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Title: LGBT Oral History: Ann Van Dyke

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Interviewee: Ann Van Dyke

Interviewer: Don Fitz

Date of Interview: July 29, 2014

Location of Interview: ?

Transcriber: Sarah Goldberg

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Abstract:

Ann Van Dyke was born in a farming community in Bradford County, Pennsylvania, where she was raised in a devout Methodist home. After moving to Mechanicsburg to work at the Methodist Home for Children at age 19, Ann was exposed to the more diverse Harrisburg community that challenged the ideals of her upbringing. She went on to study at the Middletown campus of Pennsylvania State University and then moved to Harrisburg to work for the State Human Relations Commission. In this work, Ann offered trainings about hate crimes and organized hate groups, collaborating with several major organizations such as the Community Responders Network and Equality PA as well as with the U.S. Department of Justice until her retirement in 2012. In this interview, Ann discusses her experience identifying and challenging her homophobic beliefs that were engrained during her childhood. Ann describes how she began to identify as a straight ally when several of her close friends, family members, and, eventually, foster son came out as gay. She also describes the legislative difficulties the Commission faced in preventing LGBT hate crimes, especially when sexual orientation and gender identity were added to the state's list of protected classes, but then were later repealed.

DF: I think it's important to get your background.

AV: Okay.

DF: Where you were born, your religious background, your employment history.

AV: Yes, okay.

DF: Because that'll give us a framework for where you're coming from.

AV: Yeah, yeah.

DF: Where you've been.

AV: Okay, okay.

DF: Just like we did with the—for the—

AV: Everybody else. Yeah, yeah.

LM: Okay.

DF: Good afternoon, my name is Don Fitz. I'm with the History Project. I'm interviewing today Ann Van Dyke. Today is July—Tuesday, July 29, 2014. Ann, do I have your permission to interview you?

AV: Yes, you do.

DF: At the end of the—at the end of the interview, I'll share with you how—and you may help us decide how this interview will be preserved and used.

AV: Okay.

DF: Can you give me a little bit about your background?

AV: I'm—I was born a farmer in Northern Pennsylvania. My family goes back about five generations in the valley where I was raised. I moved to a very—and I need to say—a very culturally isolated community. Everybody was this color of skin, and almost everybody went to the Methodist Church. There was very little diversity of any type where I grew up. We were a serious church-going family, but—which was good and helpful, but it also unfortunately taught me some biases. Some very ingrained biases I learned at my church, I say that with great sadness. And I also learned some biases at the knees of some really good people. A lot of those were learned by jokes. You know, jokes about people of color, jokes about people who are gay, jokes about immigrants, jokes about people with disabilities... So when I moved to Harrisburg at the tender age of—I was 19 when I came down to this area to work at the Methodist—

DF: From where are you?

AV: Oh, Bradford County, which is—

DF: Pennsylvania?

AV: Yes, which is as far north as you can get without falling off the top of the state, you know. So, when I moved down here to work at the Methodist Home for Children in Mechanicsburg, when I was about 19... Mechanicsburg was much like the area where I grew up, also quite culturally isolated.

LM: Let me hold one minute. I have to get my glasses. I think they're still out there.

AV: Oh, I think they are too.

[LM crosses screen and tries to open door]

AV: Push that up. Yes.

[LM exits]

AV: Wouldn't you know the dog would make noises? [laughs]

[LM crosses screen]

DF: If you have to bring him in, you do.

AV: Okay.

DF: Let me think where we were.

AV: Okay, I was at the Children's Home. I—I worked at the Children's Home for a couple years and then moved over into Harrisburg to work at the Methodist Neighborhood Center which was then at Sixth and Maclay, and that's when—for the first time in my life, I lived where everybody lived, and I worked with children of many backgrounds, particularly African American and Latino children, and that was the first time that I was aware that there was a lot of bias in me, and I had to start owning it and figuring out how it got there and figuring out what I was going to do with it. So, that was my crash course with racism within me, and then as I went to HACC [Harrisburg Area Community College], and as the women's movement really started to really come alive, I became a baby feminist [laughs] and continued to grow in that regard. So, I was opening and evolving when it comes to racism within me and when it came to sexism within me, but I was still very much keeping the whole area of sexual minorities as this is not my issue. I have no nickel in this dime. So, I was able to [air quotes] “comfortably” [gestures away] keep that as not my issue, at that—in my teens and in my twenties.

DF: Okay, before you go on, can you take me back to Bradford and tell me about you back in Bradford, you told me a little about your community—

AV: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's an important question, and I'm very sad to give you the answer to that. I was very involved in the church as a young person, and I remember when I was 16, I went away for a weekend church youth event, and at that event, I learned this long homophobic joke. And I came back and told that joke many times in many settings at my high school and with my friends. Years later, I would learn that one of my best friends, a young fellow by the name of Gordy, was gay, and he later died of AIDS. So, I am one of the people who convinced Gordy he could not be—that he could not be who he was.

DF: When you—when you—when you were telling that joke... when you heard that joke and when you were telling that joke, what were you getting out of that?

AV: What was I getting out of it? Well, again, it's that—the belief that because I wasn't gay, and I didn't have any relatives that were gay, and I didn't know any people who were gay—and by the way, much of that turned out to not be true, but that's what I thought at the time. Therefore, I did not have to worry about being kind to this group of people. I did not know any of [air quotes] “them.” So, it wasn't my issue, I didn't have to be kind to them. And telling the joke got me attention. [shrugs and sighs] I think that's the best I can do.

DF: So, Gordy was the first gay male that you knew? That you—at the time you knew?

AV: At the time, and of course I didn't realize gay—Gordy was gay until I was in my late twenties, and then when I realized it, I was just heartbroken realizing that—the impact that I had and the message that I had given him when we were teenagers and when we were growing up together. So, when—when I was in my twenties and still insisting that this is not my issue in my late twenties—and I was trying to grow, trying to evolve as a person dealing with racism and sexism... I went back to school and in school—Penn State Extension at Middletown. You know how it is in classes, you often become friends with the person you sit next to. And, this dynamite young woman about my age whose name was Susan, she and I became friends and we used to go out of our way to have meals together at the campus and just—just became friends, and as the—as the semester went on, I could see that Susan's spirit was just getting heavier and heavier, and she was getting—she was getting withdrawn and isolated, and I finally said to her, "Susan, what's going on? I can see you're so heavy of spirit?" and she said, "Ann, I'm gay. They figured it out at work, and they're making my life miserable, I don't know if I can keep working there, and I really need that job." And it was like [gestures and makes explosion noise], you know, right away I realized, "Oh my god, this is my issue." And just before that, just around that same period of time, I had learned about Gordy. It's funny how life does that, it gives you lots of messages really fast. So, and—and just about that same time at Penn State, I had a professor in a sociology class that I really wrestled with. I thought he was way too conservative [laughs] for teaching that subject, and I wrestled with quite a few other students, all white men, in that class as well. And one day after class, he pulled me aside, and he said, "Ann, you better quit acting so uppity or people are going to think you're a lesbian." Well, that was another wake-up call, I mean, I was offended on so many levels. And offended on behalf of lesbian women. Because I was thinking, "Holy smokes, so this is one of the things that lesbian women have to go—go—have to encounter." Plus, I had to come to grips with my fear of people thinking I was a lesbian. Knowing—know—just having this much [holds up two pinched fingers] of an idea of the lousy impact of homophobia every—everyday stuff can have on people. And then I was offended as a fledging feminist that he was telling me to shut up, you know. But, so—so—

DF: What did that mean, when you say the professor and the other gentlemen, the other guys in the class, there was kind of conflict between you and them, what was that like? What was that about?

AV: It was about a variety of social justice issues, but particularly about issues related to women. You know, about gender equity issues. So, at that time, I was running a group home for former state hospital residents, and so it was a community placement for former state hospital residents, older folks. And so I began to evolve when it comes to prejudice and all types of—of actual discrimination against people with disabilities and people who are older, 'cause the folks in the home were between the ages of 50 and 90. And they had, you know, mental health issues as a disability, and—and so my perception of "wow, how we do people wrong" was just getting bigger and bigger. My sense of the biggest problem most of the people in that group home had was that they were sad. You know? And with the right kind of support and everyday kindness, they were doing okay. But, they were also so aware that they were [air quotes] "marked," because they had been in the state hospital, because they had mental health prognoses, you know, that—diagnoses—that they were marked people, and so that helped me think more and more about what it was like for people who simply didn't feel welcomed and had to watch their backs

in so many different environments. Shortly after that, I was hired by the State Human Relations Commission, which enforces the state civil rights law.

DF: Can you give me a time frame? What year was it about?

AV: Okay, 1979.

DF: Okay.

AV: So, I was almost 30 then. 1979. And was gaining slowly in sense. Got—and—and recently had some very loud wake up calls about homophobia in me. So, I was hired by the State Human Relations Commission, but back then, and now, sexual orientation, gender identity, are not protected classes under state civil rights law. The law addresses employment, education, housing, and public accommodations. And so, when I started with the Commission, I thought, “Well, this something that I care about now, and I’m beginning to get some sense about, but it’s not under the jurisdiction of the agency with which I work for.” So, again, I was still kind of going, “Well there’s not really anything I can do.” I can care, but I can’t do. Which is another really common excuse that straight people give themselves, they go, “I’m not gay, none of my relatives are gay, I don’t have any friends who are gay, and even I do, there’s nothing I can do.” And just about this time—so just in my late twenties and just about the time that I started working for the Commission, my first cousin Robin—this is another big wakeup call—my first cousin Robin was on Ronald Reagan’s staff. Robin’s office was down the hall from the Oval Office. And Robin had been working for Reagan ever since Reagan—when Robin was a college intern for Reagan running for the gubernatorial in California. And I was mad at Robin [laughs] from my civil rights enforcement perspective that he was working for Ronald Reagan. I also knew that Robin was gay. So—but I kept my feelings and my relationship with Robin on the side of “I’m mad of you for working for President Reagan, because he’s not into my stuff—civil rights enforcement.” Knowing that Robin was gay and that Robin had to live so much of his life in total confidence and secrecy to keep his job. And also knowing that Reagan was in the position to do something as the AIDS epidemic really became clear to the nation, and he did not. Robin died of AIDS. Oh my gosh. And [sighs] yeah, in ‘92. Robin passed in ‘92. So, you know, life keeps telling us, we all have a nickel in this dime. And you know would to God, I had reached out to Robin more. Well, yeah, you get the drift. I—I was mad at him for working for Reagan. [laughs] And—

LM: Could we go for one?

AV: Yeah.

[recording #1 ends]

[recording #2 begins]

AV: --women, you know, people with disabilities, anybody who wasn’t born in this country, so but—but gay folks are high up on that list. So, as I studied the literature of organized hate groups, it was like, “Oh my gosh, yes, this—this is—there is something I can do, I am the trainer for the Human Relations commission. I am out there in communities where organized hate groups are active. This is—this is at the top of their list. There is something I can do. So—so I

went out of my way to, when I would do training, to use the literature and the recruitment flyers of organized hate groups and put them up in front of people to say, “Look, look who it is that they hate.” And, and, and to talk—to try to talk about how if you were anybody on that list that the day that literature showed up in your community, your life changed that day. And it didn’t go away in a week or in a month when everybody else had forgotten about this literature, these flyers. Your life changed that day. And for—particularly for gay folks who weren’t out, didn’t matter if they were or weren’t out, their life changed that day. The other thing I was in a position to do is it was my job to gather and document a whole variety of bias incidents. And, I was given the latitude to record, to record bias incidents, not just those incidents that—for which we had protected classes named under the Human Relations act. And so I started to put a lot of energy into reaching out to different LGBT groups in the state and to individuals to say, “Let the Human Relations Commission know, we can’t receive complaints on these issues, but doggone it we can log this stuff in.” We can keep careful records on what people are experiencing, and then I was in the position to start including it in my public education.

DF: Can you give me an approximate time frame for this?

AV: Okay. I started working for the Human Relations Commission in ’79, and I retired in 2012. So, for—

DF: But for the part you’re talking about right now was?

AV: Well, that began in 1989—

DF: Okay.

AV: —when I started doing the training and the dealing with civil tension and monitoring hate groups and working with communities. So in ‘89 through 2012, that’s what I spent 99% of my time doing. So, the bad news of—of... of all these organized hate groups, you know, of their literature and their philosophy, we were able to use as vehicles for education and vehicles to shock straight mainstream folks into the ugliness of hate and the power of silence. That’s something I learned to talk about a lot that—that... the biggest—the welcome mat for hate is silence. If I had a dime for every time I said that I could pay off my car. Silence is a welcome mat for hate. Whether it’s our silence in the morning at the water cooler when a friend tells a bigoted joke or whether it’s our silence as a community when some hate graffiti goes up or Klan literature is distributed. Silence is a welcome mat for hate. And—and I think that is particularly powerful when it comes to homophobia, because still it’s so egregiously common for [air quotes] “nice people” to tell homophobic jokes in a crowd that they think is safe, in a crowd they think, “Well, they’ll—this’ll be okay with these folks, they’ll think it’s funny.” And it’s—it’s just, we all have to say, in response to any bigoted [air quotes] “joke,” “Not around me.” If that’s the only thing we say, we have to say, “Not around me.” And—and I—I—I, over the years, you know, I have more and more dear friends and a foster son that are gay. And so now I can say, “My son’s gay.” Boy, that shuts folks up in a hurry. But I think, “Not around me” is really a powerful and a real important thing to say, because it’s not sparking an argument, as in—you don’t want to get into an argument, you just go “this is it, this is it.” So—so gathering that information, both about what organized hate groups were doing and about actual hate crimes. So hate crimes and

organized hate groups sometimes overlap, but it's sometimes very different things. Hate crimes are violations of Pennsylvania's or the federal hate crimes law, and that's a part of the crimes code. So, a hate crime is a criminal act motivated by hatred toward a short list of protected classes. Right now in Pennsylvania, that list is a criminal act motivated by hatred towards a person's race, color, religion, or national origin. So, if for example, someone got beaten up, and while they were being beaten up, the person was saying, "I told you, racial slur, not to come back into my neighborhood," that would be criminal act of assault, clearly motivated by racial hatred, so the hate crime laws apply. Now, for a hot minute, sexual orientation was a part of Pennsylvania's hate crimes law. It was—

DF: When was that?

AV: That was in '02. In '02, some of our friends in the legislature [laughs] in the middle of the night, because that's apparently the only way they could get it done, amended another bill and added in five new protected classes, and that would have been sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, handicap disability and ancestry, because those were the five that weren't in the original law. So, as soon as that happened, those of us in—in—that did the kind of work I did that kept track of this stuff and did training on the hate crimes law as well as training on the organized hate groups thought, "Wow, new day. And, I bet—I bet folks are going to be filing charges based on hate crimes based on sexual orientation left and right." [shakes head] It didn't happen. So we had to go, "Why isn't this happened?" Because we knew, of course we knew, that hate crimes were occurring. Of course we knew that people were being harmed—physically harmed—and experiencing vandalism to their homes and to their churches and to their vehicle—it was happening all the time. But people weren't filing charges, so we had to be a little astute, and go, "Why not?" Well, one of the reasons is a lot of these folks weren't out. Another reason was they feared retribution. Another reason was they didn't trust the police. And so, you know, we looked really closely on that, and we started doing more training for law enforcement around this issue is "Why aren't people filing hate crime complaints if we know these types of hate crimes have occurred in the last two years," and I'd pull out the database and give all these examples. Now that it's, that for example, sexual orientation and gender identity are protected classes, why aren't people filing? So we were able to do a lot of that type of training, and we did it as a team—Human Relations Commission, sometimes Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General, often U.S. Department of Justice, often Pennsylvania State police—so a great team. And we were able to give that message to all types of groups. We did a lot of teacher in-service training—woo, is that an important group to talk to—clergy groups, community groups, municipal law enforcement—did a lot of that. Well, in 2007, a group called Repent America, whose whole focus for being is...

DF: Pent America?

AV: Repent. Repent America –

DF: Oh, okay.

AV: Their whole focus for being is... being opposed to homosexuality, which now I look at as it's a little like being opposed to the Grand Canyon. After you're done being opposed to it, it's

still there, you know, like what's the point here? And—and they're really, they've really done just some heartrending things. We've seen them often. For example, when the Laramie Project, when that play was, regarding the death of young Matthew Shepherd, when that was being performed, Repent America was one of the groups that was always there to protest. But, back to the hate crimes law in '07, Repent America sued, saying that those last five protected classes that I just named that included sexual orientation and gender identity, saying that they had been improperly added to the hate crimes law, and they were right. It hadn't been done by the appropriate protocol laid out for the amendment of a bill. Now, the truth is, I suspect that many bills become law done the same way, but nobody sues, so they stand. Repent America did their legal homework and sure enough, that bill was amended, and it became law improperly. It was a paperwork thing. It was a protocol thing. But it got those last five protected classes removed from the hate crimes law. So we're back now to—[coughs] excuse me—to race, color, religion, and national origin. Those are the only protected classes under Pennsylvania's hate crimes law. Now, thankfully, there is a relatively new federal hate crimes law that does include sexual orientation and gender identity, but it's—it's more limited. It—it's only if the hate crime occurs in certain situations in certain places. Like, in transportation centers or on interstate or federal highways or interferes with interstate commerce, so it's there, but it's limited. My other concern is that there are no longer teams of—of the partners I referred to: we Civil Rights Folks and Criminal Rights Folks, like U.S. Justice, going around doing training for municipal law enforcement. And that's because the budget of the Human Relations Commission has been severely cut. Severely cut. And they no longer have the people free to do the kind of work that I did which was running around the state doing this kind of training and dealing with civil tension. That position doesn't exist anymore. In my division, where we—where we dealt with that type of issue, there were at one time seven of us—there needed to be seventy, but, seven was pretty good. Now there are, well, there's zero right now. I think they're planning on filling one position. So, the budget of the human relations commission has been severely cut. So, this is just such bad news. Little piece of bad—good news I can give in that regard is when I worked for the Commission, I helped form a citizen's group called the Community Responders Network. And that community group has a broad umbrella of concern—of focus. Their work is to prevent and respond to bias incidents—you name the bias incident. So, that leaves us free to put a lot of energy into preventing and responding to incidents within the LGBTQI issues. But we don't have law enforcement authority. We are simply a citizen's group. But the Human Relations Commission and U.S. Justice are so glad we exist, because that work isn't done elsewhere, and—and so we partner with them. We do the work and keep them informed, you know. So, the work goes on but not nearly as broadly we need it to be. I need to also say, Equality PA—I worked a lot with Equality PA when I was at the Commission, because you know, wonderful Ted Martin goes running around the state, and everywhere he goes another municipal human relations commission forms, and they have LGBTQI authority. And they have the authority for all the other protected classes, too. So—so you've got all those municipalities. Last I knew, it was something like 26, and there may be more since I saw the count of—so these little towns, townships, and municipalities, who do have civil rights protection over sexual orientation issues. But if folks aren't lucky enough to live in that particular town and they experience discrimination based on sexual orientation, they probably have no legal recourse. They may have no legal recourse. We encourage them to call the Human Relations Commission or the Interagency Task Force on Civil Tension, which the Human Relations Commission convenes, or the Community Responders Network, or Equality PA. Let somebody know so these incidents can be recorded—

can be kept track of. Because at the end of every year, then we can say to the legislature, “Look at all the people we could not help and why we could not help them.”

DF: Can you tell—Can you tell me about some of the ah-ha moments in your life regarding the LGBT people?

AV: Well, the big ones were with Gordy, with Susan, with my cousin Robin. But then there were, you know, 400 others. You know, particularly like when I would hear homophobic jokes and did not say anything and then later, in my head, did the list of all the people I love who were cut by that joke-

DF: Was there a moment that that happened? Was there a—?

AV: Many moments, many moments. And that’s why I decided within me, I have to have that statement ready to say, which is simply: “Not around me” or “My son is gay.” And I—I—so many ah-ha moments. And I think, you know, all straight people who are insisting “I have no nickel in this dime, this ain’t my issue,” they all have them too. But they’re able to push them away. And I—I am encouraged—I am encouraged—one of the groups that I belong to now that I’m retired and have the freedom to do it or the time freedom to do it—is the LGBT Interfaith Coalition, which is part—it comes under the umbrella of the Pennsylvania Interfaith Alliance, so this LGBT Coalition is—is part of that. And we work so that more congregations of all religious backgrounds will become open and affirming. So, that’s really exciting to see people of faith owning the label of “We are open and affirming.” And so I’ve—I’ve been very encouraged by that, and I guess that’s all the group that dismays me the most, is people of faith, when they don’t own that label. And the—the powerful damning they have done. The harm they have done to people over the years. But you know, we keep having to look to what encourages us and that I find greatly encouraging. My roots are by the way are Methodist. And of course, the Methodists have defrocked—I know of two, in addition to—I mean, Reverend [Frank] Schaefer, and another dynamite woman—that they [air quotes] “de-frocked.” The woman was because she was gay, and she came out, and of course with Reverend Schaefer is because he officiated at his son’s wedding. But the Methodist Church is one of those denominations that is being shook from within and without.

DF: Is that—you’re still a part of that?

AV: I belong to the United Church of Christ now, which is wonderfully open and affirming—thank God—but my congregation is a combination United Church of Christ and United Methodist, so that gives me still a foot in the door to—to—what do they call it? Rock the boat in the Methodist arena, which it’s just—it’s gonna happen. It’s gonna happen. And there’s other denominations out there that the same thing is happening both within and without. And we see that when it happens, when a denomination goes, “Okay, we’ve seen the light. We’re open and affirming,” a whole lot of folks leave. That—yeah, that’ll happen. That’ll happen. And—and another thing we see is that the denomination worries about, “We can’t afford to lose that financial support,” but when that’s—when that’s a concern—oh no, no, no [laughs] people of faith can’t be doing that. They have to go, “We’re just going to do the right thing here, people

have to leave, they have to leave.” But I really am encouraged. I’m encouraged by how many new... organizations of people of faith, not just churches, are becoming open and affirming.

DF: Okay. And I gotta ask you this—this is the History project. It’s the history of LGBT people in Central Pennsylvania. Why—what is your involvement about—why are you getting involved?

AV: Well, because of all those wake-up calls. Because of all the people who are dear to me that I directly harmed either by my acts or by my silence and then by all the new people I love that I’ve come to know over the years. And—and having that background in civil rights enforcement gave me knowledge and hard information that I can—that I’m in a position to take out there. And because I’m a person of faith, you know, this—this is what I’m supposed to be doing.

DF: Okay, is there anything else that you would like us to end with?

LM: How did AIDS impact your work for the state?

AV: Oh god [sighs] oh god. Well, it—it—those of us who were so, so dismayed that LGBT was not a protected class under Civil Rights law, when AIDS really began to have its incredible impact, we felt like we were going crazy. It was like—

DF: We, meaning your—your organization?

AV: Yeah, well, those of us, yeah, in the organization that—that wanted to have LGBT as a protected class. And—and some of us were straight, and some of us were gay, and we just felt like we were going crazy. We felt like what—what more does this country have to see? We also saw more fear—more—at the same time, more fear being developed by—out there in the general straight public about the gay community. So, it was—it was this [gestures and makes explosion noise] convoluted transition time in both positive efforts and negative efforts. It was both. And last, I want to say how honored I am to be asked to participate in this history project [laughs]. And I—

DF: How did you get involved?

AV: Oh well, I’m one of the participants. I do interviews as well.

DF: How did you get involved?

AV: [shrugs] I just heard that—that the new Center was doing this, and I’m just a great fan of oral histories. I’ve been a part of doing them with older folks from the African American community. I see their weight. I’m so concerned about people’s—any community’s history—being retained and honored and making sure it isn’t lost, you know. So, when I heard that the new Center was doing this, I thought, “Oh, I want to be a part of that.” So, I want to say, when I was first asked to be a—I loved being an interviewer—when someone asked me to be interviewed, I thought, “I don’t deserved to be in this project,” [laughs] but then I thought, well, maybe what I have to say about having not been an ally would be a value to people who are potential allies. And then I thought, and maybe what I learned being in an official civil rights

enforcement agent for the state, maybe that stuff will be of assistance to everybody. And I sure hope so.

DF: Excellent.

AV: Okay.

DF: Anything else you would like to add?

AV: I don't think so.

DF: Good job, good job. Thank you.

AV: Thank you.