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**Interviewee: Robert Sevensky**

Interviewer: Barry Loveland

Date: July 29, 2017

Place: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

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**Abstract:**

Robert Sevensky was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1948. Despite having an unpleasant experience in early education and having financial issues, Robert persevered and ended up pursuing an academic career in college. After two years at the University of Scranton, he studied English abroad. He then eventually received his doctorate in philosophy. In this interview Robert discusses the struggles and joys of sexuality and religion from childhood to retirement. Growing up in a heteronormative society, he was mostly quiet about understanding and exploring his sexuality. He also discusses becoming involved with the church and the Holy Cross Monastery. The monastery is a significant part of Robert's life as he and many other brothers there are openly gay. Furthermore, the monastery has become a safe space for LGBT-identifying folks to converse and participate in different programs. Robert elaborates on joining various LGBT rights organizations and other spaces that have become inclusive to LGBT folks. Though these spaces are inclusive, Robert explains the negative effects of how the HIV/AIDS epidemic was treated in medical facilities for a period of time. In this interview, Robert also touches on his current beliefs about how society has recently began to shift towards political correctness and what that means to him, specifically regarding queer theory and thus, queer people.

BL: Alright, so my name is Barry Loveland and I am here to conduct an oral history interview on behalf of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania. Today is Saturday, July 29, 2017 and we are here in Harrisburg [Pennsylvania], and I am interviewing Robert Sevensky. And Bob, do we have your permission to record the interview today?

RS: Yes [BL: Great] yeah.

BL: Okay, well [RS: clears throat] thank you for the opportunity to interview you. I know you have been away from the area for a while, but you are back here for a visit and we are glad to be able to have this chance to [laughs] catch up with you and talk about your life stories [RS: Mhmm]. Great. So, why do we not begin at the beginning? Where and when were you born?

RS: I was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania on September 6, 1948, which is Labor Day which makes my birthday a movable feast [BL: Laughs] [laughs].

BL: And tell me about your family origin [RS: Mhmm] your parents [RS: Mhmm], siblings...

RS: Sure, right. My parents were the children of immigrants, and both of them grew up in the Depression and were really marked by that. My father's family—both of my family's trees go

back to Eastern Europe and Poland/Ukraine depending on where the boundaries were at the time. So, my father was basically a laborer, and then he ended up working for Sears and ended up in a managerial position. But, like many people, he had to quit school in order to make a living. He quit school after third grade to work around the mines, and my mother quit after sixth grade to work as a domestic; and again, that was not all that uncommon. They were remarkably literate people, and my father particularly. He was a great writer and both were readers and that was interesting. And I had two siblings, both older: a brother who was seven years older and a sister who was six years older. And they—my sister is still alive. My brother died about a year ago. And we grew up in a kind of lower income area, along the Lackawanna River, which flooded when I was about seven years old; and so, it is interesting being along the banks of the Susquehanna [River]. And we—there was a kind of urban renewal in the area. It was pretty much just cleared out and we all kind of just scattered. But I am really grateful to have grown up into what was a pretty ethnically-rich, diverse area for Scranton in any event. It was—there were a lot of Jewish communities around me, people of many different countries of origin, as well as folks like me who are second-generation Americans. So... [BL: Mmhmm].

BL: How about schools?

RS: I went to public schools and that was—in seventh grade, I went to the big junior/senior high school: West Scranton [High School]. And, on the whole, it was not a bad experience. I just went to my fiftieth high school reunion last September and it was joyous. I was surprised. It was really one of those kind of markers in my interior biography. And I got to see some people, some who I never got to talk to in school but now did. And the fact that we survived, I think was the big equalizer of it all [BL: Mmhmm] and many of our classmates had died. So, it was a big class, but still shocking [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. So, then I went—after high school, I went onto college. I went, because of economic issues, I decided to stay at home and commuted to the University of Scranton for two years. But, early on, realized that I needed to get out of Scranton and so, I went to Europe for a year, in my junior year and lived in Belgium and studied there; and was going to stay on there, but my mother developed a terminal illness and so I stayed with her for the last year of college, and she died my first year in graduate school. So, that was the kind of container of it. I was a philosophy major. I started as an English major, but I did not know what I wanted to do with my life, so that seemed vague enough. And in the end, I ended up going on to get a doctorate in philosophy and taught; and that is what brought me to Central Pennsylvania. There was an ad in the *New York Times*: that was how people got jobs in those days, and they needed someone quickly at Penn State's Medical Center in Hershey to teach the Psychology of Religion. And a friend said, 'you are the closest they are going to get, so why do you not try?' and I did and I got the job; and I ended up staying on there for eight years. And it was during that period that I became involved with the larger Central Pennsylvania community and Harrisburg, both the lesbian and gay community and also other groups—church groups and so on [BL: Mmhmm]. So...

BL: Tell me about in your childhood, at what point did you feel like you were different or if you [RS: Yeah] knew what gay was or whatever?

RS: Yeah, right. After years of psychotherapy, I have realized that I was different and on the margins of my family pretty early on. I had left the family, you know, in some way psychologically before I left it physically. But, I started recognizing around the age of 11 or 12, I would think that I knew—and even before then, that I was gay and attracted to men—boys

really, at that age. But, it was so formalist in a way. I mean, those first longings were simply longings. It was a desire to be with someone, to be near someone, to share in their energy and I realized that was the energy that I had. And so that was, as I said, at about the age of 12, I also started having my first sexual experiences around those ages with another student in my school. And they continued off and on through junior high school and into high school, but that was the extent of it. Although [laughs], I have to laugh because I was in a boy scouts troop—a church-sponsored boy scouts troop and our little patrol was simply very gay. We ended up calling ourselves the Coo coos [BL: Laughs]. And we were odd and we were different and it was okay to be different. And I am so grateful for those like micro communities, where it was possible to be different, to be—to explore to the kinds of boundaries and interior desires. And so that happened. That happened also in church for me. And church became a kind of container for the exploration of myself, including my sexuality. So, I was an altar boy and I was not raised in a Catholic Church, but in a church that was very similar to it: the Polish National Catholic Church, and so the same kind of dynamics. Sexuality was not talked about much and if it was, it was not with a lot of approving. Though, I remember going to a church camp once and a young seminary was giving a talk on the dangers of nautical emissions [laughs], instead of nocturnal emissions [BL: Laughs] [Laughs]. So, but, you know, by 16, certainly about 16, I went to—there was a big Roman Catholic shrine in Scranton, called St. Anne’s. And I remember visiting there. I was always poking my head into other churches and other places, and they had these petitions that you give to St. Anne. They had so many of them, they had them on little carts. And you could check it off, and there was what? ‘Dear St. Anne’s, send me a Catholic boyfriend [laughs] or Catholic girlfriend.’ So, I checked off Catholic boyfriend, and she did [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. So, I have been grateful to her over the years. The other interesting thing in my life was that I had—I have an uncle, he is still alive. He is my last uncle, he is 92, who is gay. And though we did not talk about it, he modeled a way of being different [BL: Mmhmm]: that it was okay not to be married; it was okay to have a circle of male friends, which were always there at family gatherings, always these three or four or five guys. They were simply part of the family. I do not know how anybody looking at it could not have seen what it was, but it was seen and unseen [BL: Mmhmm]. And it was a good model for me, I think. And my uncle did tell me, years later, that when I was about six, there was this guy who really ran this salon society in the ‘40s in Scranton—the 1940s, which was the only way you could really be gay. There were a few night spots and into the ‘50s. And he saw me and he said to Dick, ‘he’s one of us’ [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. So—and I look onto those things as real blessings, that I had models even if they were not conscious models about how could I navigate my life? How could I go forward with this? [BL: Mmhmm]. And so, I could get back to a story about Uncle Dick or I could tell it now?

BL: If you want.

RS: Sure. But, after my time in Central Pennsylvania, I was 36 and was not getting tenure. And I had always been fascinated by monastic life and wrote to a monastery when I was 17, but life happened. But, I finally decided at 36 that I was going to try it and do it. And, my Uncle Dick heard about it and when I was visiting him, he said to me—he took me aside and said, ‘what is all of this I hear about you picking beans with those nuns?’ [Laughs] [BL: Laughs]. And I said, ‘it is just something that I always just wanted. I do not know why. I cannot explain it.’ I could probably explain it now in Ewing’s archetypal terms, but... And he said, ‘you know, when I got out of World War II...’ He was drafted in like 1944 when he was 18. He said, ‘I wanted to be a ballet dancer’ and he said, ‘to be a ballet dancer in those days was to be queer and I was and I did

not think I could take the heat.’ And he said, ‘I have regretted it to this day.’ He said, ‘I go to a dance performance and I wonder if that could have ever been me on that stage.’ So, he said, ‘I am not religious.’ He said, ‘I—but, if you feel like you have to do this, you need to do this or you will end up going to the grave asking yourself if you should have.’ And I felt like that was one of the kind of go ahead signals to me, that this was part of a larger story [BL: Mhmm] and I was so grateful for him to tell me that story about how many of us have regrets? [BL: Yeah] We all have regrets at various levels in our lives [BL: Right]. So, that is the end of the Uncle Dick saga, I think [BL: Laughs] [laughs].

BL: So, how did you sort of start your coming out process?

RS: Mhmm. Well, you know, there was an issue of *Life Magazine* that was published in 196— it was before Stonewall [riots], so it would be 1965/’64, and it was about homosexuals. And there were pictures of various kinds of people as they were imagined by *Life Magazine*. You know, there was a picture of a leather bar in San Francisco [California]. And I got that issue of *Life*, and I hid it away and I would refer to it. I said, ‘oh my god, there are other people out there like me.’ You know, there had to be, because *Life Magazine* said it and that was like the authority, it was like *Wikipedia*, you know. And so, I started to understand myself more self-consciously, as a homosexual man. The word ‘gay’ really was not quite there yet—it was and it was not. And, you know, so I saw that... [BL: That would have been about at age 16 or 17?] That would have been around age 16, as well, yeah [BL: Yeah]. And so it started to become an identity, but there was no way to play it out. And so, I basically did not—around that time too, any of the sexual experiment with this friend stopped. And it was not until I went to Europe, as a junior in college, that I met another student from [the United States of] America. And we became, I would not say lovers, we became what we used to call boyfriends [laughs] [BL: Laughs], so... Maybe they still use that term. And that did not, in the end, pan out for the long-term. That is a rather longer story. But, it was a way where I actually could understand my sexuality, in terms of interpersonal love and affection for another person, who reflected back to me interests and you know, made life interesting. And it was wonderful to be in love. Everybody should do it at least once [laughs], it is—and to be loved, and all that goes with that. So, that is where I really started also to—that would be ‘68/’69 and that was also at the time of Stonewall, and that was also kind of being covered in the press and the news, even though I was living in Europe. And so, I started getting a sense of that. And still, you know, I was not out in any public way. There were one or two friends that I told and they received it with various degrees of acceptance or horror. Then, it was not until really I went to Boston [Massachusetts] for graduate school in 1970 that I started to go to gay bars and I mean, I must have walked around a block 100 times before I went in, before I got the courage to go in. But, it was not a bar first that I went to. There was alternative newspapers in the area, the *Boston Phoenix* there was just starting out. And there was an organization that was just founded, and it sounds like a Communist front, it was called the Student Homophile League, and it met in the basement of a church on Beacon Hill. And that really was where I count my coming out at age what? 21 that I went into an identified gay space, where other men were, and women, and I was so shocked. I mean, when I walked in this door and there were 75 or 100 college students. And, I mean, who knew? [Laughs] [BL: Laughs]. So, and I got involved with that organization. They had various activities and supported, you know, the beginning of gay pride celebrations and observances in Boston [Massachusetts]. But, it was also around the time that my mother died; and I was going back and forth and getting real conflicted, anxious, it was just anxiety of life. And I had a kind of huge

anxiety attack and I went to a doctor and he said, ‘you should talk to a counselor’ and I ended up going into counseling at a gay-identified counseling service, which had just started up, called the Homophile Community Health Service. Homophile was a popular word back then [laughs] [BL: Laughs.] in those days. And had—I worked with a therapist, who himself was very involved with the gay community. And it was during that time that I met a friend that became a lover and we were involved with the community, you know, and there were coffee houses and newspapers. And I started attending Integrity at that time in Boston, which was starting up there, and which was a support community for gay and lesbian folk in the Episcopal and Anglican tradition. And they all had good relationships with Dignity and MCC [Metropolitan Community Church?] and all of these worked together. I did a two year long counseling training program out of the Homophile Community Health Service and that also was very helpful. I did take interviews for people coming in and felt that that was what I could do as a graduate student. And then I was gay [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. And it is very funny because, at that time, someone gave me or I bought a little pin that had two male symbols on it; and I wore it back to Scranton on one of my visits and my sister saw it and she never said anything about it, but she said later, ‘of course when I saw that, I knew.’ And she said she probably had known all along. But—so, I was sending out these little [BL: Signals] signals very carefully [BL: Laughs]. It was the early ‘70s and I mean, there were people who did, you know, suffer for being open. I still do and so, it was something people did with various degrees of caution. And one of my great episodes in my life during that time in Boston was that I had a group of friends and we would meet, I think it was Thursday night at the Charles Street meeting house, which was kind of a gay coffee house. And we would have coffee and conversation. And then, we would go to my apartment because it was nearest; and we would watch *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* and then we would go out to a bar for drinks. And it was over the course of two years, we did this every Thursday and they were an amazing group of people, social workers and architects. And it was where I got the sense of community, that and through my church. I went to—when I was living in Boston, I went to a church that was—a lot of gay people went to it, whether it was gay-friendly or not, that is another story. But, the coffee hour was and the people around it was also a place where you would meet week after week with the same people, who became part of your story, who you invited to your parties. And it was wonderful. [BL: What denomination?] It was in an Episcopal church. Right, it was the gnashing of teeth when the local Boston *Phoenix Newspaper* named it the best cruising [BL: Laughs] spot for gay men [BL: Laughs] [laughs]. The vestry was not pleased [BL: Laughs] [laughs]. So—but, it was... [BL: So how long were you in Boston?] I was in Boston for eight years [BL: Wow]. Yeah, so... [BL: That is a long time]. Yeah, so... [BL: And did you start your employment work at that time in Boston or...?] I was—yeah, if you call it that. I mean, I was a graduate student and was on fellowships and then I got odd jobs and I did some part-time teaching gigs. But, it was really only six months after I got my doctorate that I got the job here in Central Pennsylvania. Yeah, so...

BL: Yeah. So then you moved to Central PA [RS: Yeah] and how was it going from Boston [laughs] back to a more rural part of Pennsylvania?

RS: Yeah, more rural [BL: Definitely] and I lived there for—my first year, I lived there in Palmira on the other side of Hershey. And I just drove through it the other day and I said, ‘how did I survive?’ [Laughs] [BL: Laughs]. But I, you know, was busy with my work. But, I started coming into Harrisburg and went to some bars and met some people. [BL: What were your recollections of the bars that you went to in the (unintelligible).] I went to the—yeah, there was

the, what is it up here, the Red—the Rose [BL: The Rose] Yeah. And there was a place on North Street [BL: Oh, the Neptune] Neptune, yeah. And yeah, and I think it was Neptune's, yeah. And both of them I thought were gentle enough places, and people could go into them and... I met—there was a guy named Amel French (ph). I do not know if you remember him [BL: No] and he was kind of the promesta (ph). He knew everybody [BL: Laughs]. And he introduced me to people. And then I heard about Dignity and started coming to Dignity [BL: Mmhhh] as a way of meeting people. And that became an important part of place to meet friends and to keep my mind on who I was and within a few months, I realized that I needed to move into Harrisburg. And as soon as my lease was up in Palmyra, I moved into Harrisburg and lived in the same place, on the corner of Penn and Boas (ph) for the next seven and plus years. So, it was good. [BL: About what year was it that you came in Harrisburg?] I would have come to Harrisburg in '86 [BL: '86]—no sorry, no correction, that is when I left [BL: Laughs]. It would have been '78 [BL: '78] '78 yeah, '79 [BL: Yeah]. [Someone clears throat] and there—yeah... The other thing that happened was I ended up coming out at work in ways that I had not planned. I mean, I started this job, I was in a—working in a medical school and working in a humanities faculty, talking and teaching about humanities and how they can shape medical practice. And it was really a pioneering program, and it got these huge government grants. We really expanded. And the second week I was there, they were having a seminar on how to teach sex education to the medical students. And they asked me to—one of the professors said, 'come join us.' And so, we are going around the table and why is this topic important to you? And I was like the second person. I said, 'oh crap, here it goes' [BL: Laughs]. I said, 'well, I am gay' and I said, 'it is important that we make the medical community aware of the peculiar and particular needs of gay and lesbian folk, and others in the kind of larger non-traditional communities; and particularly in terms of sex education, and doctors need to be comfortable with the variety of sexual expressions and—because many people are afraid to go to physicians because of a bias or judgementalism.' And so, I said it was important to do this. Well—so, that led to me within a few weeks, doing two programs on WITF. There was a talk show on what was called, *The Gay Health Problems in a Straight Health System*. So, I was trying to raise that. This is before, of course, AIDS/HIV [Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome/ Human Immunodeficiency Virus] [BL: Right], surfaced, but not long before. Within two years, we were dealing with a lot of other issues that were, you know, could not have been imagined [BL: Mmhhh]. Yeah so... So, that coming to Harrisburg fit in with that and... And then there were people in Harrisburg who became friends through Dignity; and Dignity at that time, though it was called an organization for gay Catholics and their friends, it was often more friends than the gay Catholics [BL: Laughs]. And it did play an important kind of social role in the community. I mean, it was a place that was safe for people to come to if they could not go to the bars, or did not know how to meet people. It was a place for people to explore the larger community; and often, exploring the community is best done when someone is taking you by the hand, at least in my case it is. And so, I think one of the great things of those years, particularly the early years, was the gay volleyball, the police athletic league, which was this utterly dilapidated [BL: Laughs] bat infested in an old building. But, every week, I forget what night it was, we had gay volleyball. In the early years, I mean, it would be a triumph if somebody could get the ball over the net, you know [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. But, any degree of competency was welcome and for a lot of gay men in particular, the sports arena was the area where you were outed, if you will, you were shamed, you were... And this was so welcoming and so much fun. And it went on for years. And there were other leagues that then developed that were more professional and played in the area, they may still. And there were

some wonderful women. One was a gym coach, which—she was so good with us and just got us, actually playing pretty good. And—a Barb, Barb Disley (ph) And she was a pillar and I hope she still flourishes and... [BL: She passed away recently] Oh... [BL: I am sorry] yeah. She, well—she deserves a reward [BL: Yeah]. Yeah, yeah, yeah and...

BL: So, were there other ways that you got involved with the community or...?

RS: Yeah. The president of Dignity, at the time when I came in was Harry Brennon (ph) [BL: Mmhmm], who again, was a small guy with a big personality [BL: Laughs. Good way to put it.] Right. And he was an organizer. He was kind of out of the mode. He was big into the unions—the state employee unions, and used that kind of union organizing skills to push the causes of the gay and lesbian community forward. And he did amazing jobs. And so, I remember kind of under—being pushed by him. He always was on my case; and he was hard to say no to. And [laughs] I used to avoid him sometimes. But—and he—I ended up doing work with the police department on what was called sensitivity training for gay and lesbian, and at that time, even transgender community. We used film strips in little talks. [Laughs]. It was like very primitive. You know, but we have PowerPoint now. But, you know, I do not know if it made a difference. The very fact that an openly gay, and also women came with me, I forget who it was. We did it a few times and talked about this, issues around policing and domestic violence. And I mean, we are now realizing so much in terms of racial profiling and stereotyping, which we all carry with us; how this affects things like medical services or public safety. And so, this was just the first worries into that [BL: Mmhmm]. And then, Jerry also said they are advertising people for the Humans Relations Commissioner in Harrisburg, you have got to go and become a Human Relations Commissioner. And I thought about it, and I did. And so, I under Mayor Reid (ph), who was the mayor forever [BL: Laughs]. I became the first—I think, the first openly gay Human Relations Commissioner in [BL: Oh, that is great] Harrisburg. And I did that until I moved out. It was not a dynamic program, but it was there. And this municipality was really on the forefront saying that sexual orientation is not a barrier to employment, to housing, to other fair practices. And it is—I mean, I cannot imagine that 30 plus years later, people are still grappling with this. I mean [BL: Yeah], really [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. It is like, I am, you know, I am old now. I am retired. How did this happen? You know, so...

BL: Yeah, that local ordinance in Harrisburg was passed in 1983, I believe [RS: Yes]. And were you involved at all in the hearings they had for it or anything like that?

RS: I was not, no. I am wondering if that—if I went on the Commission right after the ordinance was passed. [BL: Probably you did]. And yeah. So, I filled some of the mandate that—of the ordinance [BL: Yeah]. It was pretty amazing, and there were some good people on it [BL: Yeah]. Yeah

BL: Yeah. That was the second city in the state that actually passed one of those ordinances.

RS: What was the first? [BL: Philadelphia] Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], okay. [BL: As you would imagine.]

BL: Well yeah... what else do you remember about your years in Harrisburg that might be remarkable to think about?

RS: Right. You know, Harrisburg plays an interesting role in the state, I think. I mean, it is a small town, but it is where the state government is located. So, it has impact. And it has kind of tentacles out, particularly to Pittsburgh [Pennsylvania] and Philadelphia, and less so in those states up to the Northeast, the Northern part of the state, there wasn't much going on; but, even into Maryland and D.C. [District of Columbia]. So, I always felt that being part of the community, including especially the gay community in Harrisburg and Central Pennsylvania, put me as a kind of honorary member in all of these other places. And this was true even in the Dignity organization. We were—it seemed linked with Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore [Maryland], or Washington [D.C.]. And that made for a bigger world [BL: Mmhmm]. I think that that is one of the wonderful things about life here is that you could and did get in your car, if you wanted in two hours, you could be in another larger metropolitan area with more of whatever you wanted [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. So...

BL: And Dignity was part—like a—there was a regional [RS: Yes, yes] conferences and things that they had [RS: Right]. Were you ever going to one of those?

RS: I was regularly down to these cities [BL: Mmhmm]. And those folks were regularly here too, which was an interesting thing for people from big cities to come back to smaller towns and see stuff was happening [BL: Mmhmm]. And many of these people also who were in the big cities started off in small towns. And so, I think it was a kind of encouragement, a breath of fresh air, that even in a relatively modest metropolitan area like this, you know, advancement can happen, growth can happen [BL: Mmhmm]. I think what was interesting in Dignity is we brought in a lot of speakers, and some on particularly religious topics having to do with gay and lesbian issues. I remember there was a famous Jesuit, John McNeill, who left the Jesuits; but, he wrote a book on the church and the homosexual, which was groundbreaking. We had John Boswell (ph) and his work. But then, we had other politicians, the kind of Elaine Nobles, which were big names in the '70s and '80s. Elaine [Noble] was the first openly lesbian legislator in Massachusetts [BL: Mmhmm]. And Brian McNaught and others, who now are I do not know, people do not probably remember them; but, they were people who took great risks to advance the cause for everybody [BL: Right]. Yeah, so I was grateful for our doing that and being part of that. Yeah, so...

BL: And you would have been around for the tenth anniversary, I think, of Dignity [RS: Yes] in '85 [RS: Yup]. Do you remember there was like an anniversary dinner or something [RS: Yes] or celebration [RS: Yeah. Yes, I have photos of that]. Yeah, because—what are your remembrances from that?

RS: I remember it was always hot in the summer, always bitterly hot and humid because we would have these every year and they were fun. And we did great Catholic liturgies. There was this very Ecumenical group and apparently these Roman Catholic priests always would enjoy presiding for us because the liturgies were well thought out and not sloppy, and we would expect that of us. And—but, I remember that there were folks there from places like PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and that I always was moved by. Even if we were only a handful, the fact that people could bring their parents, I regret that I never came out to my mother and father. It would have been somewhat premature to my mother, but I wish I could have to my father. And he died just as I was leaving Harrisburg, just a few—two months before I left [BL: Mmhmm]. And like many people, he—it would have been a stretch for him but I think he would have stretched and made it. Yeah, yeah, so that was one of those little regrets [BL: Mmhmm]. So...

BL: Let us see. Anything else you can think about your time in Harrisburg that you remember?

RS: No, other than those beautiful picnics we used to sponsor down at Dignity at a state park towards Carlisle [Pennsylvania] [BL: Yes, the Pine Grove Furnace] Pine Grove Furnace. Those were great. I mean, there would be 75 or 100 people out there [BL: Yeah] and they were joyful. What I remember most, I mean, it was—it is the joy. That started to dampen when people started getting sick with HIV/AIDS. We realized we were at a different place in our community journey. Particularly who was very close to me was Gary, who was the head of [BL: Gary Norton] Gary Norton. And he really was amongst the first to die. And John and I were just talking about it the night before last. I remember when he was up at the hospital and I said we are going to go visit him. And in those days, no one knew quite how the disease was transmitted [BL: Right]. So, hospital staff was frightened, inattentive, and felt threatened. You had to gown up like a spaceman [BL: Mmhmm]. And I remember going in, and the first time we went, the only way we could really touch him was to massage his feet [BL: Mmhmm] with oil. And John was reminding me at how angry he was at the last visit that this should happen to him and it was—it should never happen to anybody [BL: Yeah]. And—but, I—every time we do this ritual and holy week of foot washing and I can't remember—can't do it without remembering Gary [BL: Mmhmm]. And my first holy Thursday in the monastery, when my feet were being washed, I just wept and wept and wept. And I was weeping, I think, for the loss. By that time, I was knowing people who were dying [BL: Mmhmm] and it was a quick—in many cases, a pretty quick advancement of the disease and so... I still have lists of names from those days and I remember them [BL: Mmhmm]. Yeah.

BL: So, after Harrisburg, you did what (unintelligible)? [RS: Laughs] [Laughs].

RS: I joined the Order of the Holy Cross, which is an Episcopal Monastic community and it has been around since the 1880s. I started visiting there in 1977 and I would go once or twice a year. And I loved the men; and I loved the place; and I loved the worship; and I loved the life. I saw it through rose-colored glasses, as one does in these things. But, it seemed to... [BL: I am sorry. Where is this located?] It is located in—about 80 miles north of New York City [New York] [BL: Oh, okay] on the banks of the Hudson River [BL: Uh huh], right across from Hyde Park [BL: Yeah]. And I [background noise] decided that if I was going to do it—ever do it, it was going to be now. I could have gotten another job teaching, but I said, 'okay, I am going to try this.' And I have been with them for 30 plus years now. It is a community of monasteries. And I was in New York for six months and then went to our house in Santa Barbara [California] for a year. Then, back to New York for a few years. Then, I was sent out to our monastery priory in Berkeley [California], where I lived for about a year and three months; and then was back in New York [laughs] and where I was the kind of the director of new men and formation. And then back into Santa Barbara. And I hope back into New York now. I have been in New York since 2008, when I was elected head of our community and I just finished nine years of that. So, I am just at the beginning of a sabbatical. I am going to be going to Cambridge [England] and studying for a term [BL: Wow] in England, so... And it has been an interesting—the community, early on, came out publically against homophobia, sexism, and racism. Like most monastic communities, whether they talk about it or not, there is, you know, let us just say that gay men are overrepresented [BL: Laughs] and we're okay with that. And you know, the straight men have to understand that, you know, we are not going to censor ourselves; that we are who we are and—but, that's always a balancing act. We ask what is appropriate for discussion. And that is,

you know—you can comment on someone looking beautiful or handsome; everyone does. But, you know, you do not want to get caught in a mental or spiritual trap of that because we are vowed to celibacy and to comment on our ownership of goods. And that is, like everything, a growth thing, you know. And I remember when I was leaving Harrisburg. There was a guy at volleyball, who said ‘does this mean that you are not going to be gay anymore?’ [BL: Laughs]. And I said, ‘no, it does not mean that.’ I said, ‘I will probably be gay in a different way.’ But, [laughs] that ship has left the dock long ago [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. And I am grateful for my life. I am grateful for my years here. And I am grateful for the sense of dignity and integrity that was given to me through organizations like that and through communities like this. It—I hope that there are similar supports for people who are still struggling with coming out. I mean, we still need people who—for whom that’s, you know, not an easy journey [BL: Mmhmm]. Yeah. And...

BL: So what sorts of things do you in your monastery and your community up there?

RS: Okay. Where I live, we have a community of now 15 men. And we are church five times a day [laughs]. We also, though, have a large guest house and we welcome over 3,000 overnight visitors a year [BL: Yeah]. We can take up to 44 guests. And they, you know, come from groups—church groups, twelve-step groups, other kinds of groups. Individuals come for programs that we offer. These are church folk or seekers, who are just looking for a quiet place where they could find a sense of community. We tend to be more extraverted than most monasteries. So, we have breakfast that is always silent from 8:30 at night until 8:30 in the morning. But, there is talking almost always at supper; and the midday meal, there is reading and then conversation. So people get to know us, we interact with our guests. A living [BL: Mmhmm]. That is how we make our bread and butter primarily. But, they also give us a chance to be human in a good way, a holy way I hope. And we have a house in South Africa. We started a school there about 2010, which has been a headache; but, it is starting to get on its feet. It has been a big financial challenge and administrative challenge, but it is good [BL: Mmhmm]. So—and much of the last 9 years, I was traveling back and forth to South Africa and California and Toronto, we have a house in so... Yeah, so... And we welcome people. I mean, we have—we do things also. We have crafts and paint. And we make incense, so we have a bookstore. We—and so on. But mostly, I do a lot of meeting with people who just want to talk [BL: Mmhmm]. Yeah.

BL: So, your using that background [RS: Yeah] that you had [RS: Yeah] and...

RS: A kind of spiritual direction, but I do not call it that because that sounds too pompous [BL: Laughs]. I said, ‘I do not do that, but I’ll talk with you’ [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. So... [BL: Good].

BL: Let us see [flips through papers] if there is something that I have missed on our list here. We have covered a lot of this area. [RS: I cannot believe I have been so verbose] [Laughs]. [RS: Oy] No, it’s great. In terms of your life now, do you have any connection with the LGBT community at large or do you...?

RS: Not at large, but certainly on an individual basis [BL: Mmhmm]. I mean, gay and lesbian folk are constants in our life. Yeah. And we are seeing, interestingly enough, a number of people who are either exploring new sexual roles for themselves or are transitioning, and are finding the monastery, a safe place to try this out. So, there is this one person named Tina, who comes as a man and then all of a sudden appears in a dress. And now, some of the other regular guests get to

the point of saying, ‘Tina that dress does not work for you’ [BL: Laughs]. You know, and so then we have some folks who are transitioning, who will come visit and we have to be very careful of what pronouns we use. One wears a sign that says ‘my preferred pronoun is they.’ And so, it is fascinating to see other issues, other things kind of playing out. So, well, we are not formally involved. Although, one of our brothers, Brother Aden, was a speaker at a big evening song service at a church in Greenwich Village [New York], at the end of a Gay Pride March; and it is on our Facebook page, Holy Cross Monastery. And it is a brilliant, brilliant talk [BL: Mmhmm]. He is an amazing guy. He is thirty. He is a graduate of Yale and Union Seminary. And man [BL: Laughs], he challenges you [BL: Mmhmm]. Yeah. So, we are involved in that way, yeah [BL: Yeah. That is good]. Yeah.

BL: [Flips through papers] any important events or turning points in your life that we have not really touched on in the conversation?

RS: No. I think the interesting one now is coming to retirement age. I am not leaving the monastery, but I am in this transition period. And I am asking myself, you know, ‘what is going to change? You know, what am I going to do? How am I going to be? How will I live out my life? My vocation?’ And I am more and more aware now that as people age, that is a big question. I have seen a lot of people at retirement age want to have a conversation or direction. And it is a challenge. And I think probably for gay and lesbian folk, it is a big challenge. Before I came on retreat, I visited friends in Maryland, Jim and Tim, who got married a few years ago; but, they have been together for 35 years. And they just moved in to a retirement community. They are the only openly gay couple [BL: Mmhmm]. They are hoping to attract more. But, it is—they have been warmly, warmly received by most everybody, but not everybody [BL: Yeah]. So, it goes on. [BL: Yeah, it is a challenge with the Asian population] Yeah.

BL: That we are all at some point going to have to look at those issues with where we are going to live, how we are going to live.

RS: Right [BL: All of those things]. And we have got to make the choice about you know, what if one of us got sick first? [BL: Right]. Who is going to take care of the other? [BL: Right]. So, they went into this thing, which is a step care [BL: Yeah] thing, you know. It is expensive, but they had the where withdraw to do it [BL: Mmhmm]. So... [BL: Yeah]. But no, 65 is the big event [BL: Yeah]. I am 68 now, so... [BL: Yeah].

BL: What changes have you seen in the LGBT community, let us say at large, or anything in particular that you want to talk about over the years [RS: Yeah] that you were more involved in the community [RS: Yeah] versus [RS: Yeah] now?

RS: Yeah. Well, I think certainly the inclusion of the transgender population in the sense of community has been a growing point. That is new. Even, I was joking in my e-mail to you. Even the—and the ‘Q.’ You know, the whole emergence of queer theory and the way people are able to articulate their—who they are being, and study it; and that is totally new. And I remember, oh gosh, one event that I will tell. I was—when I was living in Berkeley, this would be ’91, I was helping out Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. It was the day of a Gay Pride March in San Francisco. I got on the bart (ph) in Berkeley and it was just filled with these people having a wonderful time, enjoying who they were. And I thought—I started to cry. I said, I never thought it would get to this, that people could actually have joy and fun. You know and it blew me away.

And I have seen more of this when people are able to just be themselves, and be themselves in different ways. I do not always understand that I have struggled with what, you know, the transgender dynamic and the queer theory, kind of, I do not get it. But, there you go. So, I got a lot to learn. But, I see a kind of a broadening. My fear is though, is that there is also an alternative kind of narrowing that, you know, is there is a kind of a queer identity and if you do not fit it, you know, you are... So, I worry that we might get a little bit too narrow and that there is one kind of politically correct way of doing or being. And I would not want us to go there. We have gone too far. Yeah. [BL: Mmhmm]. Yeah. I hope that answers [BL: Yeah] that question.

BL: Were there any things in your life that particularly influenced the trajectory of your life of what you've decided to do and things like that?

RS: Not really. I mean, often it was like they say, you wait and do the right thing [BL: Mmhmm] as best as you can discern it or figure it out; and that is almost always how it has been [BL: Mmhmm]. Yeah, there was no big trauma. I mean, it was like, you know, when I was leaving Harrisburg, it was because my job was ending [BL: Mmhmm]. So, that became an opportunity [BL: Mmhmm] for me to explore another thing. And yeah. [BL: Good] yeah.

BL: Have we missed anything you can think of?

RS: Probably, but not that I can think of [laughs] [BL: Laughs]. So...

BL: Okay, great. Well, yeah, if you know of anybody—oh you know, one thing I did want to ask you is did you have any sense... Because you mentioned a little bit of your uncle with knowing kind of the early Scranton history [RS: Mmhmm], did—and we do not have a lot of information about Scranton [BL: Mmhmm], do you know much about the LGBT life in Scranton? Were you aware of it at all when you were there?

RS: No. I really was not. I found out when I was approaching maybe college age, that there was a gay bar in downtown Scranton, the Silhouette [BL: The Silhouette]. And there may have been another one. I actually wish my uncle Dick could do this [BL: Yeah] at 92 because he could talk about what was happening in the '40s and '50s [BL: Yeah] in a small town [BL: Yeah], because it really was a salon society [BL: Yeah]. But—and life went on there. You know, I did not invent this [BL: Laughs] [laughs]. Although, I like to think I did. You know...

BL: Is he in a position where he could be interviewed? Or do you think he would do something like that?

RS: I do not think he would [BL: Okay]. Although, I might mention it to him. I am going to see him...

BL: If you would not mind mentioning it to him [RS: Yeah] because I mean we would love [RS: Yeah] to get more information about the Scranton area because even though we are—our sort of area of the state that we cover [RS: Yeah] is more South Central PA [RS: Yeah], we have been getting stories from Williamsport [RS: Yeah] and Scranton and (\_\_\_\_???) [RS: Yeah]. So, we want to kind of branch out because nobody is doing it up there [RS: Right]. So... [RS: And there is generation—there is always generations dying off] Yeah. [RS: And this stuff just gets lost] Right. So, we lost pieces of history, so... [RS: I will see him] Yeah. [RS: Maybe I can] Just plant that idea in his head and see if he is interested and we... [RS: I mean he is so funny. You would

enjoy him. He is howlingly funny] [laughs] [RS: So...] He would be good to meet. [RS: And he is a great storyteller. So...] And those are information about or project [RS: Oh, great]. And this is just a brochure on the LGBT Center. [RS: Wonderful, wonderful. Okay]. Alright, this concludes our interview. So let me...