobilized. And up to that time the annual gay pride gatherings had been attended by perhaps a few hundred people at most. They were not widely seen as something to participate in across a broad spectrum of community. The gay pride gathering that followed those actions at the city and county governments was attended by thousands. It was a completely different environment.

There was also an election year that followed. And we were able to mobilize people on behalf of candidates who were going to be friends to our community and appreciate the need for these kinds of measures. But it was the first time in Tampa that candidates for political office had been called upon to take a stand on this issue, you know, besides the potholes and the sewers.

CW: Right.

KR: The other thing, suddenly they had to also answer: Are you going to support this ordinance? And so it was— And we had a great crop of candidates it just so happens from both city council and the county commission. And we were able to mobilize volunteers for the campaigns for all those who were willing to stand with us.

People who could write checks, wrote checks. The gay community was very visibly involved in these campaigns. And we managed to help elect a majority of supporters, some very fine people. Not just because they supported us, but because they happened to be very fine people.

CW: Right, um-hm.

KR: In some cases, I think especially with Ruddy Fernandez on the city council, he was a member of the Catholic Church in south Tampa that had taken a very rigorous stand against these ordinances. And he wasn't just a member of the church. I mean, that church was a large part of his world. It was where he drew a lot of his political support, but also it was, you know, the environment he grew up in.

And he stood against the pressure coming from the pulpit and every other direction in his life to support us and there were others as well that did the right thing. They were good people. In the midst of all this, and again, I could sort out the chronology if I had to, but let's just say in the midst of all this—

CW: Okay (laughs) that's fine.

KR: —a couple of us thought it would be great to just enhance the entire profile of gay community with not just these political actions, but with social and cultural activities as well. And we hit upon the idea of a gay film festival.

CW: Right.

KR: At the Tampa Theater. That was kind of a logical venue, because it was public, publicly supported venue, and we didn't think they could say no because we were a group of gay people wanting to show gay themed films.

CW: Right.

KR: And in fact, they were from the get-go the management of the theater was very enthusiastic and very supportive. And it was for me more a political act than it was cultural, and I can say that now. Obviously, the Tampa Theater is not a place that can be used for any overtly political. And there was nothing overtly political about showing gay themed films, but I certainly saw it as a part of an important effort to declare loudly to the community that we are a part of this community.

We are here. We're not going away. We're going to have our film festivals. We're going to have our rallies and picnics and gatherings. We're going to participate in this community just like anybody else. And it seems—I mean, fortunately we've arrived at a point where all that seems a little bit anachronistic, but at the time it was very important just to make those essential points, because the world was still being educated, and we were doing our little part here in Tampa.

CW: So, were you— So, from the beginning of the film fest, did the Klan—I know the Klan protested some of the film festivals, but did they protest all of them from the beginning or did it take a while for them to—

KR: You know, I don't, I honestly don't remember. I guess now that you mention it, there were some jokers who showed up in those ridiculous robes among, you know, there were always a few people kind of hackling on the sidelines and whether they came from— There was a guy named David Caton, who was supposedly the head of some organization called the American Family Association.

Well, it's still— It's Donald Wildmon's group. It's been around for a long time. David Caton was sort of the local guy. (coughs) Excuse me. And whether it was his people or,

you know, there were always some crack pots hanging around the fringes. I don't recall them being an issue.

There were some— There did come a time when pretty early on, I can't remember whether it was the very first year of the festival or not, where there was recognized that we needed some law enforcement. Well, I mean, we closed off that part of Franklin St. anyway, so we needed some police presence there.

CW: Right.

KR: And, you know, we had whatever permits we needed to be there. And so, we never felt threatened. It was—the numbers of people who showed up were small, even if they had bullhorns, they were an annoyance.

CW: Right, right. Okay.

KR: And, of course, we laughed at them. I mean, it was just really— But I will say that that very first film festival much like when we had the ordinance hearings, because at this point the ordinances had not passed.

CW: Right.

KR: The first film festival occurred in interim period between the rejection and the ultimate adoption of those ordinances. Just as was the case when we held, when the hearings were held on the ordinances, we didn't know if anybody was going to show up.

CW: Okay.

KR: We didn't know. We had to ask the media people who were there, and every television station, every network television news broadcast had cameras there, to please respect people's privacy. And we didn't know if people being afraid of that public exposure just wouldn't show up, because to get into the Tampa Theater you've got to line up outside.

CW: Right, yeah.

KR: And we still do. But to my delight, once again, people showed up. They showed up and they lined up. And they lined up to go to a gay film in downtown Tampa in front of the television cameras at a time when that was not a safe, necessarily safe, thing to do.

CW: When you say that it wasn't safe, do you mean just that people could still be fired from their jobs?

KR: Yes, yes. I don't mean that there was any real threat of a physical danger. I guess that could have been in the air. You know, there's always some safety in number so that by gathering as a crowd, but I suppose there certainly was the possibility that somebody could hang out, see people on their way there, and, you know, do them physical harm.

You know, it's so far away from my consciousness now that it's hard to remember that that might have been the case, but indeed it might have been the case that people might have been physically afraid to be seen going to a gay film festival on the sidewalks of downtown Tampa. But more it had reference to being seen on television on the nightly news cast and having your employer say, "Really?"

Of course, at that point there were no protections against being fired or any other kinds of — You know, we talk about: the law protects against the specific things it can protect against, but there are also sorts of discriminations and prejudices that can show up in ways large and small in a person's life beyond just getting fired or denied an apartment. And so, yeah, that was the start of the film festival, and that was certainly has become a highlight, because people have managed to keep it going over the years.

CW: That was 1990?

KR: 1990 sounds right. Yes, because I think the ordinance rejections occurred in '89. I think 1990 was the election year. I believe our first film festival was in June. I think we kind of timed it around gay pride. The political campaigns were beginning to get underway, but would get more underway as the summer went on. The elections for county commission occurred in the fall of 1990 and for city council in the spring of '91.

CW: Okay.

KR: And so then big joint public hearing at which the ordinances were adopted occurred later in 1991. So, yeah, that sounds right.

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

CW: So, the gay community wasn't really unified politically prior to the human rights ordinance?

KR: No, there was nothing really to rally around. In fact, even in the term gay community (laughs)—

CW: Okay. Seems—

KR: There were lots of gay people out there and lots of them knew each other, or not.

CW: Right (laughs).

KR: And there were events. There was a gay men's chorus. So, you know, that was an important— There was already that cultural institution. There was a business guild that consisted of gay business people that was already established. So, yeah, sure there was a sense of community certainly in pockets and in— But the presentation of these political measures and the visibility that it got in the media pulled it all together in a much bigger way.

And I think let everybody, just reminded everybody that they were a part of something larger and provided something bigger to attach to and be part of. The ordinances were challenged legally. David Caton's organization spearheaded efforts to repeal them by popular vote. We challenged the repeal efforts. There was variety of different sorts of challenges that occurred in the succeeding years.

My role as a lawyer, I was a part of an effort to get one of the city of Tampa's repeal efforts struck from the ballot. We were actually successful. That was one of the highlights of my career as a lawyer, certainly. Of course, that was one of the problems I had with being a lawyer is the things that meant the most to me were the things I wasn't getting paid for.

CW: Right. (laughs)

KR: Like that. And yeah, that was a very, very gratifying. It was a great effort on the part of a number of people. We were fighting the repeal effort on the political front, of course, and there was a good chance we would have won it, but Nadine Smith, who has, of course, been the head of Equality Florida for a long time, was spearheading the effort on the political side to defeat the ordinance at the ballot box.

And she huddled with her top people, because I confronted her, I said, “Nadine, are you sure that we shouldn’t just if we think we’re going to win the ballot box, do it that way?” And I don’t imagine it was an easy decision, but once we had the court decision in hand, their judgment was to go with it and defend it, because it could have been put on hold.

It could’ve, the vote could have gone forward at that point, but we defended it successfully through the appeals process. There was an appeal to the District Court of Appeal. There was also a— They filed a measure. They, I say, David Caton’s group filed a measure in federal court to try to get it back on the ballot, but we succeeded in a couple of very hectic days.

The election that that measure was slated to be voted on at, of course, occurred on Tuesday as all election days do. We didn’t get the judges’ decision striking it from the ballot until late Thursday afternoon preceding. (laughs) So, we had a couple of very frantic days.

CW: Right, right.

KR: In the appeals court. (laughs)

CW: Gosh.

KR: Yeah, that was quite a— And interestingly, Pam Iorio, who was the supervisor of elections at the time, it was she who we had to sue.

CW: Um-hm, wow.

KR: To try to get the measure struck from the ballot. Of course, it was only in her official capacity that she was being sued. And yeah, I had met with her before we filed the suit and explained what we were getting ready to do, and why she had to be the person who was named, because, of course, Pam had been a great supporter of ours throughout.

When the anti-discrimination ordinance was first presented to the county commission, it was defeated by a five-to-two vote and only she and Jan Platt had voted to approve it. So, yeah, Pam had been in our corner all along. So, obviously I had to explain to her why we were suing her. (laughs) She understood, so that was fine.

Yeah, a couple of days of frantic legal activity as we went to the appeals court, and it wasn't until the Monday night before the Tuesday vote that we received the— Well, both decisions; late Monday afternoon we received the district court of appeals opinion affirming the judges' ruling, and then later that evening the federal district court judge's ruling rejecting the challenge in federal court, which meant that the measure would not be on the ballot.

Of course, it was physically on the ballot and I'm still not sure how all that was handled. The votes were not counted, never revealed, whatever. So, and I do remember that there were signs placed in every polling place that said that this measure was not to be voted on.

CW: Right, wow.

KR: Which didn't probably keep some people from marking it anyway, but we'll never know I suppose. Anyway, yeah, that was a very eleventh hour thing.

CW: Wow. So how many people were involved in this frantic process?

KR: Well, there were about four attorneys, myself and three others. And we had help from some other people doing some research for us and what have you. There was a fairly small group. It was a group of maybe a dozen people, and, of course, we were getting support from the community organizations as well.

But one of the lawyers was Lubell Trummy(?), was a Holland and Knight attorney, so we had some of the resources of the firm available in terms of just compiling things and what have you. It was a great effort, very satisfying effort. (inaudible noise)

CW: Sure.

pause in recording

CW: Okay.

KR: And I mentioned that that was certainly among my most gratifying moments as an attorney as far as my legal career is concerned. I also recall dealing with some cases that obviously involved people being victimized by discrimination, employment or housing, that got attention in the news media during this time frame. But there was one incident in particular that I recall.

I had— Obviously because people knew me in the gay community, they would come to me for some of their legal difficulties, and that included men who might get arrested for lewd and lascivious behavior, because the police had set up some sort of sting operation. And there was one case in particular, one of the leading members of the Catholic Church locally, Norman Balthazar, was arrested for lewd and lascivious behavior, or something like that.

And obviously his arrest made headlines, because he had been very vocally anti—the ordinance. Well, when the ordinances were being considered, he had enjoined his congregation to, you know, vote to repeal the ordinance. He had been clearly visibly and publicly against these adding sexual orientation protections to the human rights ordinances.

And then he was arrested for soliciting a male cop. And I believe it occurred, if I am not mistaken, in a parking lot at night with him in one car and the cop in another car, or walking up to the car, or something like that. And the reason I remember this incident so well, besides the fact of— Well, I thought the hypocrisy was just so obvious that it didn't even bear commenting upon.

CW: Right.

KR: That sort of spoke very eloquently for itself, right, but I used it as an opportunity to help educate people about what was going on here. I was immediately contacted by the media for my reactions, you know, as some sort of spokesperson for the gay community and as an attorney, “What’s your reaction to the fact that Monsignor Balthazar was arrested under these circumstances?” And I said, “Basically, I think it’s bullshit.”

As far as I know from the accounts of the incident that have been provided nothing occurred in public that was unseemly. This was a solicitation to perhaps, who knows, go back to my apartment, whatever. The same kinds of propositions that men and women are engaged in on a regular basis every day in places public and private of all sorts.

And as far as we know there was no discussion of money changing hands so it doesn’t fall into a definition of any sort of solicitation for prostitution. So, just exactly what was he arrested for, and now by the way you see what the problem is, because men who don’t have the profile of this high ranking Catholic priest are getting arrested and are the victims of sting operations like this all the time, and they, likewise, haven’t done anything wrong. They are just essentially being arrested for suggesting that another man have sex with them. (***)Not sure about this all being quotes or not)

CW: Right.

KR: And that’s not against the law.

CW: Right.

KR: And it shouldn’t be against the law and we shouldn’t be expending the resources of our law enforcement agencies to entrap people who are just soliciting, you know, private consensual sex. It’s not against the law.

CW: Right.

KR: (laughs) It’s what people do.

CW: So that occurred often, these sort of arrests?

KR: Yeah, pretty regularly, pretty regularly. The Tampa police department to its credit wised up pretty quickly when we started calling these things to their attention. And their policies, you know, I know nothing about the inner workings, or what discussions, or deliberations they had, or what decisions were made, but they, the Tampa Police Department, was never a difficult organization to work with, so I don't want to malign them at all.

Once it was called to their attention things started shifting, you know. They would still set up these operations in places where children might be.

CW: So, obviously public places not by bars or—

KR: Public places, right, right. But I would still learn of the officers who were involved in doing the soliciting engaging in some inappropriately come-on types of activities, but, you know, again they understood that this sort of thing had to be approached very carefully to be fair, and they got it (laughs) in the big picture, institutionally.

And so, you said you had some—that, and, you know, I continued to be involved politically with what ultimately became Equality Florida for several years. I did some organizing around the state assisting Nadine, and others like her in that effort, but you said you had maybe some questions to ask me.

CW: Yeah. So, um, well, they're slightly personal, I guess, to begin with. When was your first Pride parade? Was it in Tampa that you first went to a Pride parade or—

KR: Oh yeah. Yes, I really, I mean, since then I've certainly gone to other big city pride parades over the years. But yeah, it probably was that Tampa, in fact, it may have been that Tampa gathering at which I met Bill Cagle and embarked on the politics as it were.

CW: So, what was that experience like for you? Was it like shocking?

KR: Actually there was not a parade as I recall.

CW: Was it a picnic?

KR: If there was a parade, I was not at a parade. It was more of a picnic, yes.

CW: Right, okay.

KR: Yes, yes.

CW: The earlier days of—

KR: Yes.

CW: Okay.

KR: I don't know if they had—there may have been a parade. I wasn't at the parade.

CW: No, I think you're right. I think there were picnics for a couple years prior to there being an actual parade.

KR: And I've never been, just my personality, I'm not a parader. I'm not a picketer or a sign carrier. I admire and God bless the people who do it. It's just not my personality.

CW: Um-hm. So, when you did come out in Tampa, which we established was kind of the eighties, what was the gay community like then? Was it easy to find—using the term “community” loosely—but was easy to find other gay people and to have sort of a support system?

KR: Yeah, let me correct an impression I may have given. There certainly was a gay community. It's not at all fair to say otherwise.

CW: Okay.

KR: Um, as I said, there was the gay men's chorus, which was well established at time. There was the business guild. There were certainly events, but as was the case in most cities, a lot of it revolved around the gay bars. I mean, that's where you went to meet people.

You know, people had private things. Well, there was a Halloween party. You know, the Halloween party still going on. It's like in its 35th or 36th year. I mean, that well predates the political stuff I've been talking about. In fact, I went—My first gay event was one of those Halloween parties.

CW: Really?

KR: Yeah, and I had to sneak to it because I was still married.

CW: Wow.

KR: I had to make an excuse. I had to stuff some sort of a costume in the trunk of my car.

CW: What was your costume?

KR: Oh gosh, a cavalier of some sort. Something designed to make me look pretty.

CW: They're very, um, elaborate, those costumes.

KR: Yes. Mine was not. I had to pull it together from things I had in my wardrobe, just so I wouldn't not be in costume. That was the main point. And if I'm not mistaken that Halloween party that I went to, and I went there by the way with great trepidation because, first of all, I didn't know, at that time, you don't know who's gay and who's not.

I didn't know who else I was going to run into, and my life was still very much anchored in my identity as a married lawyer. (laughs) You know, I believe it was the 7th annual. I could be mistaken about that. I'd have to look at the numbers, but I think it was the 7th annual Halloween party.

So, again, it was already something that was going on. There was definitely a gay community surrounding that. But during the course of the year it was mostly about the bar scene. And, of course, there was the Old Plantation, which was where I came out. That was the first gay bar I ever went to. There was Rene's and there was El Goya, which later became Tracks.

CW: Right.

KR: In Ybor City. And then there were the neighbor bars like Baxter's. But, yeah, that's kind of where you find your folks.

CW: So, what was the Old Plantation like for you the first time going?

KR: Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. Again, I'm still married. I'm a lawyer. And, you know, the draw was so strong. I got to find out. I had no idea what was behind that door, just no idea what I was going to encounter. I just knew that it was a gay bar and I have to go here.

And when I walked in, it was dark but there was a dance floor. And I think the first time I went was on a night when it was not a big night, you know. It was a weeknight of some sort. And there was just a lot of trepidation, but, of course, you know, people are people. And I got used to it.

CW: So, you had no inclination that you might be gay this whole time—

KR: Oh gosh, that's such a complicated question.

CW: Okay, well, I don't mean to ask—

KR: The answer is complicated. No, no, and it's different for everybody and a lot of things are the same for everybody.

CW: Right, right.

KR: Some can say that they knew when they were five years old or eight years old. Looking back on my childhood and my adolescence I can certainly identify things that signify that I was destined to be gay.

CW: Right, okay.

KR: But at the time they did not occur to me as that, in part because I didn't have anything to connect it to as a concept. And to the extent that I encountered evidence of quote people like that, the reason I noticed them is because of their flamboyance, and like so many young gay people, I would say to myself, "Well, I'm not that." So, that just keeps you further from, you know, you don't know that some of the lawyers, and doctors, and plumbers, and everybody else are also gay, because they don't wear a label.

The only ones with the label were the flamboyant ones and so you say, "Well that's not me." Was I aware of my attractions? Yes. Did I fool around with my best friend in high school? Yes. But none of that added up to "I'm a gay man" in large part because the concept of a gay man was not out there as something to be identified with.

CW: Okay, I understand that. Wow.

KR: And that's why, I mean, it is no accident that the poles have shifted on gay marriage, for example, the way they have or on any of the other issues that are important to gay people. It is a combination of things that add up to visibility and the assurance of—I hate to use words like normality—but diversity. There are gay people everywhere and it's not exotic. I mean, I guess that's the best way to put it.

Everything contributes to that. *Will & Grace* contributed to that. You know, the political efforts contribute to that. Individuals coming out in the families contribute. It all feeds. Everything feeds on everything else. It's a critical mass that develops. I remember when I was in law school going on a bike ride in Central Park on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, my wife and I.

And it happened to be unbeknownst to me gay pride day in New York, and the march was going through Central Park, and we actually came across the march and there were—I'll never forget—a guy on roller skates in a crinoline kind of fairy outfit with a tiara and a wand, who was skating in and out of the marchers, doing twirls and flips, and really quite acrobatic and accomplished at it.

And there were lots of men, well-built men, with their shirts off, which had me fascinated. But I just remember that glimpse of something not just exotic, but obviously appealing, "What's that about? What is that? What's out there?" You know, I fell in love with ballet when I saw my first ballet performance, which was on that trip to the Soviet Union. I saw the Bolshoi perform *Swan Lake*, and my second ballet about a week later was in Leningrad. I saw the Kirov do *Sleeping Beauty*.

And the time that I spent in law school, I went to the ballet every chance I got, mostly New York City ballet. Balanchine was still alive. It was still his company. And I just loved the ballet, and a large part of the appeal is I love watching men do athletic things.

And when their athleticism is combined with something beautiful, it's really stunning. Of course, to this day I love watching men dance, but I think I appreciate the ballet on other levels as well, but certainly that was one of those things I was drawn to without really understanding way.

CW: Um-hm, right.

KR: I mean, I knew I wanted to look at these beautiful men. I explained it to myself as "Oh, the artistry" __(?) love looking at beautiful men.

CW: That's interesting. That brings me to another question. Do you remember or recall male physique magazines? They weren't gay magazines, but they were like publications for men, you know, that kind of centered the gay male, or not gay male body, the male body.

KR: Yeah, the male body. I wasn't real familiar with them. What I do remember is— Of course it was okay for me to look at *Playboy*, right, and *Penthouse* magazines that were, you know, exposed the female body, but every now and then one of those magazines would have a feature, a pictorial feature that included a man. And I would look through every one of them hoping that this month there would also be a naked man in the pictures. I really wasn't aware too much of the male physique magazines.

CW: Okay.

KR: I've learned since of course that they're out there. I didn't know about it at the time.

CW: Wow, I didn't know *Playboy* had the male spread from time to time.

KR: Well, it wasn't a male. It was a male-female. It would be—it would still be—it would just be instead of a woman alone, it would be a woman making love to a man.

CW: Oh, I see. Okay.

KR: And in the process of showing those, you would also get some male physique.

CW: Right, gotcha. Okay. So, I have another kind of strange question for you. Does Stonewall hold any sort of significance for you? I know that's like, you know, the pride celebration is commemorates Stonewall.

KR: It happened before I was aware. When it happened I— It wasn't really on my radar when it happened. Again, it occurred in 1969, which was the year I graduated from high school. It was the year after both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King had been assassinated.

I was politically aware then. I mean, I was, but this— And I was certainly caught up in the whole countercultural thing that was going on at that time. I was very aware of it. But Stonewall as an event, or gay liberation, or gay pride as a movement wasn't on my radar, not in Jacksonville or at Stetson University.

CW: Okay. Did you like come to learn about Stonewall through the gay community? Or um—I know, it's a rough question.

KR: I can't remember, can't remember. I can't remember.

CW: Okay.

KR: It probably was through the gay press somehow, references to it.

CW: Right, right.

KR: I learned about it. I'm trying to think if when I lived, when I was in law school and lived in New Jersey, and was going to New York with some regularity, into the city, if I—

I don't think that I ever went to the physical location of it. I don't think I had it in mind then. And, of course, I might have been sticking my head in the sand about it, too.

CW: Have you ever been to Stonewall since then, in your travels?

KR: Well, yes. I have been to Greenwich Village. I've been to where—I think it's been reopened somehow, but I know for a long time there was a plaque there that commemorates it, but the physical space had been turned into something else or maybe it just wasn't the same kind of bar anymore or something. I think it's, obviously, in that many years most establishments go through a lot of transitions.

CW: When you say that you were involved in sort of the counterculture in the late sixties, seventies, within the counterculture was there any reference to the gay liberation movement or was that not referenced in a lot of the movement, larger movement literature?

KR: When I say I was—I lived through it. I know what was going on, but in away a big way I was kind of a counterpoint to the counterculture.

CW: Okay.

KR: I was never a preppy, but I was never, I was certainly never toward the hippy end of the spectrum either. In fact, I was toward the other end of the spectrum. So, yeah, no. It just wasn't—and again, I was married. I was going to law school. You know, I was engaged in that whole sort of straight-laced trajectory, and I was sympathetic to a lot of it certainly politically.

I didn't I guess adopt a political stance as radical as that of many of the people around me, but ever since I've been politically aware, I've been certainly liberal. When I say liberal with a libertarian streak, but, no, I— Definitely my politics have always been liberal. I think I've related more to, or not related, but was more interested in the critique of that era of corporate influence.

And the degree to which corporate America was calling the political and cultural shots, and, sort of, I've always been keenly aware of that critique. And so, and law school obviously, studied constitutional law, and I've never been interested in business. Business law is just not, doesn't motivate me, but all that, kind of, has come together for me in terms of my own philosophy, politics.

CW: Do you have any concluding remarks for the record?

KR: Oh gosh. Only that I hope to keep it rolling, (laughs) for a while longer anyway, as long as I can. I was very gratified two years ago— It was two years ago—when Equality Florida gave me an award. They call it their Voice of Equality Award in recognition of my efforts of some years ago, because I do feel like there was an era, and I was obviously very active. I was very pleased to get that recognition some years later. To be reminded that I guess I made a mark and left something, left a contribution. So, it's all good.

CW: Alright, well, thank you for letting me interview you.

KR: Okay, you're welcome. Thanks for the opportunity.

End of Interview