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**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Joe Christ

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**Interviewee: Joe Christ [JC]**

Interviewers: Liam Fuller [LF], Barry Loveland [BL]

Date: August 8, 2018

Location: Coopersburg, Pennsylvania

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**Abstract:**

Joe Christ was born in 1927 with Klinefelter syndrome and assigned male at birth. The seventh of eight children, Christ was placed into an orphanage during the Great Depression where they stayed until age 18. Two weeks later, Christ was drafted into the Army and fast-tracked to work as a stool pigeon in a secret German Prisoner of War camp in Richmond, Virginia due to their fluency in German, Pennsylvania Dutch, and English. Following World War II, Christ got their degree in education from Moravian College, going on to teach English, German, and Social Studies while building and driving racecars, motorcycles, and flying planes as a hobby. In 1974, Christ went to Germany to teach American English on a Fulbright fellowship, where they met their second wife, Liz, a Fulbright scholar who was in Germany teaching British English. While working there, Christ helped improve the English skills of a German cytogeneticist to allow her to participate in the World Health Organization, and it was through this connection that Christ discovered they have XXY chromosomes. Christ had occasionally started presenting as a woman before learning they were intersex following the end of their first marriage in 1973, but never formally came out, electing to present as masculine or feminine selectively. Christ expresses comfort in being able to present as either/or, while not particularly identifying with the LGBT community.

**LF:** Rolling now. So, hello, my name is Liam Fuller. I'm here with Joe Christ and we are in Coopersburg, Pennsylvania. Today is the 8<sup>th</sup> of August and I just want to start with do I have your permission to conduct this interview?

**JC:** Yes you may.

**LF:** Okay, awesome. So I'd like to start at the very beginning of your life. Can you walk me through your family life, your early childhood development, where you were born, and in what year?

**JC:** This is a copy of my birth certificate, which has me registered as a male for the obvious reason. And I was born three miles from here in Northampton County. We are now in Lehigh County. So it's three miles away. The year was 1927. I was born two weeks after Charles Lindbergh took off from Roosevelt Field on Long Island and landed at Le Bourget Airport outside of Paris. So I grew up with the age of aviation and yes, I have a pilot's license. My father committed suicide in 1930. I was three years old. The Great Depression had begun just about six months before, and I was number seven of eight kids my mother had, and she couldn't afford us two youngest. I was three and my kid brother was just about eighteen months old. We were put into an orphanage run by the—at that time—it was the Evangelical Reform Church of America.

Originally it was founded in the middle of the American Civil War in 1863 and it was called the German Reform Church of America. Incidentally, English is my third language. My father spoke German to me and my mother spoke Pennsylvania Dutch. Her family had been here since the American Revolution—before the American Revolution and my great-great-great grandfather was in the Continental Army. He’s buried just north of the town of North Hampton in a Kreidersville Church cemetery. I’ve done a lot of family research. I had to because I was going to grow up in an orphanage. Anyway, I have here my photos—my admission photo and my discharge photo, and if you look at my discharge photo, you’ll be amazed at the length of my legs.

**LF:** Oh, yeah [chuckles quietly].

**JC:** Right there is the most obvious factor of Klinefelter syndrome. But the rest of it, which is also easy to identify, but I’ve had it corrected, is dentures like you wouldn’t believe. I had teeth growing outside the row, I had teeth growing sideways in the row, and I had some teeth growing horizontally in the row, and I’ve had it all corrected with some very expensive orthodontics. Yes, my teeth are my own. I was 18 upon graduation from high school, and World War II was in full—swing, and about two weeks after my graduation, my birthday is in June, and about two weeks later I had the card “Greetings from the President, you have been selected ...” you know? And I had to go down to Philly to get checked, and about all they did down there was to make sure that you had only two eyes and just one nose, and I was sent to Indiantown Gap. During the processing there, getting a uniform, being thoroughly checked physically, dentally, optically, everything, the next was the questions, and one of them was “Can you speak any foreign language at all?” And my reply was, “Sure [speaks German and Pennsylvania Dutch].” And that was it right then and there. That was going to determine my military career—I didn’t even have to go through basic training. They gave me a railroad ticket and the dining car tickets to get me down to the railroad station in Richmond, Virginia, and I was told to report to the military police desk in the railroad station. They would take me to my destination. My destination was a German-speaking prisoner of war camp about 15 miles off the main highway south of Richmond way out in the forest. There were 1,988 members of Rommel’s Africa corps stationed there. All of this was kept away from America—the American public. Roosevelt deliberately did it. There were 650 such camps scattered coast to coast, and we had 387,000 German soldiers right here in our country. Anyway, we also had 15,000 Italians and 5,000 Japanese. So this was going to be my job, dealing with these German prisoners of war. This is the flyer right here that I handed out. I’ve spoken to various historical societies, a couple of photos and an explanation of what we did. Anyway, they needed kids like me who could read their incoming mail, to censor it, and the outgoing mail also, to censor it. No military information was to be passed.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** Anyway, at the end of the war they had to be taken back to Europe under the terms of the Geneva Convention and this was going to happen. We took them from Richmond in early December of 1945 up to Camp Shanks, New York, until transportation could be arranged overseas. This was early December and it was early January when we finally got a ship and we were not going to go with the United States Navy, we were going with the Merchant Marines on

a brand-new, first time out Victory ship. The smell of paint right there was sickening and it was now January, and everything you've heard about the North Atlantic in the winter time is true. There were times that you could not see over the top of the first wave from the wheelhouse of the ship. The ship was not only going up and down, it was rocking back and forth and side-to-side. When we left the New England coast, the Merchant Marine captain called—there were 18 of us—called us into the dining room, which was about the size of this room, and he said, “Gentlemen, this is not going to be a pleasure trip.” And he said, “If anybody falls overboard,” he said, “That’s it.” He said, “It takes us 15 minutes to turn this ship around to where if somebody fell overboard and you cannot survive the North Atlantic for 15 minutes.” And he said, “We ain’t picking up bodies.” Nobody fell overboard.

Well anyway, we got into ... --oh, on the way in the only wartime incident we had one sunny morning in the English Channel, the ship’s engines stopped and the captain came on the intercom, “All hands on deck wearing life jackets.” And when I got up on deck, I asked one of the merchant crew, “What’s going on?” And he said, “Look over there.” And about the length of a football field away there was a floating object in the water. A floating mine. So the gun crew got on the front deck gun, took one shot to get the range, and the second shot the mine went kaboom and all hands stand down. We went into Le Havre, unloaded the prisoners there, until inland transportation could be arranged. The inland transportation was going to be the same boxcars that the Holocaust victims had used.

It was now early February and the ambient temperature was about 0 degrees Fahrenheit. It’s a trip that you could make today in maybe three hours, but it was going to be a two-day overnight trip because the Germans had torn up the French railway network moving in and we tore it up even more chasing them out, so we were carrying whatever we were going to eat or drink for those two days. I don’t ever want to be that cold again in my life.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** When we got to a—we—we dropped them off at the railroad station Gare du Nord, the Northern Railroad Station in Paris, and took them there by truck convoys to a camp near the town of Compiègne. And when we herded them into that camp, when the gate closed, the French tricolor came down, and a red flag with a hammer and sickle went up. They were going to be the property of the Russians. That soured me on the Army right there.

Anyway, you have to understand that at the conferences at Tehran in 1943 with Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, Stalin said, “I want your prisoners when the war is over”, and he also said the same thing in March of 1945 again, when the three of them met at Yalta. And in the summer of ’45 he said the same thing to Harry Truman at Berlin, Potsdam. State department records all show this, and the state department can also say, “We didn’t turn them over to the Russians. The French did.” Well, anyway, that’s Army and the whole thing.

And when we came back—oh, we were given a weekend in Paris, all eighteen of us, at the Rainbow Corner hotel. And I’ll tell you this, I wasn’t interested in seeing the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre Museum or anything else. I was interested in a nice, warm, cooked meal, a warm bed to sleep in and a bathtub full of hot water.

LF: Mhm.

JC: Well, I came back to the states in--in late February of '46 and I was assigned to the MP detachment over here in New Jersey until my discharge in December. They wanted to keep me. The army was being disbanded but they made me an offer, "Kid, if you'll sign on with us, we'll send you to the Provo-Marshall's office in Washington D.C. You can have a career with the army." And I told them, "I don't think so. I haven't had a career in civilian life yet and I'd like to give it a try." Well, that's pretty much my story and I have some photos here. The prisoners were living in G.I. barracks and we were living in tents, and I can tell you it gets cold in Virginia in December. [begins to flip through photobook] This is a view from the top deck of the ship and you couldn't even see over the top of the first wave. This was the prisoners getting off the ship at Le Havre, and I was sent then, when I came back, to Camp Tolmer, MP duty there. I was with the third army service command. Third army, if you know anything about World War II was Georgie Patton's. Some of my classmates were actually with the infantry. I was lucky, the job I got nobody ever shot at me.

LF: Yeah.

JC: Although I was always armed to the teeth. This is a story of my life. These are photos that were taken then at Camp Kilmer in New Jersey with various uniforms we wore. The summer uniform, the downtown and the camp gate uniform and the winter uniform. This is my discharge certificate, front and back, and a letter here from Harry Truman congratulating me.

LF: Mhm.

JC: This is an article that appeared last Veteran's day, last year in the *Allentown Morning Caller* front-page article. They were looking for untold stories of WWII, and they got in touch with me and I was going to be a speaker at ArtsQuest Center here at SteelStacks in Bethlehem. I said, "Yeah, but I don't drive to unfamiliar places at night anymore." And they said, "That's okay, we'll send a limo to pick you up and take you back home." This is me on the job, Professor Joe. This was me at my son's home in Christmas. This was December of 19—2014.

When I started teaching—I was going to be a teacher. I made a vow when I left that orphanage that I would somehow payback society for what society had done for me as a kid and I was going to help kids. Teaching. I had been working at Western Electric in Allentown when I was going to college. The army paid—well, the G.I. Bill paid—for a year and a half. I was in for a year and a half, but I had to pay for the other two and a half years, or whatever, and I took a job at Western Electric where I worked the middle shift. So I had classes six days a week and I was working six days a week and I had next to no social life at all.

Anyway, the day I graduated, I was earning two and a half times what a starting teacher makes. So I kept on working for a while with Western Electric, you know, that's a hard decision to make because a starting teacher was paid only \$3,000 a year and I—

LF: Wow.

JC:--I could not live on that.

LF: Mhm.

JC: So I worked for a while. When I finally made the decision, I was 28. Better get on with this because until I carry out my vow, I'm going to be forty. I was going to do it day for day that I had grown up in that orphanage. And I bit the bullet and took that \$3,000 a year job, but I couldn't live on it. So I was living at the time at the University Club in Bethlehem, where I was Steward and a friend of mine said, "Foreign cars are going to be coming on strong in this country. Let's get in on the ground floor." So we went into business.

We took on the Triumph dealership. To make a long story short, from September to December I had made \$10,000. Well, teaching was going to become my hobby and the auto business was going to become my lifeline.

LF: [chuckles quietly] Mhm.

JC: This photo shows the last Porsche I owned. That was sold back in 2007 and the Porsche I have here in the garage cost me half of what I got for that.

LF: Oh.

JC: This was the last racecar I drove. I drove racecars for 17 years. You know, I'm going to have to prove my manliness.

LF: [chuckles]

JC: And this was the last racecar I drove. My son has it today and he enters it in vintage events. This photo is snapped in the Simeone Museum in Philly where it was on loan for six months and this one was there, too. This one I designed, built, and ran. This is a photo of that car. It was snapped by a professional race photographer. You have to have so many races under your belt every year to keep your license and my car was not ready near the end of the year and I ended up borrowing this junker from somebody out in Reading and I took it down to Vineland, New Jersey and won a race with it. Okay, that's pretty much it. From here on in. This is Michelle and me at my college vesper service—Christmas vesper service. This is that Porsche last year at a car show. This is the same Porsche with its factory hard-top on it the year before.

And now we get into the rest of my life. I was sent to Germany in 1974—August of '74—to teach English under the Fulbright Act and that's where I met the woman who was eventually going to marry me. She knew me from day one. You really ought to look at these photos. This was taken in January of '75 right here in my kitchen. That's me and that's her. This photo was snapped in Atlantic City. This was in May of '74; this is an artist's sketch of m;, and this is me right here in my backyard. We were having a swimming pool party in summer of '74. I was a hairdresser's model for the fashion shows and how we met him—I knew I was going to Germany

and I wanted somebody to rent my house for two years. Okay, how about a gay couple. No kids, no pets.

So I went into the Stonewall Bar in Allentown—the best known in the area here—one afternoon, and the only two people in it were the bartender and me, and he said to me, “Madame, you look as if you don’t belong here.” I said, “I do. I’m looking for a gay couple to rent my home for a couple of years while I’m off to Germany.” And he said, “Well, my lover and I could be interested in it.” “Who are you?” And he said, “I’m the manager of the Trevor’s Salon at Hess Brother’s Store in Allentown.” So we made arrangements to have dinner at their apartment in Allentown; they had to come see the house and all that and they finally said, “We’ll do it.” And he said, “You’re going to be my—my model for the fashion shows.” He said, “You have the hair that every woman would love to have.”

And here I am. Swimsuit and all. This photo was taken in—sometime in the ‘80s. The clothes you see me wearing here I wore on the airplane to California. This was at Long Beach, California. That’s the *Queen Mary* in the background. This was another year. They’re all marked—here’s the year. I’m with some drag queens on Santa Monica Boulevard at Halloween in Hollywood.

Now we get to the Keystone. On Friday evening of Keystone, I went downtown for dinner at an Italian restaurant and I always stayed clear of the rest of the crowd, you know? And I always went in a little after. I don’t belong with these people, we just happen to ride the same bus. [laughs] And the place was full up. It was about seven o’clock on Friday evening and I said to the maître d’, “You see if you can find me a seat somewhere.” In Europe, if there’s a vacant seat, doesn’t matter where it is, you can take it, but you can’t do that here. I said, “See if somebody will have me sit with them.” She said, “I’ll have the waiter look.” And he came back and he said, “Yes, there’s a—there’s a father and daughter sitting up at the front window, they’ll have you.” So I went up there and I did a double-take. The daughter was Nicole Maines [TV’s first transgender superstar]. She was going to be the speaker Saturday evening. I was wearing my military decorations—I was Madame, but I had all the military stuff on, and she didn’t want to know anything about World War II.

Her very first question to me was, “What did you do after the war?” So we got into a long discussion. I told her I spent a year driving NASCAR among other things. Went to college and all that, I was a teacher and blah, blah, blah. And we parted company that evening and I thought nothing more of it and... Saturday evening, when she was going to be the speaker, one of the things she said, “I’ve met a lot of people—nice people—here and last night I even had dinner with a NASCAR driver.” And when she came down from the podium a line formed to speak to her, I walked right past the line and walked right up to her and she just threw her arms around me and began to cry.

**LF:** Mm.

**JC:** That’s this photo right here. And as soon as I got her settled down, the photographer said, “Now turn around and face us.” So that’s this photo here. She had her surgery done that summer. And the very first luncheon I had there, Chris Beck [the transgender former Navy SEAL] was the

speaker. “Lady Valor: [The Kristin Beck Story]”. And I was sitting about from here to the other side of the kitchen wall away from her while she spoke. But when she took the podium she said, “Will the veterans in the audience please raise their hands?” And mine went up and when she was through speaking she came right over to me, gave me a big G.I. bear hug and whispered in my ear, “Which war?” I said, “World War II.” And she took a step backwards and said, “No way.” Well, anyway, she said, “Will you be photographed with me? I’m running for public office and this will make a damn good political photo.”

**LF:** [chuckles]

**JC:** So that’s this photo right here. This was taken at the Phila—Philadelphia Health Fair—LGBT group. This one was snapped at my college President’s garden party. I told Michelle, “You’re going to have to look older to be with me.” They thought she was my wife. And this was at Michelle’s daughter’s graduation party from high school. She’s been divorced now for 16 years. Her daughter is a high school graduate, her son will be a junior in high school this year. He just turned 16 and is working on his driver’s license. This was taken in my church at a spaghetti supper on a Saturday night. Just me and Michelle. This photo here was snapped at this year’s Keystone. We were both dressed the same. I bought an outfit for her that was just like mine. This one was snapped at a Renaissance meeting here in the Lehigh Valley. This one was snapped at the LGBT Center here in Allentown. And this one was snapped on a Bermuda cruise that we took last summer. I appeared in *Messenger Magazine*, a full-page article and I was also a speaker at the LGBT center and this was the flyer to advertise it. This was a list of the questions that she had me explain, like you have here. And this is a photo of me speaking, you can tell. And this was another ship-board photo. At this year’s Keystone, this was the third time I had dinner with Charmin Elise. Dr. Charmin Elise.

When I left Sunday morning, his officers even escorted me out to the car. This was me having lunch this year on Grand Turk Island in June and this was Michelle and me in the dining hall on-ship-board. And Michelle wanted to go fishing in the Cayman Islands, so I said, “Okay.” She likes to go fishing. I can’t eat fish. I don’t want nothing to do with fish because I’m allergic. I break out in hives. So I said, “Okay, you do that.” And she said, “Your hair is getting kind of long. Why don’t you get it cut on the ship.” So this is the haircut I have right now, and that’s pretty much the story. Now, what would you like to know?

**LF:** Can we go sort of back a bit and if you’d like to talk about anything you didn’t talk about your experience living in an orphanage?

**JC:** I grew up with 29 boys in the orphanage and as we became teenagers I could see that what was happening to them wasn’t happening to me. That I was going to be different. I wasn’t interested in sports. I just didn’t fit in, more or less. So that was pretty much—it was a church-run orphanage where we had religion up to there. There was chapel every evening and on Sunday there was Sunday school in the morning, church in the afternoon, and chapel in the evening, so you got religion right up to there. So, yeah, I’m still a member. It’s no longer the Evangelical Reform Church of America. Today, it’s the UCC. The United Church of Christ. And I’m still a member.

After the death of my wife, three and a half years ago, I lost my faith. I told the pastor that. My wife was one of the healthiest specimens you could imagine. She was a biker, a swimmer, a hiker, and when she finally turned ill and was first diagnosed she was already at Stage IV.

**LF:** Mm.

**JC:** She lasted only five more months. Now, she was very active with the church, extremely active with the church. And my first question to the pastor when he came to see me was, “Where in hell was our gracious, merciful God when it came to Liz?” And of course he didn’t have an answer for that. But anyway I became a hermit for a year. And finally people started to tell me, “You better get out and around people again.” And then that’s what took me to Keystone. That’s where Michelle and I met.

Her father had passed away; she was with him when he died of cancer and she was right there in the vending area and her first question to me was, “Where you from?” “I’m from Coopersburg.” “Oh, I know where that is. Is the Potbelly restaurant still there?” I said, “Yeah, it’s still there but it’s called Bubba’s today.” And we had a nice, long conversation. She gave me her business card and we parted company and left.

Two weeks later, one Saturday evening I had a phone call here and the voice on the phone said “Joe?” “Yes.” “Joe Christ?” “Yes.” You know, we were wearing those nametags with your surname in typewriter script down below. I said, “Who’s calling?” And she said, “This is Michelle. We met two weeks ago at Keystone.” I said, “Whoa. Where’d you get my phone number? It’s unlisted.” And she said, “It was easy. I just typed it into my computer and hit search and up came not only your phone number, but your home address and I have GPS so I can find your house.” I said, “Since you’ve gone to all that trouble, why don’t we get together some Saturday evening when you’re off from work and we’ll do dinner.” And that was the beginning. I’m her replacement father.

**LF:** Yeah?

**JC:** She’s the daughter I never had. I’ve only a son out here.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** Well, where do we go from here?

**LF:** Is there anything about your educational background that you haven’t talked about?

**JC:** Well, yes. I grew up in the orphanage. That was grade school and I went to high school in Womelsdorf, that’s where the high school was just up about a mile away. And entered the Army. And I went to college then. Moravian College by choice. My father was from the province of Moravia, but he was not a Moravian. He was Roman Catholic and I chose Moravian College because they could take me as a day student ... and my—my means of getting to and from college was a motorcycle at the time, and I became a pretty damn good motorcycle rider. In fact I

joined the AMA, the American Motorcycle Association and I got their competition license. I had to prove my butchiness.

In the Labor Day Nationals of 1948 up at Laconia, New Hampshire, I had an accident in practice. It happened this way: we were running on the paved surfaces, the blacktop surfaces in the state park and there was a hairpin turn and some guy had spilled it right ahead of me, and his oil tank broke open. And this is not farming country up there. Its lumbering country and they had bales of wood chips. So the coroner crew broke open one of those bales of wood chips and put it on the oil to soak it up and when I hit it, it was like hitting wet corn flakes. The bike went right out from under me and I came down on top of it and I got damaged right under the ribs. It didn't go in but it bruised my liver.

Well this was in practice on Saturday and on Sunday there were 45 starters. I was number 40 of the 45 and at the end of the very first lap, there I was number 2. And the crowd kept hollering, "Go get 'em, go get 'em!" And I kept getting slower and slower and slower and I ended up in 17<sup>th</sup> spot and they were paying only to place 15 [chuckles].

**LF:** [chuckles quietly]

**JC:** I managed to come home and I passed out the next night at work in Allentown. I had what they call Trichromats Hepatitis. I turned yellow and it was going to be a long road of recovery. It cost me a semester of college. Well, the doc said, "No more cycle riding for you." So, okay, why not turn to race cars?

**LF:** [chuckles quietly]

**JC:** And that's when I went to NASCAR. And they were running on dirt tracks at the time. The old horse racing dirt tracks. There were no paved tracks back then and it was one of the dirtiest, I mean physically dirtiest, sports you could imagine. I lasted one year and I turned to SCCA, the Sports Car Club of America because they ran on paved surfaces only and I spent 17 years driving race cars to show my "manliness"—ha, ha. I ended up with 54 trophies. The small ones are out here above the kitchen cabinets. The big ones are upstairs in the attic. We didn't have room for display. But anyway, it was fun. 54 trophies, 17 years, that figures out to about three a year. I was pretty damn good at what I did. Anyway, I—when I got married, Liz said, "There's going to be no more racing and no more flying airplanes when you're with me." So I lived with Liz for 40 years and gave that up. And my son has the last two race cars that I drove.

**BL:** What year did you get married?

**JC:** We were married in... God, what was it? It was—it was '75. June of '75. I had her here in January of '75. She said, "Do you--do you want to dissolve this relationship we have?" I said, "Not really, but I have to go back because I have 19 years of teaching behind me. I want to keep my pension." And after she checked the place out here—I own this house, you know? And she said, "Okay, I'll quit my job and we'll go back to the states." This was '76 that we came back. I spent two years teaching in Germany and that's where I got to know Professor Dr. Karl Kannar, and his wife Professor Dr. Henrietta. He was head of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the hospital,

and she was head of the Cytogenetics lab at the University in town. She was also the head of Germany's nuclear commission and, would you believe, he was the doctor who had delivered a stillborn from my wife. This was a second marriage for both of us. Her first marriage she had a stillborn.

Anyway, they called the school. "You've got an American teacher there. Will you ask him if he'll help us with our English?" All meetings, no matter where, of the World Health Organization have to be held in English. It's just like flying today. English is the language of flying, it doesn't matter whether you're landing at Tokyo or Berlin or Paris, the conversations in the tower must always be in English. Well, anyway, they wanted some help with their English to attend the World Health Organization meetings and also to translate some of their articles that they had written into English for publication here in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. So I did that. And in the process I had to work in the cytogenetics lab so that I would know what I was writing about and she was dealing with chromosomes. You should have 46 chromosomes, 13 pairs. She could cut them out to paper dolls and hang them all in a line in the lab. [gestures stretching arms wide]. There better be matching pairs. She knew which chromosomes were going to be which disease. She had this all figured out. It was the process of amniocentesis. I don't know if you know what that is. It's removal of a fluid for the coming child from the uterus. You take out some—some fluid and using the chromosomes you can tell everything. Whether it's going to be a boy or a girl, whether it's going to be a blonde or a brunette, you—you can tell everything. Would you believe that's where I found out who I am?

**LF:** Yeah? In--in Germany?

**JC:** I was 47.

**LF:** Mm.

**JC:** [takes a pause] I had to work with this stuff to know what I was writing about and that's where I found out. I have a condition that Dr. Harry Klinefelter never even dreamed about. I have 47 chromosomes instead of 46 and that 47<sup>th</sup> chromosome was an X. A female. So that's who I am.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** Any other questions?

**LF:** Yes. So what did you study in college?

**JC:** I had three majors. I had English, which I had to learn all along for school. I had German, because it was easy. And I had Social Studies, because I had to find out: "Who am I? What's my background? What is my historical background?" And I found it out in spades, including going to Germany and while I was there. Oh—They have classes six days a week and the principal said, "You're not going to have Saturday classes. Our government wants you to travel on weekends." So I did, including beyond the Iron Curtain to find out, you know, what's my origin?

Where did I come from? Who am I? And it was eye-opening for me. When I met my Aunt Anna, these people were all driven out because they were of German descent at the end of the war, west of the Iron Curtain. With 50 pounds of whatever you can carry, leave the key in the lock and get out. My Aunt Anna gave me the two photos you see there of my father's parents. My grandparents. I said, "This was part of your 50 pounds?" And she said, "Pots and pans and blankets can be bought anywhere." That grave tablet down there was my grandfather's grave tablet. He was buried right in front of the church. He was somebody. It was his wife's gravestone, initially, with that tablet bolted on the back because over there you can put two people in the same grave plot.

**LF:** Oh, okay.

**JC:** So the priest said, "Would you like to take that along?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I'll dismount it for you." He said, "If you come back next year it might not be here because the communists are taking the—the headstones and cutting them up into building blocks." So he gave me that. And so they wouldn't—in coming out they wouldn't find anything valuable. He gave me a ... he was an oil painting artist. That was his hobby, and he gave me an oil painting on a piece of cardboard that he had done a couple days before we left and he said, "Put this on top of the pile in your trunk." And would you believe that's what they gave me grief at, at the border?

**LF:** [chuckles quietly]

**JC:** This oil painting. They never checked anything else. I—I've had experiences like you wouldn't believe. Did I answer your question?

**LF:** Yeah, yeah. And then, so, your family in Germany was on the other side... you have to go through—

**JC:** In—in the province of Moravia in Czechoslovakia. Which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire way back then when my father came here. And Hitler took it over. That was his first move, you know.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** Right next door to Austria. First Austria and then Czechoslovakia. And when the Russians came, incidentally, Patton was already in Prague and then he got called back. I—he—Patton was just one of those. A pusher. And he got called back by Eisenhower. "Get back here in Western Germany with us."

**LF:** Yeah, so then, what subjects did you teach in school?

**JC:** I taught—would you like to hear my last year's teaching schedule?

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** I was teaching at Freedom High School here in Bethlehem in the morning and in periods one, two, and three I had them for social studies. Period four I had the seniors for German 4. And from there I went to one of the middle schools, Broughal Middle School in the south side of town where I had two six grade classes for what they called Introduction to a Foreign Language and I had the eighth graders for German 1. How's that grab you?

**LF:** Sounds like a busy schedule.

**JC:** [chuckles] Well I quit.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** I needed some hernia surgery, I knew that in January already. But because they had given me that schedule I thought, "Okay. I'm deliberately going to quit on April 1<sup>st</sup>." And when I told the kids they said, "This is an April fool's joke, isn't it?"

**LF:** [chuckles]

**JC:** I said, "No." The superintendent's assistant followed me around the rest of the day, "You can't do this. We're going to have to hire three people to do what you were doing." "Do it." So that was my last year of teaching. Anyway, I taught all three subjects. I taught English, German, and then Social Studies.

**LF:** Mhm.

**JC:** In fact, some of my Social Studies students used to say, "You taught us as much English as you did Social Studies." I still have a student who calls me. It was—this was my second to last year of teaching. There was a student, I never had him in class but I had known him since the sixth grade and I had just come back from having half a kidney removed in February and he met me in the hall and he said, "Mr. Christ, hey there! I need help." I said, "Okay. I'll look up your records and get back to you." So I looked up his record. He had third grade, fourth month reading ability. What the hell is a kid with third grade, fourth month reading ability doing in an American high school as a junior? Well his main problem was he couldn't read the driver's ed. manual which was written at the seventh grade level and everybody had to take driver's ed. So I get back to him and I said, "You're a bus student. You're going to take the bus to school every morning." He had a pretty poor attendance record. And I said, "You're going to stay after school with me." You know, teachers stayed when the kids went home. I said, "You're going to be with me every day after school and you live along the route that I drive, so I'm going to see that you get home." And I said, "If you screw up once, I'm going to drop you like a hot potato." Would you believe he didn't screw up?

**LF:** [chuckles]

**JC:** And at the end of the year I took him up to the state police barracks and got him his learner's permit and that summer he called me. He said, "I'm--" After his—his on the road testing in school he said, "I'm ready to go for my driver's test. Will you take me?" I said, "Yeah, but I only

have cars with gearshifts and you've learned on—on automatics. But we can take my mother's station wagon." He said, "You want me to pass my driver's test in that!?" I said, "It's this or nothing." So I took him up and the state cop took him out at the wheel and went around the driving course and he came back in and he said "He done real good." Would you believe this kid still calls me?

**LF:** Mhm. Yeah.

**JC:** He thinks I'm god, [chuckles] or something.

**LF:** [laughs]

**JC:** He's now in his mid-fifties and he just—he'll be—he'll be graduated from college this fall. And he said, "Will you come to my graduation ceremony in October in Washington?" I don't know if I can manage that.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** I've had experience like you wouldn't believe?

**BL:** So what—what years were you teaching? Approximately?

**JC:** I taught from 1955 to 1985.

**LF:** Wow.

**JC:** And my military time counted on top of that, so I had 31.5 years pension coming. I live here alone and I had to take meals on wheels. Don't kid yourself that it's for free because it isn't. They go by your 1040 tax form and meals on wheels costs me between \$240 and \$250 a month. The only thing free is the delivery. It's done by volunteers. Okay, and now?

**LF:** Oh, next question, sorry. I was enraptured. So, is there anything about your military experience that we haven't touched on that you think would be important to bring up?

**JC:** I think we've pretty much covered it. They needed—they needed my language skills. I didn't even have to go through basic training.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** They needed me that badly.

**BL:** How did the flying—at what point did the flying come into your life? That you started to fly planes?

**JC:** Oh, that must have been in the early '80s. You want to know what groups?

**BL:** How—how did it all come about that you decided you wanted to do that?

**JC:** I decided to build an airplane. As a matter of fact, I was president of the Lehigh Valley Chapter 70, the Experimental Aircraft Association. When I went to Germany, though, I had to quit—and the flight instructor that I had took over the project and he eventually flew it. But Liz got me away from flying airplanes. My son used to go flying with me. He loved it. He used to go to the races with me, he loved that, too because he could be right there in the pit area with everybody else. Does the name Roger Penske ring a bell with you? Roger Penske was a Lehigh student when I was back in the business, the car business. And I watched him destroy one of the early Corvettes—the engine. It was smoking for laps and finally it just wouldn't go anymore, and he showed up at my shop on a Monday morning, would I put an engine in his Corvette? I told him, “No, get out of my shop, kid. Don't ever come back.” One of the biggest mistakes I've made in my life.

**BL:** How did you get into the car racing and about what year was that?

**JC:** Oh, god, when was that? This—this was in the '50s already. It had to be the late—well, I went cycle racing in '48, so it had to be the early '50s when I got into NASCAR. Must have been around 1950 because then I got into clean racing out here and the haulers plaque hanging member of the PHA Hall of Fame, the Pennsylvania Hill Climb Association. I had a reputation as Sir. [laughs]

**LF:** [chuckles]

**BL:** And so you were doing the racing alongside your teaching?

**JC:** Oh, yeah.

**BL:** Yeah.

**JC:** Oh, I got hell for that one morning.

**LF:** Mhm.

**JC:** I got called into the principal's office, “Mr. Christ, there are some school board members who are excited that you're spending your teacher's salary on racing.” My answer was, “If you know a school board member who knows how to support a racecar on a teacher's salary, tell them I'm interested.” That ended that right there. I— I've had a life.

**LF:** And then with your—with your, sort of, like later in life with your religious affiliation, were you a part of any congregations?

**JC:** I'm still a member of this church, in spite of the fact that I told the pastor three and a half years ago there is no God. I go because my family is there. My niece is the church treasurer, she's the one who does my grocery shopping every week.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** It's a family thing, you know. So I'm still a member. And the orphanage? I was the president of the Alumni Association—

**LF:** Oh yeah.

**JC:** For a number of years. In fact, the director of development called me last week. She knows what I'm involved here and this Saturday is Alumni Appreciation Day and I think she'd like me to show up, but that's not going to happen either. This is—it's Bethany Children's Home today. It was Bethany Orphan's Home back then. "Orphan" became politically incorrect, so they changed it to Bethany Children's Home. But anyway, it's fifteen miles of Reading just off 422 at Womelsdorf. I go back. I'm very active with them.

**LF:** And then, let me see here. So, can you tell me about if you sort of went through a coming out process, what that was like?

**JC:** I didn't.

**LF:** You didn't. Okay.

**JC:** I lead two lives. There are people who know me as one or the other. And darn few who know me as both. There was no real coming out. My son has never seen me looking like this. But he's right outside here.

**LF:** Yeah. So when did you start presenting as 'the other' as you put it?

**JC:** This was after the divorce and that was '73.

**BL:** That was your first wife.

**JC:** My first wife, yeah. 1973. I looked at it this way, life has handed me a lemon. Why not make some lemonade.

**LF:** So then after '73, then did Liz know you?

**JC:** Liz got to know me in '74.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** And well, you can look at the photos here. In fact you can decide which, if any of them, you'd like to have. They're in my computer.

**LF:** Okay, awesome. And so then can you talk a little bit about your first marriage if you want to?

**JC:** Let's put it this way. With Klinefelter's syndrome, I was living on the fringe of society. I didn't get married until I was 28 and when I applied for a teaching job that was one of the first questions they asked me, you know, "Are you married? Have you been married?"

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** "No, but I'm planning on being married in August of '55." So that solidified it. I did my practice teaching for this particular principal and he said, "I want you on my school staff." He said, "You won't have to lift a finger. I'll take care of it." And he did.

**LF:** And then, so, with Liz, did you meet her in Germany then?

**JC:** Well, of course. We were teaching in the same school. She was teaching British English and I was teaching American English. Two countries separated by the same language.

**LF:** And then so with your marriage to Liz then you both moved back stateside.

**JC:** Yes, in '76. Summer of '76.

**LF:** Yeah. And then she passed away a few years ago, you said?

**JC:** She- she died in January of 2014. The most horrible death you can imagine. We both have living wills—had living wills and her very best girlfriend used to go with me every day to the hospital watching what was happening. And finally Rosie said to me, "Joe, we have to stop this. Look at her." Rosie was one of the signers of her living will. So she had four oncologists. One of them was always on duty on the weekend. It was a Sunday afternoon. I thought, "Okay." I said to one of the orderlies there, "Call the nurse in." When she came in I said, "I want the doctor to come here now." And when he came I said to him, "We had—" Rosie had a copy of the will, you know, she was one of the signers. She said, "You're violating this living will." And he said, "I know we are. What do you want me to do?" I said, "I want you to turn off everything but the morphine." She passed away the next day. And in effect, I killed her.

**LF:** And is there anything in that marital relationship you had with Liz that you'd like to talk about?

**JC:** It was the best relationship you could imagine.

**LF:** Mm.

**JC:** There were people who used to say, "You two are never seen apart." We weren't. We were a pair. I— she knew from the very beginning who I am and what I am and toward the end she was getting a little... edgy about it. She said, "Look at the number of friends we have here. If they see you and me together as Madame--" [telephone rings in background] Oh, God. Can you grab that phone? It's right out there in the kitchen.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** Just- just pick it up.

**LF:** One sec.

[Audio cuts out. Tape ends.]

**JC:** [Into the phone] Hello... Thank you, I'm perfectly happy with what I have [hangs up].  
Damn scam calls.

**BL:** Alright, we'll just start back up.

**LF:** Yeah. I just need to put my mic back on.

**JC:** Okay, where did we lose it now?

**LF:** We were talking about your relationship with Liz.

**JC:** It was the best relationship you could imagine. She—she was just thrilled. She had many names in her life. Her first name—she was—she was born in 1940, right at the beginning of the war. First year of the war. And her birth certificate read 'Liesel.' If you had to translate that into English it would read, 'Lizzie.' And when she became a teenager she said, "I don't want that name." Every cow in Bavaria is named Lizzie. I want my mother's name.

So she had it changed to Elizabeth and when she got married she became Frau Bachert. She had been Elizabeth Reinel, same name as her mother. Well, her family still referred to her until her death as Liesel. But when she went to college she was Ellie to her classmates. She had various names. And when we got married and came over here, she was no longer Elizabeth, she was just going to be Liz. So she became Liz Christ, and that's the name she was happiest with.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** Well—yeah it was a blow, her death. I became a hermit for a year.

**LF:** Mhm.

**JC:** And Keystone is what got me out of it. The 2014 Keystone—2015. 2015.

**LF:** So then can you talk about raising your son and your relationship that you have with your son.

**JC:** We had next to no relationship after his mother took him out. She—he went—he finished his last two years of high school with her. I really wanted to see him through high school period. But I didn't. And that was—that was the end of our relationship. And he's been through two marriages, was an alcoholic, and he's been living with this—lady that you see outside here for about 10 years now. And I paid for his rehab in January of last year. That cost me \$12,850. He didn't have any money for his son's, my grandson's, education. I paid for that, too, after high

school. \$40,000. Well, the grandson—I bought him his first \$5,000 car. He needed a car to go to work and to go to school, too. We get along. He knows nothing, though.

**LF:** Okay. So then Liz and you separated at that time?

**JC:** No, we stuck it out right to the end. But she was getting edgy toward the end there. Supposing somebody sees the two of us together.

**BL:** It was the first wife you're thinking of.

**LF:** Oh, it was the first wife. Your son was with the first wife?

**JC:** The son was my first wife.

**LF:** Oh, okay. Sorry, I had everything all mixed up in my head.

**JC:** No, no, no. My first wife.

**LF:** Okay, yeah. So then can you talk a little bit about your experience with Keystone? How you learned about it and then also ROSE as well.

**JC:** On the internet.

**LF:** Yeah?

**JC:** You could do anything on the internet. Well, you—you've already heard the story of how I met Michelle at that very first Keystone. And I tried to break it off with her. I said, "Look at the age difference. I'm 30 years older than you are. You ought to be looking for somebody much younger." And she won't hear of it. She's just—my son says, "She wants your money." I said, "No she doesn't. I've lent her money and she pays it back."

**LF:** Yeah, so, what is your relationship with Michelle?

**JC:** It's father and daughter.

**LF:** Okay.

**JC:** I'm her replacement father. I could do things with her that she couldn't afford. I got her out of the funk that she was in after her father's death and she got me out of the mess that I was in after Liz's death. So we were good for each other right there.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** And I would still like to see Michelle come out with somebody much younger as a friend, but she hasn't been able to. She has too much baggage. She lives with her retired Mother as a teacher—a retired teacher and her two teenage kids. Well, the daughter is now 20. She's in

college. The elder of the two. She got her divorce when she was pregnant with her son, their second child. And she's been divorced now for 16 years. Young guys don't want that kind of baggage.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** I told her that flat out. You know, after growing up in an orphanage I'm a realist. You look at the world the way it is, not the way you would like it to be. And I think she's learned quite a bit from me as a teacher.

**LF:** So then, what sort of capacity do you serve within ROSE?

**JC:** ROSE?

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** Liz's best friend?

**LF:** No. Renaissance... am I getting the names mixed up?

**BL:** The Renaissance group.

**JC:** The Renaissance group?

**LF:** Didn't you bring that up in the photos that you had?

**JC:** That—that was Michelle.

**LF:** Oh, that was Michelle? Oh, okay. Sorry, I must have gotten it mixed up. And has your sort of identity influenced be it your social life, civil and political life, spiritual life?

**JC:** Well, after I retired, I became president of the Northampton County Chapter of Pennsylvania Association of School Retirees. When I was racing I was president of the War Hampton Motor Club—Sports Car Club. I was president of Bethany's Alumni Association. I—I've held all these jobs.

**LF:** And then have you been involved within the greater LGBT community in any capacity?

**JC:** No, no. No.

**LF:** And are there any important events or turning points in your life that we haven't covered that you'd like to bring up?

**JC:** Not that I can recall offhand, no. I told Mary Anne don't come in while you're here [laughs].

**LF:** Yeah. And then was there any—can you talk a little bit more about—you were talking about the drag queen on Santa Monica and your-

**JC:** I—I went out to visit the gay couple. They ended up on... Fuller Avenue in—in Hollywood. I went out to visit them, you know. They took over my house here and for a while they had a penthouse apartment in Boston. Liz and I went to visit them there and I went—Liz went off to Germany to visit her mother and I shouldn't have pulled that off. I took off to visit Rich and Georgia on Hollywood and when I called her from Hollywood she just was blown away.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** But I visited them quite a few times. We're still in contact. Oh, when he decided to take me on as his—his model for the fashion shows I said, "How are you going to explain me to your clientele and to your staff?" And he stammered for a moment and then he said, "You're going to be my aunt from Cleveland." Would you believe I'm still his aunt from Cleveland? [Laughs]

**LF:** Yeah.

**BL:** So like, how long did that whole thing last with your being a model for the fashion shows?

**JC:** About two years.

**LF:** And then so did you get involved or did you visit any of the local bars in any capacity or anything like that?

**JC:** Yeah, but I never picked up any contacts there. Oh, I knew the two guys who owned The Stonewall. I got to know them, Gene and Larry, a gay couple. And if I would show up there on my birthday, a bottle of champagne right in front of me. They knew me.

**LF:** And then within the rest of, like, sort of greater acceptance of the LGBT community by wider society, have you seen any changes over your lifetime?

**JC:** No. I still feel like I really don't belong with this LGBT community, or— oh. I—I attend the Renaissance meetings here in the Lehigh Valley, but I'm not a member.

**LF:** Oh, okay.

**JC:** They assume that I am. They think I'm a member, you know? But I pay every time I go for non-member. Just cough up the five bucks.

**LF:** [chuckles]

**JC:** And they just assume I'm a member. While I was in rehab here in Richlandtown for this, the president of the chapter showed up to visit me as Amanda. She wants me to attend the meeting this Saturday. I told her, "I think I can go. Do you think you can arrange somebody?" So she said, "I'm going to send out a note to the members that you need a ride." So I haven't heard from anybody yet, that was just this weekend.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** I don't belong with this group of men—elderly men who wear dresses [laughs]. I'm physically a woman.

**LF:** Yeah. And do you think there are any sort of like, challenges that remain for the community in the future?

**JC:** I haven't looked at it from that angle, but let's put it this way, I've always had to live more or less on the edge of society. It was just a way of life. Oh, when I—when I flew out that one photo of me in the—in the white boy shorts that I wore out to Hollywood, we got on the plane at Newark and a girl can't go that far without taking her hairdresser along, so I took Tony along. You know, Rich and George we now out on the West coast so I had to have another hairdresser. So I took Tony along, and he was—he was a drag queen, also. So would you believe getting on the plane at Newark they just pushed me right on. He was right behind me and he's the one they stopped and checked. And he said, "I don't believe this. You just walked right on that airplane and look what they did to me." [Laughs] I have never been read or clocked or whatever you want to call it. Never, ever.

**LF:** Yeah. And then is— is there anything we've missed throughout the interview that you'd like to bring up or have we pretty much touched on everything?

**JC:** I can't think of anything. My—my other two years at Keystone were not the experience I had that first time. I was just blown away by Chris Beck and Nicole Mains. Who is writing the script for this? That's my next question. Where is this coming from?

**LF:** This is from the Central PA LGBT History Project.

**JC:** Yeah.

**LF:** So, just the organization will type it up and then we sort of follow the script but then I go sort of off the path as well and write down stuff throughout the interview.

**JC:** Well, who's writing the script for my life? Where-where is the-

**BL:** Oh, the script of your life. [chuckles]

**JC:** Where- where is this coming from?

**LF:** I don't know. Barry is sort of in charge of that.

**JC:** I had somebody tell me one night when I asked the same question, "God's not through with you yet."

**LF:** [chuckles quietly] Yeah.

**BL:** Yeah. I have a question. When did you have the first inkling that you were different or-

**JC:** As a teenager. In the orphanage. I could see what was happening.

**BL:** Yeah.

**JC:** I grew up dormitory style with 29 boys. I have no male features. I've had no surgery of any kind except lifesaving surgery. I- I have no Adam's apple, I have no body hair, I've- I- at Keystone I went to the facial surgeons from England and the guy checked me out and he said, "You don't need us. You are a woman." Well, I'll say this: since I've been 47 it's been a hell of a different life. Like I said, make yourself some lemonade. Enjoy it. I really didn't want it.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** And at this- at this Renaissance meeting they keep telling me, "You better keep coming. You're a role model." [Laughs] I- I enjoy both now. I can be both. I just have to put on the right clothes. If I want my hair done, I just take a photo here along to Holiday Hair and say, "Here, this is what I want. Do it." Wearing the right clothes, of course.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** It- it's so easy. Why not? I have this female figure. Oh, I used to be a six footer, when I was at the military.

**LF:** Yeah.

**JC:** I have that famous women's ailment now, osteoporosis, and would you believe I've lost six and a half inches.

**LF:** Wow.

**JC:** I am now the height of your average American housewife. That, too. It- it's so easy. On this cruise I forgot to take the glasses, so I wore my G.I. glasses for the entire cruise. That and a pair of earrings did it.

**LF:** Yeah?

**JC:** It's so easy to be either/or, you know? Including the voice. Equipped with that, too.

**LF:** Well, I guess that's all the questions I have. So I think this is a good time to end the interview, yeah.

**JC:** Well, okay, you can have a look at some of these photos here.

**LF:** Yeah, thank you so much for sharing with us.

