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Contact:

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

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

Interviewee: Larry Thomas

Interviewer: Ann Van Dyke

Date of Interview: July 30, 2013

Location of Interview: Larry Thomas's home in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Transcriber: Sara Tyberg

Proofreader: Emily Scheiber

Abstract:

Larry Lee Thomas was born in Burnham, Pennsylvania in 1941, living there for at least 19 years before spending four years in the military, and shortly thereafter moving to the nearby city of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. After his first experience dating another man through a 20-year relationship, Larry now lives with his partner with whom he has spent 31 years. In this interview, Larry discusses his experiences as a self-identified gay man living in Harrisburg through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when there was a prevalent stigma against LGBT people and few places to safely express one's sexual orientation and meet others in the community. He also discloses his challenges of managing both personal and professional relationships by selectively deciding to come out or not within particular social circles. While he does not actively participate in LGBT activism, Larry admires the amount of freedom that he sees in the gay community today, while commenting that LGBT young people may be unaware of how difficult life was only a few decades ago.

AV: It is July 30, 19— 2013. We are in the home of Larry Thomas in Harrisburg [Pennsylvania]. [Full address removed.] My name is Ann Van Dyke. I will be doing the interviewing, and Bob Kegriss is operating the camera. So, kind sir, our first question is your whole name, please?

LT: Larry Lee Thomas.

AV: Okay. And your birthdate and place?

LT: August 8, 1941. And that would be Burnham, Pennsylvania.

AV: And what were your parents' names?

LT: Claire and Charlotte.

AV: Do you have any siblings?

LT: I have two sisters left [AV: Two sisters]. There were nine of us to start.

BK: [whispers] Oh my god.

AV: Nine of you? Okay. And what were your parents' occupations?

LT: My dad worked for Bell Telephone [AV: Okay] and my mother was a stay-at-home mom.

AV: And your mother worked like crazy [Laughs].

LT: With nine kids, yeah.

AV: Right. How long have you been living in Harrisburg?

LT: Since 1962 [AV: 1962]. I moved here right when I got out of the Army.

AV: Ahh, okay. And where did you go to school?

LT: Lewistown High [School].

AV: Lewistown High. And any schooling after that?

LT: I had one year at Penn State [University].

AV: Okay. At the main campus?

LT: No, it used to up at—the John Harris [AV: Oh, yes. Okay] years ago.

AV: Are you a member of any faith group?

LT: No.

AV: Okay. Have you ever been married?

LT: No.

AV: Okay. How about nieces and nephews that you are close to or...?

LT: I have one niece in Waynesburg [Pennsylvania].

AV: Oh, okay. And your occupation? What kind of work have you done?

LT: I have been in retail, and Bar Mitzvahs.

AV: Okay. And you are currently?

LT: Retired.

AV: And what are you doing now?

LT: I am working on *EBay*— selling stuff on *EBay*.

AV: Okay. And when did you retire from retail?

LT: 2010.

AV: 2010, okay. And, do you remember when you first— your first job, when and where it was?

LT: [Leans back and sighs] it was— I was a window trimmer for Ganks in State College, Lewistown [Pennsylvania], and Danville [Pennsylvania].

AV: Okay. And you mentioned the military, what branch?

LT: I was in Army security for four years.

AV: And when was that?

LT: That would have been '58 to '62.

AV: So you were 19 [years old]?

LT: [Nods] Mmhhh.

AV: Okay. Are— do you have membership in any community organizations?

LT: No.

AV: Okay, okay. So, one of the key questions that we are asking everybody is when you first realized that you were gay and/or LG— we are using the term, of course, LGBT, and we are asking with which term do you most identify?

LT: Gay.

AV: Gay. And when you realized you were gay?

LT: After I get out of the military, and I lived above a flower shop here, Harry Horton's, remember? I lived up there, and I came home from work— I would work for Penn Harris Hotel in the Esquire room, which was men only [AV: Mmhhh] and, I came home—went down to the shop to check if I had any mail, and this gentleman was there, and he was quite attractive; and I went upstairs about my business. And then that night, my landlord said, "Do you remember the guy that was in the flower shop?" And I said, "Yes." "Well, he would like to take you out on a date" [smiles] [LT: Laughs]. And, I really had to think about it, because I was unsure [AV: Mmhhh]. And, so we went out. In those days, two guys could not go out to dinner [AV: Right. Right]. You had to have women with you [AV: Mmhhh]. So, he had two gay girlfriends. So, the four of us went out to dinner, and it was— what was that red restaurant that is now lobster— Red Lobster that was over on the Carlisle Pike? [LT: I do not know]. Anyway, we went there and it went well. And, I ended up spending [thinks] 20 years with him. And, then he decided he wanted somebody younger, and I, in the meantime, wanted somebody younger too. So, that is

when I met George. I met George at the bar. He was married with a child. And we have been together for 31 years.

AV: Oh, my. Okay.

LT: So, I have always been married, sort of [Laughs].

AV: Yeah, yeah. Another question, I think you just answered it, and that was, what your first contact was with the gay community in this area? And that would have been it?

LT: Yeah.

AV: Okay. So, back then in those early years, what was life like for you as a gay man?

LT: It was awful [AV: Ah]. It— we had the Clocks Bar— was up here on the corner, and it was a mixed— it was the only mixed bar. And it was in those days when they would put undercover agents in the bars, and try to trick you into touching them or something and then they would arrest you.

AV: And the years we are talking are...?

LT: Early 60s.

AV: Early 60s, okay.

LT: And, State Street was notorious because that is where all these people went to meet each other. And they would more or less leave them alone. I was with somebody, so that was not my cup of tea. But, when there was an election coming up, they used that and they would just arrest people right and left over on State Street, just for any reason whatsoever [AV: Yeah] and they got away with it.

AV: Yeah, yeah. So, during those early 60s, was there any other place aside from the bar that you mentioned, where gay folks could get together?

LT: Well, eventually there was a place called Johnny Kobler's, which is behind where the Hilton is, in that alley back there. It is now a garage. And [clears throat] that was gay only on the weekends. And then, the Warner Bar— the Warner Hotel later decided all they were getting was bums. So, the guy that managed the place was from New York, and he realized that he had a gold mine on his hand because, there was no lesbian bar either. So, they— he let the gay community know that they— we were welcome there. And, it was the first bar where two people could dance together [AV: Mmhmm]. That was a no-no [AV: Mmhmm]. And, that place was really popular for years and years and years. So, we used to go from the Clocks to Johnny Kobler's to the Warner. It was like [makes circling motion with his hand] you had three places that you could go to, but that was late 60s.

AV: Okay. And the Warner's, when was that torn down?

LT: Oh, I do not remember. It has been gone a long, long time.

AV: Yeah, seems like it was 70s.

LT: When I came here, I rented a room there.

AV: Yeah, they had rooms. That is right. Yeah.

LT: Yeah, beautiful rooms. Old Victorian furniture with a big marble tops and stuff. It was really very, very nice. And then, I was offered this room above the flower shop; so I took that because it was cheaper and I paid on a weekly basis.

AV: Now, during the 60s and 70s, did you ever travel to other cities to connect with the gay community?

LT: We used to go to Baltimore [Maryland] a lot because at that time, it was only an hour and 15 minutes away. And that was a thriving gay community there [AV: Mmhhh]. I do not remember the names of the bars anymore, but there were three or four. And they had gay restaurants, too, as well. Some of the bars had a restaurant attached to it. So, that was a big deal for us, coming from Harrisburg to that [AV: Yeah]. That is a whole new world down there [AV: Yeah]. So...

AV: Yeah. So, one of the questions that we always ask folks is, what impact did your coming out have on your work life?

LT: None [AV: Okay]. [Shaking head] they never knew I was gay.

AV: Oh, so you did not come out there?

LT: No. Oh, no. Never.

AV: Did you ever come out in any of your working history life?

LT: Never [AV: Okay]. When I retired, they still did not know I was gay.

AV: Okay. Well, that is the answer to that question.

LT: [Nodding] Yup.

AV: Oh my. So, no one you ever worked with knew?

LT: No. They may have suspected, but they did not have the nerve to ask me. And I was not going to volunteer the information.

AV: Right, right, right. What about— did your coming out have any impact on your family life?

LT: In the begin—my mother was immediately acceptive, and she said, “I knew and that back — that there was something different about you.” And [clears throat] most of my sisters did, I had a couple that were homophobic [AV: Oh] and— which did not bother me because I thought, well, you are the loser. You know? And— but I have a— my niece. I am very close to her [AV: Right]. And she is the one that my mother said to her, “You know, Uncle Larry’s gay.” And she said, “We— You think I would... make me think less of him?” And, Tammy says, “No” [AV: Great]. And, that was it. So, I guess, my mother told the rest of the family. My brother was a homophobe too [AV: Oh]. He was the oldest.

AV: Were you able to stay in touch with your siblings that were not accepting?

LT: Yeah, oh yeah [AV: Great]. Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah [AV: Okay]. I had one out in South Dakota. She had a slew of kids and spent a fortune on photos. And I would get all these pictures in the mail and I did not know these kids. I thought, “Why are you sending me these pictures for?” So— but, that was the only contact with her. She was evil [Nods].

AV: Okay, yeah. Now, you have already said a lot about this next question, but I want to ask it, just in case there is anything else you want to add; and that is about the impact of coming out on your social life?

LT: I really did not have a social life. You know, in those days, you just went to the bar, you went to the movies, or something [AV: Right] or out to dinner. There was not really any... I belonged to the Harrisburg Symphony and we would go there, but other than that, no. I would—I had season tickets for the Symphony, for years [AV: Okay]. In those days, you had to dress [AV: Yeah]. I mean, you could not go like they go now [AV: Right]. You had to dress to be— to go there.

AV: Yeah, yeah. Now, this next question has more to do with what was going on inside of you. And that is, the impact of your coming out on your political life and perspective?

LT: Well, my first lover was a professional photographer and he worked for the state. And he introduced me to Kennedy, when Kennedy was here because he was a photographer.

AV: Which Kennedy?

LT: John [AV: Okay], when he was running for President [AV: Okay]. He was here in Harrisburg; and my lover was the photographer who took all of the pictures [AV: Mhmm]. So, that was— so, I have been a Democrat ever since [AV: Laughs] [AV: Good reason. Yeah, okay]. [Laughs].

AV: And here is a really interesting question: Did your coming out have anything to do with your spiritual life?

LT: No. I have always believed in God, but I was never a really religious person [AV: Right, right]. So, I do not even go to church anymore.

AV: Okay. And so your coming out and, different people's reactions accepting or not accepting, did that have any impact on your spiritual life?

LT: No. I figured, that is your loss and not mine.

AV: Yeah. Okay. So, I bet you are going to have a lot to say about this: in the changes you have witnessed, in respect to the LGBT community in this part of Pennsylvania?

LT: Well, right now, the gay kids can go anywhere [AV: Yeah]. So, they do not have to depend on the bars anymore. And a lot of the bars are [pauses] only have that older people, as customers [AV: Mmhmm. Mmhmm]. Younger people do not go there. They go out with their friends, and that's all accepted. And, in the old days, there was a lesbian bar later on called the D-Jam, up on River Road. And the women then decided they wanted their own bar, and they wanted nothing to do with the gay men.

AV: Was that in the 60s?

LT: 70s, I think [AV: Okay]. 70s. And so that— then, there was a big divide between the gay women and the gay men; and it did not change until maybe the early 80s that we began to mingle again with each other [AV: Yeah]. Harrisburg did not have any what they call “Lipstick Lesbians” [AV: Oh]. They were all the real butch ones. So...

AV: Any other changes that come to mind about, you know, life for the gay community that you have witnessed since you have been in Harrisburg?

LT: I think the young people have no idea how tough it was. And they are so flamboyant that it really aggravates me to see it. I mean, I do not care if you are gay or not, you are a man. Act like one. And it— oh and they are out in public, and they are screaming and hollering. I am embarrassed for them [Nods].

AV: Mmm. Okay. There have been a lot of efforts in this general area of the state for municipal ordinances to civil rights ordinances that include the LGBT community and have you been very aware of [LT: [shaking head] No] those efforts? Okay. And have you been aware of the Harrisburg communications ordinance that includes protections for LGBT folks?

LT: [Shaking head] No.

AV: Okay. Have you been aware or involved in LGBT civil rights efforts in any, you know, state...?

LT: [shaking head] No.

AV: Okay, okay. All right. Now, here is a big question [LT: Laughs]. What challenges do you still see that we have in things that need to be done with respect to LGBT, just across the board civil rights and treatment?

LT: Well, I think that is pretty well covered. I mean legally now, especially with Obama. I mean, he is for the gay community [AV: Mmhmm. Mmhmm]. And I think we would really ha— nobody in politics would dare mess with it. It would be political suicide.

AV: Yeah, yeah. I see. So, if you were asked to name the top most important events in your life, what would they be?

LT: Just living my life the way I lived it. I traveled a lot. I had good relationships. My whole life was [nods] being good.

AV: Great, great. Can you pick— point to times in your life that were real turning points?

LT: Nothing in particular, nah [AV: Okay]. It just all evolved by itself [Laughs].

AV: Yeah. And I think you have already answered this, but I want to ask it again in case there is something else you want to add. What have been the greatest changes you have seen in this area?

LT: Well, you mean as far as the gay community?

AV: Yes, yes.

LT: This— just the freedom that these people have now [AV: Right]. It is— I am happy for them [nodding] [AV: Right]. But, I—none of them really know what it was like in the beginning [AV: Okay]. Well, I think they have a lot of freedom now [AV: Mmhmm]. And a lot of civil rights, that they did not have— that we did not have.

AV: Yeah. And let me ask, are there any books or music or objects that are particularly significant and valuable to you?

LT: Oh, I love music.

AV: And what type of music?

LT: I like classical. I like jazz. My whole life I was in music, and I worked for E.J. Corvett's in the Camp Hill Mall.

AV: Oh, yeah.

LT: And I was the record player there. And I started out in display. And I was in “Men & Boys” and tailor shop, and then I had ladies' sportswear, and my last one was I was the buyer for records and books. And we were the place to go to [AV: Yes]. Because I could order— buy

anything I wanted. I had a special room built just for the classical people to go in. And we made a lot of money. We had people come up from Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] and down from State College to shop there.

AV: Yeah. I bet, yeah. One last question: Is there anything we have missed or anything else that you want to add to this interview?

LT: [Shakes head] I cannot think of anything.

AV: Okay. Okay, thank you so much.

LT: That is it?

AV: Yup.

LT: Well, that was short.