

# **LGBT History Project of the LGBT Center of Central PA**

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**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Frank Pizzoli

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LGBT History Project  
Archives & Special Collections  
Waidner-Spahr Library  
Dickinson College  
P.O. Box 1773  
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

**[archives@dickinson.edu](mailto:archives@dickinson.edu)**

**Interviewee: Frank Pizzoli**

Interviewer: Bob Kegriss

Date of Interview: Apr. 15, 2013

Location of Interview: Historic Harrisburg Association

Transcriber: Katie McCauley

**RESTRICTIONS: Contact Frank Pizzoli in advance of public release of any research, stories, media, etc. using any portion of this interview.**

**Abstract:**

Frank Pizzoli, founder and editor-in-chief of the *Central Voice*, an LGBT newsletter for the Central PA community, discusses his experiences in the community and how he thinks things have changed over time. He describes some aspects of growing up gay in the 1960s and '70s and specifically the small community feel that the early LGBT community had, discussing the changes between then and now. He also discusses some of his experiences of living with HIV and how that affected his life in the early '80s, including his role in formation of the South Central AIDS Assistance Network (SCAAN), which would later become AIDS Community Alliance and which is now under Alder Health Services. Finally, he discusses some of the books and authors that he found important to the LGBT community and their influence.

[The first eight minutes of the video are the people involved figuring out the microphone.]

**BK:** We have an interview today with Frank Pizzoli, who is editor-in-chief, publisher, and dishwasher of the *Central Voice*, who's been a native of Harrisburg for a long time. Good morning, Frank.

**FP:** Good morning. Thank you for asking me.

**BK:** Oh, sure, we're happy to have you. How long have you been living around in the Harrisburg area, Frank?

**FP:** I first arrived in Harrisburg in 1974—January, right after graduating from college, and I was here for almost two years, and I got back in 1982.

**BK:** Okay. 1982—okay. Where did you go to school?

**FP:** I went to school at Bloomsburg University, which then was Bloomsburg State College.

**BK:** Indeed. Yes. Okay, is publishing your main source of—as your main occupation, should I say, these days?

**FP:** Actually, no, it's not an occupation. I have always been involved with publishing. All of my life I—when I was 10 years old with two friends in the little village I grew up in, the little patch[?], we published a *Daily Blab*—we had—

**BK:** [chuckling, echoes] *The Daily Blab*.

**FP:** [chuckles] Two subscribers, and charged a—charged a nickel, and in college, I was a writer on the college newspaper.

**BK:** Great.

**FP:** And then the news editor, and it's just always been a part of my life to write what you're feeling.

[Horn beeps outside.]

**BK:** Yeah. Good. Good. Okay, well, let's get to the—the—the subject, and as you know we're doing an archive—historical and an oral archive of the GLBT community in and around the Harrisburg area, and since you've been here a while, we're happy to have you—to interview you. Let me get right down to business and ask you how—when did you first realize you were gay?

**FP:** I think early on I sensed that there was something different—I don't know that I had a name for it—but certainly I think by, oh, about 10 or 11 years old.

**BK:** Okay.

**FP:** Like, I—I think I understood what it was.

**BK:** Good. Now, can you describe a little bit about what your life was like back then, as a—knowing your life was a little bit different? Did it affect you?

**FP:** Well, even though I may have felt I was a little bit different in many ways, it was an absolutely wonderful life. I was blessed to have a large family that was very close and looked after each other, and I think it—got along with a lot less and had a lot more fun. I grew up in the anthracite coal region, and certainly my family was the blessed in many ways, and it wasn't—we were not required to work in the mines.

**BK:** Great.

**FP:** But I come from a family of grocers and small business people, and people who are involved in that community, and I think that set the example of it. I was aware, like many people were aware at that point in their lives, that it's not something that was ever discussed. If it was whispered, it was whispered in very negative terms. But like many of us, we're strong people, so...don't talk about it, this too shall pass.

**BK:** Right. Right. That's exactly. Did you have anybody in the community that you were able to interact with or connect with in some way in those early days?

**FP:** No, not really.

**BK:** Not—I wouldn't use the world—word role model, but somebody that you could look up to, or...

**FP:** Well, there absolutely were no role models. I was born in 1951, so you know, the only real choices that you had then as you were growing up was you were either a criminal, a sinner, or mentally ill, but neither of—neither of those three are good choices, I suppose the one that would be the least obnoxious would be criminal—

**BK:** Yeah. Of course.

**FP:** Right. So, no, role models were not...

**BK:** Okay. Not available, around at that time. Did you socialize as you were old enough to, like, go to bars and socialize? Or was that not a part of your agenda at that time?

**FP:** Well, I left there when I was 17—

**BK:** [echoes] 17.

**FP:** —Or 18, so any experiences with bars and that sort of thing came in—in—in—in terms of college years. I do remember while I was in college, there was a bar that we would go to off on a—kind of an old highway leading to the next town, from Bloomsburg to Berwick, and it was owned by two men—a male—two guys—couple—for many years, and it was a restaurant—luncheon, restaurant, barroom—very familiar in many communities back then, the setup, and on Friday and Saturday nights, at about midnight, after everybody else left, it was kind of like, knock on the door, and “Joe sent me,” and if they didn't think the cops were gonna come, you know, they'd—they'd let you in. And—so that was it. So you always had a sense that you had to be looking over your shoulder, and at times, the police would come and raid it, you know, pull everybody out and embarrass everybody and ask for identification, and that was not unusual.

**BK:** Right. Okay. Let me ask you, how has being a person—a gay person—how has that affected your work life? Has it enhanced it? Has it hindered you in any way?

**FP:** No, I certainly can't say that it enhanced it. I—I once described it in this way: I was always amazed that in the workplace, in particular men but also women, who perceive themselves to be manly men, were always such weasels about the way that they would deal with the fact that I was gay.

**BK:** [laughs]

**FP:** By that I mean they would never sit down and look me in the eye and say, “I don't like you, you're gay. You're not getting promoted, because you're gay. I'm uncomfortable around you, because you're gay.” It was always as we would, in unflattering terms, maybe describe girls who were in the fifth, sixth, or seventh grade. I could—I always thought that was a great big disconnect. I don't mean anything anti-feminist by my description of them—I hope that

listening audience in future years will have people old enough to understand what I'm trying to describe. So, like in the—like in the world for many men—and I'm speaking about men, 'cause that's what I am—

**BK:** Right.

**FP:** Don't have any credibility to speak about other parts of our community—certainly, you know, they will take our arts, and they will take our fashion, and they will take our movies and our books, and all the good parts. They just don't really want us. And—and it—it—it—when it got a little better, it—what that meant, when the worm moved one-sixteenth of an inch in corporate America [both chuckle] in the work-a-day world, for me, what it meant was, “Well, we're not going to fire you because you're that way. But you're just not gonna go anywhere in the organization.” And—so—I don't know, I think that there were people who thought I should be grateful for that tidbit. I think for many of us, that just made us want to work harder—I think that was the theme of—of—*The Best Little Boy in the World*, meaning we know that we're not liked, so we always gotta prove ourselves—what I always thought was interesting about that is when the man whose name I cannot recall right now—Andy Tobi—Andrew Tobias is his real name, but I believe when he published the book, it was so true to form in terms of his personal life that he didn't publish the book about always wanting to do better under his own name. I find that amazing.

**BK:** Yeah, that is amazing, isn't it. Well, let me ask you this: what changes have you seen over the years, now that you've been out into the world a while? Are things getting better for us?

**FP:** You know, absolutely. I—I—I think that the change occurs whether or not any of us wants it, depending on what it is. We all perceive change to be different. People who are threatened by LGBT civil rights certainly are feeling pretty bad about it all right now, so, you know, the changes aren't neutral. It has different effects on different groups of people. But certainly, absolutely I think it's better. When I think of a lot of people who are still struggling with coming out—I've come to think of that, personally—this is my thought—golly gee, to just be all wrapped up and have your fingers and toes tied in strings over that thing is almost getting to be a form of narcissism. Are you so important that if you came out, the—what, the Brooklyn Bridge would fall down? California would slide into the ocean? Get over yourself. Nobody cares.

**BK:** That's right.

**FP:** And—and for those who do care, don't take them seriously. Their numbers are shrinking.

**BK:** I know that you've been involved in a lot of—what should I call them—civil rights movements around the Harrisburg area. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

**FP:** Well, I—I was always a participant in the following ways: in ways with groups and organizations that didn't necessarily perceive themselves at the time to be civil rights-oriented or movements, but there was Dignity. I was raised a Roman Catholic. I am not a participant of any church or religion. I'm a very spiritual person—a spiritual atheist, if that makes sense.

**BK:** [chuckles]

**FP:** But we would, for example, have a Sunday Mass by some closeted priest who might sneak over from some local parish and say Mass, and there would be four, five, or six good Catholic boys there, and then we'd go downstairs to a potluck dinner, and there would be 40 or 50 or 60 people. [both chuckle] And some people would say, "Gosh, why can't we get 60 people at Mass?" And other people would say, "Well, obviously that's not our mission."

**BK:** No.

**FP:** "What people are hungering for is not Mass. They're hungering for community."

**BK:** [echoes] Community.

**FP:** And so we would—you know, you might not think of that in terms of today's "let's pass laws, let's change laws" kind of civil rights activity, but in fact it was community building. It was very organic. I think that's a part of the community everywhere, not just in Central Pennsylvania—has gone down and will eventually hopefully if we're all lucky come back. There was the volleyball team which still plays Tuesday nights and Friday nights, and we played at a local Salvation Army, who then and still now have—although they took the 20 dollars two nights to rent the space, they wouldn't have us, in many ways, you know, in their own organization, and that—that always evolves. We had summer picnics down at Pine Grove Furnace, it would get 150, 175, 200 people at the beginning and at the end of summer, in addition to all the volleyball players. We would play teams in State College, and they would come here, and we would go there, and just the fact that we were there and have to tell people what we would do—let people know that there are gay people in the world, and we like to play sports, and that's what we've come here to do, can we please rent the gym? White-watering trips that went on. So there were very, very organic ways that people got involved. There was a—a—a great aspect to the volleyball team, Richard Hill(ph), who since has passed and gone to see God—had a huge room in his apartment, and it had those sliding doors, those big heavy mahogany doors that you would have to pull open, left and then right, and we called it the Yukon Dance Hall, because it was so big, and every Friday night after ball, we would gather and we would have some beers and soda and a big wicker basket—laundry basket full of goodies to eat, and that was the place where people would—you know, to meet other people and discuss their problems and talk about work and family and go off in the corner and have a little head-to-head about something in particular, but it was our way of actually just being a community.

**BK:** [echoes] Community.

**FP:** Looking after one another, no by-laws, no institutions, no fundraising—we always had a couple to a few hundred dollars in the—in the bank to support our own efforts. We looked after other people, if there—the trips that I referred to, you know, somebody couldn't afford, we'd—we'd say, "Well here, your job is to hold the clipboard and cross off all the names, and then in return for that, we'll pay for that hotel room. We really appreciate you doing that." I mean, we were very quiet, silent in ways—I always thought of it as a kind of homo St. Vincent de Paul Society.

**BK:** [laughs]

**FP:** You know, for those who—in the Catholic tradition—maybe others, I’m not aware of it—but you know, you got together quietly, and you talked about people’s needs, and you very quietly met them, and then, “Okay, everybody. Just shut up about that.”

**BK:** Right.

**FP:** “Okay, you know, it’s not about you, it’s not about—it’s just—let’s just take care of somebody that’s...”

**BK:** I think, in our community, we’ve always kind of been that way, haven’t we?

**FP:** I—yeah—pretty organic, yeah—

**BK:** [speaking at the same time] Although it’s becoming more people want—people want the medal on their chest a little bit more now than back then. We did it more quietly.

**FP:** [speaking at the same time] Yeah, yeah, I mean, you have to understand, I—I think, you know, one person described the second World War as the largest forced collaboration of men on the planet in the history of the human race, and—and sort of all those men found each other, and when they were discharged, then they ended up in major cities, particularly San Francisco and New York, but also Chicago—they weren’t going home. And they created communities, and they were very underground in the dark of night—“they only come out at night” is more than a song title.

**BK:** Yes.

**FP:** And we’re very organic with each other at a time when, again, you had three choices: you were mentally ill, you were a criminal, or you were a sinner. And now, I mean, assimilation is absolutely wonderful, but I—but I think we’re going through a period of “Who’s on first,” or should I say “Who’s out first,” or—you know, right now, I was reading, in West Hollywood, which is a city of about, what, 32,000 people in Harrisburg—traditionally 48 to 50,000—and there are six men running for office. And they’re all running for the same office, and if you line them up on the political spectrum, they go from, you know, Marxist/Leninist to GOProud—the GOP proud thing—

**BK:** [chuckles] Yes.

**FP:** And so everybody gets on the beer box one at a time and says, “I’m a big homo, vote for me.” “No, I’m a big homo, vote for me.” I just wrote, not too long ago, of a—that it’s not about people, it’s about policy.

**BK:** Exactly. I...

**FP:** I was writing about Christine Quinn, who is a City Council member, president of City Council, running for mayor in New York City, and some people thinking she ought to be voted for simply because she's part of our community. Yet if you look at some of her policies, you know, if I were a poor lesbian in Brooklyn, I probably wouldn't want to vote for her, because some of her policies are not really good for someone like me in my life, so I might want to look for another candidate. That was my way of illustrating—it's not about people, it's not about me, it's not about us, it's about our policies and how we interact and intersect with the larger community. I've often said: you know, if you wanna be taken seriously as a member of the community, which is our biggest complaint, well, then you have to act like an adult member of the community.

**BK:** Very good.

**FP:** That doesn't mean you can't belong to GOProud, that doesn't mean you can't be anywhere on the political spectrum, but at that point, then, it's not about your being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender. It's about what you do, what you don't do, what you contribute, what you don't contribute. So I think until—we're not all quite there yet, and I—yes, I think there's a tendency of, you know, "I'm the most important person in my community." "No, I'm the most important person in my community." I'd like to see us get back to the days when we had Yukon Dance Hall.

**BK:** [laughs]

**FP:** And we sat along—and then we went off onto the side and had one-on-one conversations that we might be able to help each other.

**BK:** Okay. What a perspective. I love it. Do you have any th—occasions in your life that you would call a major turning point, in terms of—of how you live your life?

**FP:** Yeah, I would say—I've always had a relationship with New York City, and—and—I've been lucky to, over the years, written for a number of national magazines on a variety of topics, but I've been—as a person who's been living and surviving with HIV for—I don't know, I think right after the Civil War, I got infected—I—I don't know—

**BK:** [talking over him] Oh really, was it that—that—that long ago? [chuckles]

**FP:** Yeah, a very, very long time, and I remember being back here in the early '80s and dealing with that, being aware of it in ways that the local community was not yet, you know, aware or able to have a dialogue about it, is probably a better way to put it—

**BK:** Yes. We didn't want to talk about it.

**FP:** No, didn't want to talk about it, and then finally, you know, it hit everywhere, and I would say it was '85, '86, '87, started to meet in my living room in the apartment building where I lived and Rodger Beatty, who just recently passed away last November, and—would meeting in his



living room. And we had an individual here, Robert Sevensky—“Seven-sky,” if you said it literally, phonetically—

**BK:** Yes.

**FP:** Who—his job was to ask us to sit down and get together every once in a while, two, three times a year. It was great, again: no by-laws, no this, no fundraising—it was just all organic, just “Let’s just be Mom and Dad about it, do what we’re supposed to do.”

**BK:** [echoes] Right. Do what we’re supposed to.

**FP:** And he called one day, and he said, “Do you guys know each other?” And I said, “I think, certainly, I—I know who he is, I don’t know him very well,” and he said, “Do you realize you’re doing the same thing?” I said, “No, no, I didn’t.” And he said, “Well, I wondered if you would just work together,” and I said, “Well, absolutely!” And he gave me his phone number, and he lived a couple of blocks over, and I called him and said, “Roger, how many people are you getting in your living room?” Well, he was getting a few more than I was, and I said, “Well, fine—you’re getting more people, and your living room’s bigger. How ‘bout if I bring my crowd over there?” And we organized around: “What is—what is AIDS?” It was HIV, didn’t know it was a virus yet—these are the dark ages of this disease.

**BK:** [echoes] Disease.

**FP:** And you know, without any question of—as the expression you used earlier—“Who’s wearing the badge?” [gestures to indicate an imaginary medal on his chest]

**BK:** Right.

**FP:** “Who’s getting the luncheon and the plaque?” “I don’t care, people are dying.” The very first person that we had address us was an African-American IV [intravenous] drug user, okay, who would have been sort of the lowest rung of “other” you could think of back then, right, but he was the only person we were willing to—that was willing to—we knew that was willing to—willing to come and talk to us about what this was like, and he sat—diminished, wasting—soft, weak voice—and he described what the experience was like. It was truly a death sentence then. Is no longer. And we decided that we were gonna raise money—we weren’t quite sure how, but it was after his sitting in Roger’s living room, speaking to us—after he left, we decided that we would help anybody who was affected by this disease, regardless of whether they were black, white, straight, gay, IV drug user—didn’t matter to us that it was. It was a disease at that point, and that—that—out of that effort came the South Central AIDS Assistance Network—S-C-A-A-N, called “SCAAN” [pronounced “scan”]—

**BK:** [echoes] N. “SCAAN.”

**FP:** And at around the same time, in Lancaster, a similar effort had occurred, called the Lancaster AIDS Project, LAP—along the lines, LAP had been subsumed under the head of SCAAN, and SCAAN became AIDS Community Alliance, serving all of those counties

together, and AIDS Community Alliance is today—has evolved into Alder, A-L-D-E-R, Health Services, as in the alder tree that is planted and blooms and protects what grows underneath it, into a marvelous series of services—an LGBT primary care practice in both Harrisburg and Lancaster that's been up and running now. Harrisburg, about 18 months, Lancaster about six, eight months, at this point, and...

**BK:** Yes, I'm familiar with their work. They do wonderful work down there. Just to change the subject a bit, if you don't mind—do you have—and go into something lighter, maybe—we all have our favorite books or our favorite music, or—I'd be interested in knowing what that is for you. Favorite movie, whatever.

**FP:** Yeah, well, I think for—books, you had—just this morning, literally, this morning, I've been lucky to write for *Lambda Literary Review* and do interviews. I've interviewed Edmund White three times—

**BK:** Oh. Wow.

**FP:** *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Farewell Symphony*—a number of books. Biographies on Gide, on Proust, others—and just this morning that went up online is an interview I did with Edmund White and Felice Picano and Andrew Holleran—*Dancer from the Dance*. They were three members of a seven-member group called the Violet Quilt who thrived in the '80s, and they became the—the icon writers that men of our generation would have been reading, okay—you think of 1978, and Larry Kramer's *Faggots* is published, it's—*A Boy's Own Story* is published in '80 or '81—Holleran in '78 had done *Dancer from the Dance*—so these were books about those cities where there were—they were the Mecca cities in our years. They wrote primarily about New York. And so that period of time—is favorite—I was lucky to have all three of them on a conference call—

**BK:** [speaking at the same time] Great. Oh my. That's wonderful.

**FP:** Interviewing them, and I—literally got up this morning and I had an email box full of emails about all sorts of things—some from them and other people and other links, you know, asking questions about the—about the—questions about the story. So it's hard for me to name any one in particular.

**BK:** [echoes] Any.

**FP:** I can say that Gore Vidal, who I was never lucky enough to interview—was closing in on it at a time when he was not well, had not been well for a while—was—I probably tried to read every word, and I just found out there are some new unpublished interviews with him that should be arriving in the mail very soon—

**BK:** Great.

**FP:** As a—a writer in general, but certainly that covers a lot of territory for me.

**BK:** [speaking at the same time] Right. It sure does. We don't have to end this interview, but let me ask you, is there anything in particular that you'd like to say to the folks that are gonna be seeing this 20, 30, 40 years from now?

**FP:** I... I've always found it interesting and—being lucky to interact with different parts of the community here and in other states—that gay people are, I think, I've concluded, first and foremost, like the region they're from or where they're from. So for example, out in—out in Texas, they're gonna be playing ball, and afterwards, they might have a hoedown, not a—you know, not a—not a disco dance. And—[looks at the camera] You wanna just do that over?

**Unidentified off-camera voice:** Yeah.

**FP:** Okay.

[tape cuts and restarts]

**BK:** Frank, we've had an interesting interview, and we don't need to stop, but I would like to just ask you—is there anything you would like to add to this interview that somebody 20, 30, 40 years from now would say, “Gee, that—that guy's terrific, and he's got his eye on the ball.”

**FP:** Well, I guess, certainly this has been an interview that you've done with me—I—I would hope that I can somehow make an impression that with all the wonderful opportunities that I've had, I have very often not thought of them as being about me. It was about an opportunity to interact with other people and be part of events, and I look for that in other people, and I think as assimilation occurs that the community will take on that character. On the other hand, you know, we're right now in the thralls of marriage equality, and people just can't dive on the issue and—and be supportive of the issue—for which I am very grateful. But our community tends to be very narrowly focused on what's important to them. I personally don't care much about the issue, but I would never thwart anybody's attempts to be successful with it. What we don't do well when we're focused on our narrow issues as a segment of a larger LGBT community is then return the favor. Okay?

**BK:** All right.

**FP:** What I mean by that is, for example, I think we both know that women—lesbian women, bisexual women, trans—transgender women—were absolutely fundamental to the foundation of AIDS service organizations that were formed—

**BK:** [speaking at the same time] Absolutely.

**FP:** —When the disease first hit. After the decimation—let's call it—until the mid-'90s when the miraculous medications came along that would keep you alive, the male community coming after doesn't know that history. The people who live through it and survived are tired, but one of the things that would be really nice—how about we help back? If not minute for minute, as they were helping us, it doesn't occur in real time, but—how about an effort back as one big bouquet thank-you on breast cancer, cervical cancer, women's health issues? With Republicans just

really you-know-what over female body parts these days, why don't we—as a gesture of kindness back to our lesbian sisters and our transgender sisters and our bisexual friends who are female—how about we help you with that the way you helped us when we were dying? Admittedly, they're not equal—no two significant events in the life of a community like ours are identical, okay—that's a foolish way to look at it, if that's your reason for not helping, you're dumb. No nice way to say that. How 'bout we give back? How 'bout we extend that embrace back and do it? Let's get out of the narrowness. Let's look at a larger picture. Like we say, “Well, we wanna be part of a larger community,” I still think we have a lot of work to do within our own alphabet soup of how we identify ourselves, 'cause we're really not good. Now, I don't mean to suggest by that that I think that's all our fault and we're bad people. Nothing happens in isolation, we live in an—we live in an atomized world where, you know, there's the internet, and everybody's walking around plugged in, and—but, you know, people used to meet each other on the street and in bars and restaurants and at organic social events like we talked about—now it's all body parts on cyber, somewhere. You know, so—that has influenced all culture, not just ours, so you filter that in—but it says to me, as where I think we started out, a while back in this interview, I'm ready for the capital-O organic again. I really think that that is—once assimilation occurs, non-discrimination laws are in place, and we have those people who don't like us out of our hair—we can finally get back to just turning the circle inward and looking at each other again—taking a deep breath and saying, “How can we be a loving community with each other?”

**BK:** And that's a terrific way to end this interview. And I can't thank you enough. It's been very informative, to say the least. Thank you, Frank.

**FP:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**BK:** You're welcome.

**FP:** I appreciate that very much.

**BK:** Thank you.