

LGBT History Project of the LGBT Center of Central PA

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Interviewee: John Folby

Interviewer: Blake Barker

Date: March 26, 2014

Place: John Folby's home

Transcribers: Blake Barker and Jennifer Ott

Finalized: Mary Libertin

Abstract:

John Folby was born in Pittsburgh in 1947. He was the oldest of five children in an Irish-Italian Catholic family. He relocated to Harrisburg in 1975 with his partner. John continues to live with his partner in Harrisburg in a relationship lasting more than 44 years. John is well-known for his activism in the LGBT community of Central Pennsylvania. In his younger days, John was involved in a Catholic group for lesbians and gays known as Dignity, and assisted in the Gay Switchboard Hotline. He began a 25-year career in a state government civil service position running a medical drug program for persons with HIV/AIDS. He continues his service to the LGBT community through consulting for the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health which offers the Pennsylvania Mid-Atlantic AIDS Education Training Center. John's work with HIV/AIDS has been recognized with numerous awards, and the John Folby Award for Excellence is named in his honor. He additionally volunteers for the LGBT Center of Central PA's History project. In this interview, John not only discusses his extensive activism efforts, but also his family's reluctance to address and accept his homosexuality, his relationship with his partner, and changes within the LGBT community within his lifetime. He also discusses his and his partner's decision to have John adopt his partner in order to financially protect themselves and their assets when gay marriage was illegal in Pennsylvania.

B: My name is Blake Barker and I am recording the oral history of John Folby for the LGBT Center, so if I could have your consent to an interview, that would be fantastic.

J: I do consent to it.

B: Fantastic, and if I can have you sign right here before we get started that would be great.

J: [signs]

B: Thank you very much.

J: You're welcome.

B: Okay, so if you could introduce yourself, your name, age, a little bit about where you grew up.

J: Sure. I'm John Folby. I'm 66 years old. I was born November 25, 1947 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and lived in Pittsburgh until I was 25. I moved to Harrisburg in 1975, and shortly after that started getting involved with the gay community here.

B: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

J: Sure. I have — both of my parents are deceased. My father just recently passed away. He was 94 years old when he died two months ago. I have four siblings; I'm the oldest. I grew up in a very strict, Roman Catholic, Irish-Italian family, with lots of expectations. That each child would eventually get married and procreate, have lots of babies—which did not happen with me. So that actually played a big part of growing up—because of that I could never ... From the time I was very young I knew something was different, that I really wasn't attracted to girls. Yet there was an expectation that I would date, I would go to functions with girls and take them out, and go to proms, and all of the typical stuff that you do when you're in school. So I did it, really just to please my parents, more than me. It was a strict, strict household.

B: How do you identify amongst the LGBT community?

J: Absolutely gay.

B: When did you realize you were gay?

J: Well very early on when I was young, but I didn't know what it was. I didn't what it was called. One thing I wish had existed when I was growing up were student LGBT groups. Because there are kids now that are in junior high, grade school even, that are able to talk to someone, if they're feeling they may be gay or lesbian, or bisexual. I think that's amazing. I didn't really know what to call it, or what it was, and I just felt different for years and years and years until I started college. I met someone in college who said to me, "you should read this book," and it was a novel, or biography, of a guy in California. I think his name was Richie, and the name of the book was *The Sexual Outlaw*. And it was about all of his sexual exploitations in San Francisco—in Golden Gate Park and other parts around San Francisco. And by reading that book I started to learn more about gay lifestyle. Even though he was a hustler, it was still one aspect of gay life. And after reading that book, the guy who suggested I read the book started introducing me to friends in Pittsburgh, in his network. And bit by bit I met people and started dating and going out, and feeling a lot more comfortable about my preference.

B: When did you come out to your friends and family?

J: (laughs) Friends—I did not come out to all of my friends. There were friends in college I came out to. I did not come out to any of my siblings. I did not come out to my parents; although I did come out to my parents years and years later—and it was by accident. My parents had a habit of popping in unexpectedly, without calling. They were on their way back to Pittsburgh from Atlantic City, and thought, well, we'll pop in to Harrisburg overnight. And they popped in. I had a stack of pornographic magazines on the bed in the guest bedroom—I didn't know anybody was coming. And I came in to the house and my mother immediately said, "Can we talk?" And I said, "sure, what do you want to talk about?" And she said. "I found these [hand gestures picking up a stack of magazines] on the bed, and took them off of the bed before your dad went to the guest room." And I said, "if you're sure you want to talk about it, yes—absolutely, we'll talk about it." So we went outside to the patio and sat for a few hours and talked about it. What was interesting to me is, my mom started to say, well is Mark gay? Is Tony gay? Is Jeff gay? All of my friends she had ever met, that she and my dad had ever met, she just assumed then that they were all gay. And I just said, "I don't know. I've never slept with them so I don't know what their sexual preference is." And I finally said, "it's really none of your business, or my business.

You know if you want to ask them that, fine. But I'm not going to out them if they happen to be gay." My dad never, ever, ever, ever talked about it. Never acknowledged it, never discussed it.

B: Your whole life?

J: My whole life. And when he died two months ago, that was one thing that I really...well I still am angry about it. And someone said to me, you have to remember your dad was 94 years old. His generation, that was something...for a son to be gay or a daughter to be gay, you just didn't talk about it. You didn't address it. And you're lucky...maybe if you had told him he may have kicked you out of the house. And he might have. I don't know. Or my mother might have intervened. My mom never really cared. I met my partner when I was 20 years old, so we have been together a really long time. So my parents knew I lived with another guy, but never really questioned it—we were roommates. And it was funny because our first apartment was a one bedroom apartment, with twin beds that were pushed together. And when my partner's parents or my parents would come to visit, the beds were pushed apart immediately, with a nightstand between them. So, it was playing this game of "oh yeah we're just roommates in this one bedroom apartment and we share the bedroom."

B: So after you came out to your mom, did your siblings find out after that?

J: Not right away. Not until they were a little older, because there's a 17-year difference between me and my youngest sibling. And so I thought, there's no reason to tell her or discuss it with her. And my siblings—we've never really sat and talked about it. They know that I'm gay. They know I'm in a relationship. And two of them are fine with him and two of them are very homophobic. Not just with me, any LGBT person—they just cannot wrap their brain around it or accept it. It's just not a lifestyle they want to acknowledge or affirm. So they don't talk about it.

B: How has that affected your relationship with them?

J: We're not really close. And I do get angry, and I do speak up if I hear them say anything negative or prejudiced or biased about the LGBT community. I will let them know that, no...I don't want to hear it around me. If you want to keep it to yourselves, fine, but not when you're in our home...you're not going to do that. Or even if we're at a family wedding reception or some event...they just don't get it. They don't want to get it. And that's fine with me. I don't need them to get it.

B: How did your friends react? What was the impact it had on your friends?

J: Well in school, in college, it wasn't a big deal. There were a few people that thought it was disgusting. And I used to think well they're not really my friends to begin with, because in my opinion your friends have no faults. That includes sexual preference or identity. And if that's who you are and what you are, fine, you're my friend. When I started to work after college it was for a large department store in Pittsburgh. And I was part of the visual merchandising team. And probably 80% of us were gay and lesbian. So working with that group of people was instant recognition of your choice, and instant acceptability of your choice. So that wasn't a problem. And a lot of people in retail, I learned, were gay or lesbian. And a lot of the manufacturing representatives that we worked with were LGBT. And I probably started learning more about gay after college when I started working, because it was just this enormous universe of people. I mean I couldn't get over how many gay people there were—and lesbians. It was interesting.

B: What prompted you to move from Pittsburgh to Central Pennsylvania?

J: My partner. We had been together for a few years. He was offered a job with state government and said, "I've been offered a job, and would you like to come with me to Harrisburg?" And I really agonized. I didn't answer him right away, because I thought, I just started this job, I really like it, I like the people I work with, I'm learning a lot, it's a good beginning, great experience. And the store that I worked for, Kaufmann's, a department store, was really well known in the city. I had amazing bosses when I worked at Kaufmann's. My first boss, in the men's division, was a very, very uptight, heterosexual guy. He knew his staff was gay but he just kind of put his blinders on. As long as we were doing a good job, he didn't need to deal with our preferences. Everyone – once in a while he would make a wise comment about it, but it wasn't too bad. But I had phenomenal mentors. So I liked my job. Didn't know...do I want to give this up and move to central Pennsylvania? This relationship may or may not endure. Because I did know one thing—that a lot of times LGBT relationships don't endure. That they can be a very short-lived situation. So I thought about it for months. He had already moved here and started to work, and I was still in Pittsburgh. And then one day I thought, why not? I'm 25, I have nothing to lose. It's going to be terrific, or it's going to be awful. So I packed up the apartment, moved here, and we've been together over 44 years.

B: And what was it like moving here?

J: Definitely culture shock. I think Pittsburghers are very open to strangers. You can be standing in line for a movie or at the grocery store, bus stop, and people will just chat. They don't want to know your whole history, but they'll just chat. They'll talk about the snow, or the fact that they're freezing. Or maybe the Pirates had a great season. Or maybe the Steelers had a great season. People just chat about things. People don't do that here. I think they're very conservative; not receptive to strangers or outsiders. As a matter of fact my partner had a phenomenal professor in undergraduate school, and she did her graduate work in the area. She taught human growth and development. And one day when she was here visiting I said, "Margaret, I don't get these people. I just don't understand it." And she said, "you have two things going on here. Central Pennsylvania is Pennsylvania Dutch. It is a very close knit, very tight group of people. They are not receptive to outsiders. The other thing that's going on is it is the capital of the state. People who tend to have really good friendships and relationships know that it takes work to sustain a friendship. If you're someone's friend, you deal with...whatever goes with that person, you become part owner of that, to keep the friendship." And she said people in state government tend to change every four years with the administration. So, people don't want to invest time in a friendship, because they think, why bother being a friend—you're going to leave in four years when the administration changes. And so it was hard even making friends in the gay community. Because most of the people in the gay community I did become friends with are all transplanted from some other city. Very few of them were natives. I've since learned people, met people and hang out with people who did grow up here. But most of my LGBT friends are from other cities and states. And it's funny how many of them are Pittsburghers. We kind of just found one another...it was serendipitous.

B: What was the LGBT community like when you moved here?

J: Well, I started meeting people because of a friend in Pittsburgh, who had a lot of friends here. Because he lived here at one point, and he called them and said, "Call John, take him out for

drinks, and start to introduce him to people.” And so Milan did that. He would pick me up on Friday nights; we would go out for drinks and he would introduce me to people. In the meantime, I was starting to feel really guilty that I had strayed away from my Catholic upbringing. And thought, I really liked being Catholic. I liked the ritual, I liked going to mass, I liked the philosophy of it—I liked the doctrine. And I heard about a group in downtown Harrisburg called Dignity that was for gay Catholics. And I thought, that’s really interesting, that appeals to me. So, I went downtown, called this priest who kind of facilitated the group; his name was Father Sari. Called Father Sari, asked can I come talk with you? Yes. And he would say mass for a group of gay and lesbian people on Sundays at the Friend’s Meeting House in downtown Harrisburg. So I started meeting other people who were gay and Catholic. And from that group there was a volleyball team that I started to play volleyball with for about four years. And that was the beginning of making really good friendships here...that I’ve had ever since.

B: Does that group still exist?

J: A fragment of it. The volleyball team is no more. But there’s a group of about 20 people, and out of that group of 20 that still network, once a month they have a potluck dinner at someone’s home. And once a month they go out to dinner somewhere. And so it’s a social thing more than a religious organization.

B: Were there other places that you socialized in the community to meet people?

J: The bars. Because the friends who introduced me to the friends here, they would go to the bars. The volleyball group—it was really funny, every Tuesday night after volleyball we would go to one of the bars. And usually the bars in Harrisburg were not real busy on a Tuesday night. And once word got out that this volleyball team came into the bar every Tuesday, the bars started getting crowded. The bar owners loved it because we were attracting business. But it was fun, because after volleyball we would order 10 or 12 pizzas and take them with us to the bar. And whoever happened to be there we would just say, hey help yourself, have pizza and stuff. What I didn’t know until recently, was the bars in Harrisburg never really started to be a safe place to go until the mid-70s. There’s a man involved with the history project who has been supporting it, who has amazing stories about the bars that I just took for granted. Because by the time we moved here and I started going to the bars, it seemed as though they had been there forever. But they hadn’t. They were still fairly new to the community. So to me it was interesting. There were other places in town aside from the bars that people would go to meet, but I didn’t go to those places. I would just stay with my volleyball group and had fun with them. I would hang out with them and entertain them here (gestures to the dining area in his home). One thing about my partner and me is, I’m very much...I don’t know if it’s because of my family background and growing up, I love having friends come for dinner. I love to cook. Love to have company. He’s the complete opposite—very quiet. I mean when people hear he’s cordial, and nice and gracious, and a terrific host, but would never ever say to people, oh come for dinner Saturday night. (Laughs) he just could not be bothered. So a lot of my friends come here...we’ll just invite them here to hang out.

B: How did you feel that the larger Harrisburg community...were they receptive to the LGBT community at the time?

J: No, I didn't think so. And that was just really based on listening to people talk and the kind of things people talked about. When we first moved here —when I first moved here, I moved here without a job. And that was not a big deal to my partner. That was okay with him. So I did all kinds of things just to have an income. I worked as a stylist for an advertising agency doing catalog work. I worked doing stenciling; I would design stencils and stencil people's kitchens and bathrooms and living rooms and family rooms. I worked at one point as a waiter, and discovered what a really tough job that is—to be a wait person. People can just be horrible. That's a rough job (laughs). Or even owning a restaurant is a rough job. I also discovered there were a lot of gay people in the food service industry. But just observing people's conversations, listening to people, I learned it was still a pretty uptight community, as far as LGBT.

B: When did you decide to get involved in activism?

J: Probably...I became a real activist when I started working with the gay switchboard. I was a volunteer for the gay switchboard.

B: What is that?

J: It was a hotline that—I think Barry Loveland, who was one of the creators of the LGBT history project, Barry started the gay switchboard. And originally it was in a shed downtown. And it was a hotline, that if people in the LGBT community needed help or felt they were in crisis, we would refer them to the crisis hotline, or counseling hotline. We, ourselves, were not counselors. We were not social workers, but we would direct them, here is the appropriate agency you can call. Sometimes people would be visiting from out of town and just call and say, where are the bars? So to me, given that it was such a conservative community that in itself was a form of activism. That you were working this telephone line in a shed in downtown Harrisburg. And Dignity sponsored trips to gay pride in New York. And once I went to New York, the first gay pride, I sort of felt empowered as a gay person. That it's much greater than this little group of people in Pittsburgh, there are millions of us. And it was an amazing feeling. And so I did become more empowered to talk about gay rights, or my perception of what I thought gay rights should be. And eventually I started working for state government. And shortly after I was working for state government, friends in Pittsburgh were starting to die. And people would call from Kaufmann's and say, "Tom's in hospital he has this really weird pneumonia they don't know what to do." And I had been reading all these articles in the *Advocate Magazine* about people getting this really weird pneumonia that was being called gay pneumonia, and it was only affecting gay people. And at the time it was labeled by the medical community as G.R.I.D. It was gay-related immune deficiency. So friends in Pittsburgh started dying, and I got a call one day one of my best friends from Pittsburgh had moved to Manhattan, and two women we worked with in Pittsburgh married guys in Manhattan and moved to Manhattan. And they called and said, "You need to come to New York, George is dying. He has this really weird pneumonia; they don't know what to...there's no cure, there are no drugs." As a result of that I started getting really angry. I wanted to know, what was the government doing? I came home and said to my partner one night, "what's the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania doing about all these people who are dying from G.R.I.D.?" And he said, "well, as a matter of fact, they're going to start an AZT program." And in 1986, '85, AZT was the only drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration that clinicians were starting to prescribe for people with HIV. So I said, "how do I get that job? I want that job. I want to do that. I want to be the AZT guy." And he said, "well you have to go and talk to..." and he gave me the person's name. And I found this woman; I like,

stalked her to find where she was. I knocked on her office door and said, “hi, I heard about this AZT program, I want the job. I think it will be my way of helping the community, by being a gay person on the inside...in the government agency that’s going to give them drugs.” And she looked at me like I had landed from another planet. And said, “it’s civil service, have you applied for it?” And I said, “I’m applying for it now.” And she said “no, no, no, it doesn’t work that way [laughs]. Go to civil service, get an application, get it notarized, blah, blah, blah.” So I did that, and three weeks later was called for an interview. Three weeks after that she called and said, “I really would like to hire you, but I don’t know if I can, because 39 people applied for the job”—all of them except me had experience in state government. State Government is a very social ...I mean civil service is a very strange animal. That you can be incompetent as anything, but if you meet these strange criteria that have been established, you can get a job. And so she said they have seniority, which gives them an upper edge. She said the thing you have going for you is you are the only person out of all of them that wanted the job for what it is, not because it was a promotion—because there’s nothing to promote you from. So I said, “that’s right, I want the job.” And she said, “well, they’ve filed grievances...” Some of the people had filed grievances that they were not hired. So, I said, “fine, if you don’t hire me, I’ll file a grievance and say you didn’t hire me because I’m gay.” And she was kind of speechless at that point [laughs], and I said, “really, if you want, I’ll be real flamboyant about it. I’ll put on a feather boa and some chandelier earrings and paint my nails and I will go with you to civil service and file a complaint.” And she said, “I don’t think we need to be that radical about it [laughs], just give me a few weeks to work it out.” Fortunately, she had recorded every single interview, took them to civil service, and argued her point that out of all those people I was the only one who wanted the job for what it was. So, I think that was a turning point for me becoming a real advocate. Because I was able to see how government was going to treat gay people with a fatal disease. Because in 1987 if you were diagnosed with HIV, usually you were dead within a year. And it also turned out that the woman who did hire me gave me a lot of leeway. She was from Pittsburgh, and she had relatives who owned a gay bar in Pittsburgh. So she completely got gay, and was compassionate and really sympathetic to people who were dying from HIV. And the result led me to all kinds of advocacy work. I would say, there’s going to be a gay pride parade in Harrisburg, I want to go and hand out pamphlets. And she would say, we don’t have any money for you to do advertising. And I would say, “that’s fine. You know, I’ll get them somehow.” And I would go to, it wasn’t Kinkos, I forget what the copy shops were called, and a friend of mine would do artwork, and would do a flyer that would say “FREE AZT: call this number.” And I would go to gay pride at Reservoir Park in Harrisburg and hand out pamphlets and stuff and be an advocate that way. I ended up advocating because of the drug program, and that’s what I did for 24 years. So it was quite a transition from working in a retail environment, where the idea is to make money, to working in an environment where I was giving money away, via the drugs. But it was an amazing, amazing experience to be an advocate from inside the system.

B: What sorts of things did you do for the community with that job?

J: Well, I think probably one of the best things that happened was one of the very early aggressive advocacy groups with HIV was called ACTUP—it was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Philadelphia had one of the most vocal aggressive chapters, and I think what helped being gay was I could say to them, I’m one of the good guys here, I’m on the inside. Just because I’m working for the department of welfare doesn’t make me the bad guy ... come to

Harrisburg, let's figure out what we can do together. And it turned out to be a real proactive arrangement because the gay community realized there was somebody in government that related to their preference and their disease, and wanted to help. So it was pretty powerful stuff. Building these liaisons between AIDS activists and gay activists, because not everyone who was an activist was infected, and state government, and networking, getting people to realize that there are some agencies that do have an open door. There are agencies who do get it.

B: What sort of roadblocks did you hit?

J: Churches [laughs] and trying to do outreach in the religious communities and in the African American community. Even though there were a lot of African Americans who were infected ... complete denial. And I would go to organizations in the African American community and say, "hey, there's a program in here that can help you get drugs," and ... well, "no, we don't have any of those people living here." And so that was a real roadblock as far as helping people get access to medication that they needed. And it was tough. Even though the African American community was invited to the table all of the time to work and network and meet people, here in Central Pennsylvania it just was not working.

B: And you spent 25 years in this career?

J: I did.

B: What were some of the changes you saw from to when you first got the job?

J: Oh wow. Well for one thing, the formulary, meaning the list of drugs, expanded from one drug, AZT, and by the time I left government service we were providing more than 700 different drugs to people who had HIV or needed drugs *for* HIV, but they also needed drugs for the side effects of HIV, which were other medical conditions. For example, there were some people who had HIV plus diabetes. So we were able to provide their HIV meds plus their diabetic meds. So that was a phenomenal thing. The other thing was people started to live longer, which was amazing. I mean it was so...it was terrific to see people living longer and responding well to the new drugs that were being developed.

B: And what about the community's views about HIV and AIDS?

J: Great question, because it is completely fallen off the radar screen. There's so much apathy, in my opinion, now, about AIDS. The people don't support it. People are still getting infected. People are infected and don't know they're infected, and not being tested. I have a nephew who is 25 now, who moved to Manhattan. And from the time he was a little kid I suspected he was going to be gay. I just thought, one of these days. He moved to Manhattan and I thought, oh no. he's incredibly handsome, talented, good-looking guy. He's going to become Manhattan party boy. And he did. And almost three years ago he called one day and said, "hey Uncle John, I just wanted to let you know I tested positive." And I could've killed him. He and his friends, their attitude is, it's okay if we get infected, the drugs are so much better. And I would say to them, "maybe the drugs are better, but what if the government says, we're not going to pay for those drugs anymore? What if the government says, the Ryan White CARE Act is being overturned [video recording file change] written out of the budget, we wanna put the money into something else because AIDS isn't a big deal anymore?" And he and his friends said, "Oh we didn't think about that." And I said, "You need to think about that." So, but people are living longer and

responding well. My nephew is doing really well. The current clinical regime...if people can tolerate the drugs, they're down to one drug a day. One pill a day. Which is very different from 1987 when it was as many as 92 pills a day. So some people, the pill burden was literally 92 pills a day. And I don't know, but I mean there are people who can't take a 10 prescription of antibiotics without choking, so it's hard to wrap your brain around 92 pills a day. So, that's been encouraging. But the sad thing is that people are apathetic and...the first AIDS organization in Harrisburg was called SCAAN. South Central AIDS Assistance Network, and every year there would be a walk on City Island of a fundraiser. That walk used to raise tens of thousands of dollars, upwards of 80 or 90 thousand dollars. The last walk I think raised \$6,000. So I think it shows a lot about where the people's heads are about the disease. And the other thing is it's not a gay disease anymore. And I think that is another thing that affected apathy. Early on gay people owned it, and they were angry, and they wanted to help their friends who were infected. And they wanted to do whatever they could do to provide funding so there were agencies for people to go to. The other thing that happened early on, a lot of the lesbians that we played volleyball with became the caregivers and they started taking care of the guys who were infected, and they would cook meals for them or clean their homes or visit or take them to doctor appointments and things. And I think once the disease shifted out of the gay community into mainstream heterosexual community, then people started to not talk about it as much and it just became maybe an expectation that well, "I'm infected, so the government will pay for my drugs and take care of me. I don't need to worry about it." So, it's been a real...it's still going on, I still work with AIDS.

B: What do you do now?

J: I work as a consultant for the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health. We offer the Pennsylvania Mid-Atlantic AIDS Education Training Center. And then I'm also working with a local lobbyist for one of the companies that make AIDS drugs, just trying to keep an eye on government to make sure they are providing ongoing new emerging therapies for people who are infected.

B: How do you raise awareness in community that doesn't seem to be concerned with it anymore?

J: You just keep talking about it. Whenever and wherever you can. I...this—because of some friends I've been introduced to, youth groups in some the local schools and—I take tons of condoms with me and say "it ain't over, the fat lady didn't sing, there is no vaccine, there is no cure, until there is..." The down side of that is I gave that same lecture ... my nephew when he was growing up, and when he did tell me he was infected and I was so, so angry. One of my friends from PITT said "you've to understand, the age difference. He's 22, you are 63," you know, at the time. "And in his mind, you are the voice of an adult in a Peanuts cartoon." That "you are wah-wah-wah-wah-wah. You are sound, you are no substance. You're just a sound." And so it's hard, but you still gotta keep talking to people about it. And... It's interesting there's the Logo TV station on cable, which is all LGBT, does terrific public service advertising about getting tested and getting out there. And the sad thing about that is I don't see those ads on the major networks. Which is really too bad because it hasn't gone away, and people are still...I don't know that you will ever keep people from acting on their raging hormones. If you wanna have sex you're gonna have sex. The point is getting people to have safe sex.

B: What about the... Have you seen any major shifts within the LGBT community at large over the past, you know, 30 years?

J: Here, it's phenomenal. I mean people are out, people are open, people are talking about their sexuality. I think it's incredible the LGBT center has a storefront in downtown Harrisburg. It's phenomenal. That's great. Unlike the hotline that was operated in a shack in an alley with a telephone and a lightbulb. So yeah, it's emerged a lot, and the other thing that I've observed, I don't know how true it is, but it seems as though young people don't care if there is a gay bar or not. When I was growing up the gay bar was your haven. The place where you could go to — to be with people who were like you, to feel safe, hang out, meet people, socialize, have a really good time. And when you talk to the bar owners downtown, most of them will say, "business is awful." And I think it's because young people don't feel compelled to have a gay specific bar that can go to, that they can go pretty much to any club and if you're gay fine, if your lesbian fine, you know you just kind of blend in with all the other people who are at the bar. You know and if people don't want to deal with it or talk about it, leave it alone. I don't know how intense gay bashing is in the community anymore. I haven't heard stories, at least in this region of gay bashing, that doesn't mean it doesn't happen. I'm sure the kids that I've talked to, the high school groups, they are bullied. And they do have classmates that bully them. Beyond that in the community, I don't know. I haven't heard any stories of people being abused or beaten up downtown Harrisburg. And that did happen.

B: Really? Can you remember sometimes?

J: There was at one point, I think it was in the 80s, when people leaving the bars were being beat up and mugged and kicked. I think one of the bars even started providing whistles to people so that when you left the bar you had a whistle with you. If someone jumped you, you could blow the whistle and make all the noise you could possibly make to get help — let people know something was going on that shouldn't be going on.

B: Were you ever involved in a situation like that?

J: No.

B: No?

J: No. One of my roommates in Pittsburgh, was beaten very badly in New York City, and almost died. He was in the hospital for month and months. A gang jumped him and threw — they bashed his head in with bricks. And he was lucky that he did survive and did not have any brain damage after his recovery. So, but I've never personally been, thank God, involved with anything. That would just be awful. Yeah.

B: Do you still network amongst organizations in the LGBT community today?

J: Absolutely. Yeah, with LGBT Center [of Central Pennsylvania] downtown. I'm part of the committee for the project the two of you are working on, so I'm involved with the History Project. Right now I'm trying to figure out how to [use] social networking to find people who grew up here, but now live in San Diego. Or live in Chicago. And my game plan is to just start working on Facebook, because I love Facebook. Some people will have 1,400 friends — and so I figure, okay, if you have 1,400 friends, if even 10 percent of them are LGBT, I wonder how

many of that percentage grew up in Central Pennsylvania and moved away. So what I kind-of experiment to see how can we network on Facebook or Twitter and reach out and have friends post a message to their friends, and to keep spreading the word outward to see how many people we can get from Central Pennsylvania from New York to California. So, I do work with the community that way.

B: Why is the History Project important to you?

J: Wow. Well, for one thing it is important because we have lost such a huge chunk of it because of AIDS. We have lost two generations of people who died because they didn't respond to the drugs. So, I think the history of the remaining people, the living, is important. Whether or not they were infected is important. How they grew up, how they were perceived growing up or what their experiences were, think is really important. I think every little bit of exposure to teach people that we're normal people we're just like everybody else. We have jobs, we go to school, we pay taxes, we get sick and die, whatever your situation is — that we're all really very much the same, except for who we want to sleep with. And I think every bit of that exposure through the history project helps teach people to a little more accepting, a little more understanding of LGBT.

B: Can you talk to me a little bit about you and your partner?

J: Sure. [laughing] We met—as I said, I was 20 when we met. And I had a fake ID, I was in a gay bar in Pittsburgh. We meet in a bar. Went back to my apartment from the bar and just started seeing one another fairly often after that first encounter. And after about, I don't know, six or eight months he said, "Why don't you move in with me." And I thought, mmm, yeah, I like that idea, I'll move in with you. So I moved in with him. I think why the relationship has endured for over 44 years is because we're completely different. Completely. I did say that my dad never acknowledged the gay, but he absolutely adored my partner because my partner did all the stuff I would not do. He would play golf, he would play bridge, he would play poker, he was a high school and college jock. I could care less. I'd rather be digging in the yard planting herbs or something than whacking a ball in golf cart, golf course. So we're really, we're very different. He's nine years older than me. He's very, very level headed. I tend to react and then think about it after I've reacted and hash it over in my brain. And he's real logical, I sometimes wonder if I have any logic at all. But, he's a great guy, really smart, really smart. He's just, you know, low key and yeah.

B: What were some the hardships that you two faced early on in your relationship?

J: I can't say that we really faced any, because he was not out to any of his friends or family. And so there were, there were no negative interactions with family members. Although— he has one sister, and I think that she suspected that we were gay but wouldn't talk about it. But I remember one time, they lived out of state and they were home visiting my partner's parents and his nephews were I think in high school. And my partner had said to his sister "ya know, why don't you let the kids sleep over at the apartment tonight." And she would not let that happen. "No, they're... no...they don't...no...they're staying at their grandmother's." And we were both pretty sure it was because she thought we would molest them or do something terrible because she's real homophobic and so that was a negative encounter. But he was never out to people he worked with. Never.

B: Were you okay with that?

J: Yeah, and I'm okay with any LGBT person who wants to do that. Because I think it's who you are, and we each deal with our personal lives the way that we see best to deal with our own personal life. I'm comfortable being out, now I wouldn't want the neighborhood to know because there are people in the neighborhood I think would harm us or our property or that dog [point to dog off camera] if they knew that we were gay. There may be people in the neighborhood who suspect we're gay, but it's a good relationship. Yeah.

B: Did he ever come out to his family?

J: Never.

B: Really?

J: Never. Nope. And both of his parents are deceased and his sister is still living — she's in her 80s, lives in Arizona. But no, never talked about it and his... It's really interesting because he has an uncle that's gay. And his uncle and his partner have been together over 60 years. And I think they're just amazing guys. They are incredible. What's funny about them is they're from a generation, I think, when a lot of gay relationships were assigned gender roles. And so the one partner was always the more masculine partner and one was like the feminine one. And so, I call them "Uncle Mak" and "Aunt Ken" [laughs] is how I refer to them. And Aunt Ken does a lot of things that you think would typically be a female role in household or relationship. Sewing, knitting, crocheting, cooking, canning ...canning food —preserving food, making jam and jelly and it's real interesting. I don't know other than my partner's dad once did say some comment about his brother-in-law, and he said "ya know, he's a little funny," but that was all. That was the only comment. But I never heard either of my partner's parents say anything negative about gay people or just...or I should say evil. I mean, just saying someone's "funny" is negative, but I never heard them be overtly prejudiced or bigoted, saying "they should be killed or locked up" or something. But no, his family...he has one niece that knows, and that's mine. She's I think in her 50s or 60s. She might be close to my age, but she's fine with it. So we just don't talk about it even...I was telling you earlier, before we started, that we adopted one another a year ago because we are not confident that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will approve same sex unions in our life, and I wish would stop calling it same-sex marriage. I think if advocates would call it same-sex union it would be easier for people in this region to maybe start to understand it. You say the word *marriage*, and they immediately flip open the Bible and, "Oh, well, no. Marriage has to be a man and a woman" and ya know "It can't be two men, that's sick" and stuff. And somehow calling it a *union* might work. Anyway, we adopted one another. Because my dad was still living at the time, I adopted my partner. Which people thought was weird cause he's nine years older, and they thought, "well, the father should be older than the child," but it didn't work out that way. But we adopted one another and there was the *Central Voice* newspaper did an article about the adoption. And my partner wanted to be pretty anonymous and laid back, primarily because of people he knows and works with. And he plays golf probably three or four days a week when the weather's nice, and had organized a senior golf group that is positive 99.9 percent heterosexual. And may be the only gay person I know that...I know a lot lesbians that golf, I don't know any gay guys that golf. It's very weird. I don't get the fascination with lesbians and golf. I really don't. And I tease my lesbian friends about it all the time about it ya know. "What is it with you and ya know golfing?" I just don't get it. But he's not out to any

of those people that he golfs with, and when Frank wrote the article for the *Central Voice* — my partner would not allow photograph to be taken for the article. And I kept saying to him, “What are the chances that one of,” I call them geezer golfers, “What are the chances one of the geezer golfers would pick-up a *Central Voice* newspaper and read it and put two and two together?” They don’t know me, they occasionally call here for something, some voice on the other end of the phone, but they don’t know what I look like. They’ve never seen me. So, and they’re never gonna see me on the golf course. [laughing] Forget it.

B: What was the process of adopting your partner like?

J: A lot easier than I anticipated, and a friend in Pittsburgh was the impetus for it, for the adoption because he called one day and said, “Congratulate me, I’m a father.” And I said, “What do you mean, Nino, you’re 85 years old? What do you mean you’re a father?” And he said, “I adopted Drew.” And when he explained why, the adoption because of inheritance tax, I thought that was incredible. So, I said to my partner a couple of days later, “Nino adopted Drew,” and “that’s a really good idea, why don’t we do that.” And he said I’ve thought about that for years, but just never really mentioned it.” And “Sure, I’ll do that.” So, I called my attorney and said, “you can” [coughing] excuse me “start the paperwork for adoption.” And she said “Yeah.” So she filed the papers with Dauphin County Court. We got a hearing date in adoption...the adoption court, and went down town to courtroom judge, and that was it. They swore me in. The judge wanted to know what the rationale was. And I said, “Right know it’s the only option of protecting ourselves from Pennsylvania inheritance tax.” I did not say one thing about same-sex marriage, same-sex union, nothing. All I said was “inheritance tax.” And that was fine, I didn’t have to say more than that. So I was, ya know, told “thank-you, go sit down,” and they swore my partner in and the judge said, “Do you agree with Mr. Folby’s rationale for adoption?” My partner said, “Yes, absolutely.” And the judge said, “Fine, that’s it.” He was released, we were both sitting in there, ya know, in the courtroom and the attorney said, “Well, since we’re all here and we’re the only people here right now, would you sign the adoption forms to make it legal now rather putting in pile of paperwork and signing off later.” And the judge said, “Sure.” So, he signed off on the adoption papers and looked at me and said, “Mr. Folby, congratulations--it’s a boy.” And it was a really good thing because it broke the ice for me. I was really uptight about the whole process because I kept thinking, “What if we get some Bible thumping Pennsylvania judge who’s gonna say, ‘No, you can’t do this.’” I later found out from my attorney, the judge couldn’t of done that because there is nothing legal saying you can’t do this. Yeah, “an adult may not adopt another adult.” The other thing that I think is very interesting is the media got so focused on the fact two older gay guys were doing this. I kept thinking, “What a bunch of idiots, straight people could do this too if they had a brain in their head.” There... I know straight couples who have lived together for 30, and 40, and 50 years and the partner will die, the surviving spouse has to pay 16 percent inheritance tax. So, you’re an idiot if you don’t consider adoption as a way of protecting yourself from some of that financial burden. Why not? So the one thing the judge did say is, “You realize this is final? You can’t change it.” So that if the Commonwealth would approve same-sex marriage, we couldn’t get married. I think that we are probably could, yeah if my partner would declare himself an emancipated minor, that could end the adoption or someone else could adopt him, which is legal, someone else could adopt him, and end this adoption and then we could get married. And the only reason we would do that is because now that the federal government is recognizing it, it would take advantage of some maybe tax benefits —and survivor benefits. So, beyond that we don’t feel compelled to have that

hunk of paper. I mean we...it's interesting all three of my sisters have been divorced and remarried. My brother is still with his wife, his first wife, so...but I think it's amazing our relationship had endured that long and my three sisters have all ...yeah, so when legislators start stomping their feet about heterosexual marriage being so sanctimonious, and perfect—a wonderful ... I think, “There's something wrong with this picture. Yeah, look around you. How many divorce...” The divorce rate so incredibly high, what does that say about straight marriage? Of course now it's happening in the gay and lesbian community. People who've gotten married are now getting divorces. There have been a couple articles in the *New York Times* about it. About LGBT divorces now, a new legal can of worms. Ya know, property and custody, if you've adopted. Yeah.

B: What were the reactions by people when you adopted your partner?

J: [laughing] They were interesting. I did tell Uncle Mak and Aunt Ken. And Uncle Mak just thought it was ridiculous. He just thought it was crazy. Everyone else that we did tell was really supportive. They thought it was a great idea, and a really smart thing to do. Because there was a rationale behind it, because of saving some tax liability, so they were supportive. Frank's article, Frank Pizzoli's article did reach mainstream media. And a lot of media below the Mason-Dixon Line was very negative and hurtful and at one point I called Frank and said “You wouldn't believe what they're saying.” There was a website called *Scared Monkeys*, and it was in Alabama or someplace and the feedback was just so negative. And it really freaked me out. Then there, there was a lot of feedback saying we were committing incest — to the point where I thought, “Is that true? Because now we are father and son. Is this incest?” And I called the attorney and said, “Could somebody really arrest us and say we're...it's an incestuous relationship?” And she said, “They would have to have cameras in your bedroom, microphones...they would actually have to see you having sex together before they could file charges of incest.” So interesting feedback—Northeast: real supportive. Feedback from major cities was supportive. Feedback from European publications was supportive. It was everything below the Mason-Dixon Line was just evil. I mean just... “We would kill you if we knew where you lived.” So...

B: Wow. How did that make you feel?

J: It scared me at first, and I kept thinking, “Oh, is this a smart thing to do.” Telling Frank, “Yeah, let it go. Let the story out there.” And then I thought, “Yeah, yeah, after...” Frank really reeled me in and said, “Stop reading it. Yeah, just stop reading it.” They, if they were smart, they could figure out who you are. But, just leave it alone — and eventually it did all just die down. It was an interesting experience though.

B: Does that happen a lot? Do a lot partners adopt their partners?

J: No.

B: No?

J: No, and I don't understand it because I've been chatting it up with all of the couples I know. Where the partners are in 50s, 60s, and 70s. One of the things I witnessed when people were dying from AIDS — if they were in a relationship — there were people who losing their homes because the deceased partner's family would come in and say, “Well, this was my brother's

house.” And the surviving partner would say, “Yeah, but I helped buy it and I helped pay for half of the stuff that’s in it.” But unless there was a will, those families have trumped all over the surviving partner. And it doesn’t matter whether it was AIDS or what it was, it is still happening now—that without a will or an adoption to protect you—that the deceased’s family could come in and say, “Get the Hell out. Leave.” One of the women you interviewed recently had good friends and the elder partner died last fall and his family came in and said to the survivor, “You have three months to get out of here.” Even though he helped buy that house and all of the things in it. Too bad. The family said, “No, it was our brother, we’re family, we are legally entitled to whatever was his.”

B: Wow.

J: So, I think people are really foolish if they don’t look into adoption. Yeah, and I think actually take adoption over marriage.

B: Really?

J: Mmmhmm. [Nods head]

B: Why is that?

J: Well, because it is an option right now, and because the Commonwealth drags its feet on anything dealing with sexual preference. I mean the Commonwealth.... Fortunately, there is a law that people who work for the Commonwealth are protected if they are LGBT. They cannot be fired because of sexual preference and sexual choices. I don’t know how many other states have that for state employees. But at least Pennsylvania does. But I don’t know about, yeah, how people are thinking about adoption and bouncing around to everybody. Yeah.

B: Are you still pretty confident that the Commonwealth will not approve?

J: I am.

B: You are?

J: Yep. I really...and it’s funny because a lot of my friends think it’s gonna happen any day now. And I keep thinking, “No, it isn’t.” And it’s sad because the Commonwealth has been the leader on so many different initiatives, and I don’t know our legislators just are still stuck in the mud somewhere and cannot get it around their brains. And it’s probably a lot of it has to do with the constituents. Pennsylvania is the largest rurally-populated state in the country. Texas has more rural land mass, but it’s not populated. Pennsylvania has more regions that are designated rural that are populated. So I think legislators from the rural areas where people tend to be a little more conservative and uptight listen to feedback from their constituents. And they know that, “oh well you know, Frank and Helen don’t want that to happen and so we’re not gonna let that happen—so we’re not gonna let the queers have a union.” So.

B: I don’t want to end the interview without talking about...I looked you up online, and I found that there’s actually a John Folby Award. And I think that that’s remarkable. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

J: [Laughs] Wow. I'm amazed you did that. It was, yeah, [becoming emotional] Can we delete this part?

B: Sure. Do you want me to stop the camera?

J: For a minute.

B: Sure.

[Camera is stopped]

[Recording resumes- third video clip]

J: Yeah, I did get an award. The...actually it did knock me out. A former secretary of public welfare, a woman named Karen Snyder, called one day — and she's very gruff lady — and first of all it freaked me out that she called. And she said, "Folby, this is Karen Snyder." And I said, "Oh, Hi." And I'm thinking — she has left state government, she works for public service, she's still in public service I forget the agency she's with. I think helping kids. And she said, "I need your curriculum vitae." And I thought, "Okay, what's this all about?" And I said, "Are you gonna recommend me to do some lobbying or something?" — thinking that's —ya know why would she possibly need my CV? And I said, "Okay, but it's not quite up to date. There's some new things I'm doing with the University of Pittsburgh and I need — I retired and — about to retire and I need to refresh it." And she said, "Okay, but get it to me. I need it by 2:00 this afternoon.

B: Oh wow.

J: [laughs] And I'm thinking ya know, "Lady, what is this!" And she said, "Well, I'm nominating you for an award and they need the information by 2:00 and I nominate people for awards unless I'm absolutely sure they're gonna get the award." And I'm thinking, "Yeah right." I mean this is just so bizarre. So we hung up. I pulled my CV together —updated it with current — a few current blobs and emailed it to her. And a month later got a phone call that said we going to honor you for your work with HIV— and enabling people to move forward with their lives with HIV.

B: Mmmhmm.

J: So it was awarded by the Foundation for Enhancing Communities. And HIV/AIDS was one of their core causes to support. And it was amazing.

B: There are people that get the John Folby Award every year.

J: Oh, that's a different award. [laughs]

B: That's a different award? So what is that award about?

J: That award — that really blew me away. [laughs] Wow, that award was from AIDS fundraiser called the Black and White Party.

B: Uh-huh.

J: And I was still working for state government, and one of the social workers from one of the AIDS clinics that I worked with in York called and said, “Oh, we’re doing a fundraiser and would you support it?” And I said, “Sure, I’ll buy a ticket.” Because if it was a local fundraiser, I would try to support it and buy a ticket.

B: Uh-huh.

J: And attend it. I would get a lot of invitations from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and Erie to, “Please come to our AIDS fundraiser.” Not an easy thing to do. So if it was local, I said, “Yeah, I’ll do it.” And, and David said, “Oh, ya know, don’t worry. We’re gonna, ya know, get a ticket for you. We’re just happy that you’re gonna come.” And I said, “No, ya know, I’ll send you a check.” So, I wrote them a check, ya know — and he said, “Well, you can...” He called a couple of days later, “You can pick it up at the Will Call Table. It’s gonna be at this club in York. And I said, “Fine.” And so I’m thinking, “Okay, a Black and White Party.” Of course you have to think black and white clothing and the whole what do I do here. So I went, drove to York. There were like 1,200 people there. It was huge. There were tents on the parking lot of this night club. And just a million people and I thought, “God, this is really, this is a really big deal. I’m really surprised.” So, I’m schmoozing with people I know, and circulating and talking to people and there were a ton of doctors from the clinic that I had talked with on the phone but had never met. They were all there. And all yakking and stuff — and the evening’s going on and at one point the master of ceremonies said, “If everyone would please come into the club — we wanna introduce Jenny McCarthy. Ya know she’s gonna talk about Family First Health and the work they do.” That was the name of the agency. “And they have a short video presentation about the clients and the doctors and facility and da da da da...” And on and on, and then she finished and she said, “Oh, and John Folby’s in the room -- would you please come up here?”

B: Oh.

J: And that was it. They gave me an award.

B: Really?

J: Could not stop crying. I was so overwhelmed.

B: Sure.

J: When you work for state government you really don’t think people will acknowledge your work.

B: Mmmhmm.

J: So, I’m sobbing my guts out. I could hardly talk. I mean I was a mess. And looked out of the side of my eye and there was a 6’4” drag queen headed toward me in a red sequin gown, and earrings down to here [gestures to his shoulder] and gloves up to here [points to upper arm] and bracelets. And this drag queen walked over to me and he grabbed me and gave me this humongous bear hug. And said, “Honey, I just wanna tell you thanks.” [Laughs]

B: [laughs]

J: And I said, “Thank-you?” And I said, “For what?” And he said, “Well, if it wasn’t for your drug program, I couldn’t have afforded all this”[Gestures to indicate clothing]. [Laughs]

B: [Laughs]

J: And it was a perfect thing to happen, because I couldn’t get a grip on myself.

B: Sure.

J: And it just brought me all down, yeah. And...But they named the award after me. So that whoever receives it from that point on will receive the John Folby Award for Excellence. So, and the people who’ve gotten it are all people that I would say absolutely....they’ve been on the front lines — giving a zillion percent to helping people with HIV and yeah. So...

B: That must be an incredible feeling.

J: Yeah.

B: That’s quite an honor.

J [nodding head, becoming choked up]

B: Well, we can wrap it up and at this point after I...

J: You really knocked me out with that cause I wasn’t...yeah

B: Ya know, threw that out of left field.

J: I don’t think about those things.

B: Sure.

J: I mean it was..., it was amazing. Yeah...

B: Sure. If there’s anything else you’d like to share with me I’d like to give you the opportunity.

J: I’m just trying to think, I ya know just, hopeful that the History Project will — we should do a segment that is just on how HIV did, and has, affected two generations of the community that are histories we will only know anecdotally from friends who were friends of the friends who died. And because of HIV we we’ve lost huge blocks of archival material and legislation — copies of legislation that...There was a man from Pittsburgh, Roger Beatty, and he and Dr. Tony Sylvester from PITT were instrumental in writing the legislation for civil rights, and for state employees who were LGBT. And Roger died a year ago, almost two years ago, and unfortunately his family didn’t think about it and all his files and papers and everything were just put in a dumpster. So, there’s a lot of history that’s missing because people didn’t know about it or weren’t aware of it, or people didn’t come out to their families — and couldn’t tell them about the work they did or things they accomplished for the LGBT community and that’s lost.

B: Mmmhmm.

J: So, I'm hopeful that people who hear about the project — even if they don't wanna be photographed, will at least do a verbal history...

B: Sure.

J: ...that it can be recorded and hopefully people will learn from it. So, as we all continue to move forward ...

B: Sure. What else do you think needs to be done for the LGBT community?

J: Wow, I think education really is crucial. It can't be swept under the rug because it's not gonna go away and, I just — I'm hopeful that at some point people will stop being judgmental of diversity and embrace diversity for what it is whether it be your culture, your sexual preference, your religion, just let it go. Yeah. That's it.

B: Thank-you so much.

J: Thank-you.

B: I appreciate it. I really do.

J: [laughs] You got me.

B: [laughs]