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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: Phil Wenger

Interviewer: Michele Metcalf

Date: March 23, 2015

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Transcriber: Michele Metcalf

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Abstract: The interview performed on March 23, 2015 is with Oral History project volunteer, Michele Metcalf and long-time LGBT activist and self-identified gay man, Phil Wenger. Wenger was born and raised in Ethiopia in a large Mennonite missionary family and returned to his family's roots in Central Pennsylvania when he was 12. In this interview, he speaks about his coming out, his advocacy with Pride and the Harrisburg LGBT center, and with the Lancaster Aids Project. He goes on to speak about how all of these factors have affected his life, life path, and relationships.

Michele Metcalf: So it's March 23rd, 2015, we're here with Phil Wenger, I'm Michele Metcalf, I'm with the Central Pennsylvania Oral History Project. Do you we have your permission to get your story for the project?

Phil Wenger: We do.

MM: That's great. So those materials will be preserved in the archives from the LGBT Center and also in Dickinson College, it may be disseminated in later publications and on the Internet, so I just wanted to be very clear where it's going. But thank you, we're really excited.

PW: So the purpose of this is primarily for research or you could actually make a full length movie someday or you could like, if I ran for President this would be open access to all the press to be able to have access to this, is that right?

MM: All of the above and we're also just trying to re-document a history that's been very overlooked and completely ignored in some senses, so we're trying to reclaim that. Okay, so can you tell me a little bit about your family life and early development?

PW: Okay. Yes, I am the son of a preacher and a teacher, I was born in Africa, in the country of Ethiopia, so my parents were missionaries, they went in in 1949 and then they came back in 1970 and I would've been like 12 years-old when we came back from Africa. So I'm number seven of eight children, I have four sisters and three brothers so that makes eight of us in all and I'm number seven, so I have one younger brother.

When I was young I went to boarding school because my parents were out in the mission field and then by the time that I got in the fifth grade, then I came back here to the United States. I settled in Lancaster County [Pennsylvanian] and ended up going to basically to Mennonite School so I graduated from Lancaster Mennonite High School and then ended up going to Eastern Mennonite University. I took like eight years to graduate from college; I kept dropping out every time. Get another student loan, I'd take off then I'd come back and figure out what my major was going to be. So from a development point of view that was the context to which I was

raised. It was a very faith based family, we weren't fundamentalist at all, but we were very focused on education as being critical, social justice as being important and giving back to the community was that sort of family social dynamic that I was raised with.

And yeah I would say my family really represented my faith because we were such a close unit, because we grew up in Africa, we were, you know, really close, and that was the context to which I was raised.

MM: Okay. What is your connection to the LGBT Community in Central Pennsylvania?

PW: Are you going to ask me a coming out story at a later point, because I could walk my way through that or I could just talk right now—

MM: You can do that now if you'd like.

PW: Right now, my connection to the LGBT Community Center is I support them financially; I've been active on a number of boards precursors to the LGBT Community Center, I was one of the founders of the Lancaster AIDS Project, when HIV first swept through this community and we started that organization and I've been an independent business person, so I was able to come out fairly early for what was early in those days. Today all the transgender youth are coming out when they're like five years-old, but for us coming out in your early '20s was considered sort of the thing you did and so ever since I was in my early '20s, I've been socially active around LGBT rights, involved in numerous organizations and participating in numerous activities from organizing Pride Days to fundraising banquets in the early days of the LGBT Community Center.

MM: Okay. So can we get your occupational history a little bit then?

PW: I've always been an entrepreneur, in fact I want my tomb stone to say, "He likes to make things grow", so every time I get involved in organizations I get a certain energy that I bring to them and I like to make them grow, so because of that I never was really good working for somebody else in this little box that everybody tells you what to do and then you do it and that's life. I wanted to be in control of my own destiny so I've always basically been self-employed. I did sales in college and I worked in a number of different places, but by the time I got out of college, I knew I wanted to just run my own business.

So with a buddy I—Well there were a number of businesses I tried, I tried Sawdust etc. which was a little construction company with a couple of friends, we renovated some houses and then I didn't like that model of business, so then we started a City Garden Co-op, because I took a couple of years to live in Washington DC and we brought food in to a lot of the poor neighborhoods and tried to get them to eat healthier, that kind of thing, and then I wandered around until a buddy of mine by the name Isaac said, "Let's open a restaurant". So I got started then with *Isaac's* and we started a little company in downtown Lancaster [Pennsylvania], it was a 40 seat restaurant and that restaurant was very popular, except Isaac who was the only other gay guy I knew from college, he and I were not compatible as business friends and 60 days after we started this restaurant he said, "I'm out of here" and he went to Alaska.

And so now I have a restaurant, I don't really know what I'm doing in a restaurant, but it was the business then that I chose to build, so then the next- I don't know- 30 years, I just built more *Isaac's* so today it's a chain of restaurants. We're 18 restaurants today in about seven counties and so I'm basically an entrepreneur and running that company. Restaurants though were generally motivated by money and you know making money. I was always motivated by community activities and so for me the thing that made me the most proud was the fact that that gave me a stage to do the community building activities that I really enjoyed. So I have a whole list of professional things that I've done, Chair of the Lexington Chamber of Commerce, Chair of the Community Foundation redirected a lot of money, Chair of the Lexington County Coalition to End Homelessness. In the early days, you know, Planned Parenthood was really where I cut my teeth, but prior to that, I'm counting backwards, then it was the Lancaster AIDS Project and we basically started that when I was about 25.

About 1985 or so, HIV was just coming to the forefront then, we didn't know what it was, it was an (___??) cancer, we had some friends who were infected and all of the sudden people were dying, by the late '80s and we needed to respond as a community so I got really involved with that. So the restaurants are my occupation, but community building is what really feeds my soul and what I really enjoy.

MM: Okay, so can you tell me your coming out story?

PW: [laughs] Well, you know, I went to boarding school and I came back to this country and I basically was probably socially as inapt as you can imagine. I mean I just really didn't have a real sense of who I was sexually or whether I should be dating girls or whether I was attracted to boys and none of that really gelled until I have been back in the United States for a few years and that's because our United States culture is so driven by the music you listen to, by the kind of kids you hang out with and how you get labeled and when I came back here, I've grown up in an environment where there was no television, there was no like fitting in to a certain subset of American culture, I had to figure out how the American culture worked first so the sexuality part came much later.

So I sort of knew I was always different. I mean if you look in my high school graduation pictures, I wore the big stupid tie and I have enjoyed fooling around with other people and laughing and having a blast, but I was just not quite cut out of the same cloth as everybody else, but the self-awareness really took root in the year after graduation from high school and I was in the drug store, I picked up a novel, it was called *The Front Runner*, it's a love story between a runner and his coach and I had been a runner in high school and that story just devastated me, so I read a novel and the next thing you know I'm balling like a baby because it's a love story between two guys and I never really even put that box over my attractions prior to that and I realized, "Oh my God, I must be gay", I was like 17 years-old, 18 years-old so that was basically my self-awareness, then it probably fast-forward three years until you actually are aware to admit that to other people.

So that was a series of steps in my college experience that then led me to where I was publicly able to identify as being gay. First was probably—I, I was an English major, I was interested in

studying Journalism, so I went to the University of Maryland for a year and came back and was selected to edit our college newspaper when I was like 19 and so I was editing our college newspaper in a Christian college where there were no gay people. I mean we just didn't talk about it, there was that wasn't even on the radar screen in 1978 and so as the editor I wanted to stir the pot. And so I wrote an anonymous letter to the editor about being a gay person, a student at Eastern Mennonite University [Harrisonburg, Virginia] where this wasn't even talked about, it wasn't socially accepted, it wasn't biblically blessed, there was no way that it would do and I wrote that anonymously and that was the real ethical dilemma because you shouldn't- as the editor of the paper- be planting a story and that's exactly what I did. But I confessed it later to my staff and I confessed it later to others that it was really me that was writing that letter and I did identify with it later.

So that was sort of the beginning of my coming out and then I dropped out of college again, went to Washington DC and this is in the days when if you are young, you're in your 20s, you are sexually active, there was bars that already opened up, so whether we went to the Rehoboth, we went to the Boat House, or whether I'd come home to Lancaster and we had the Tally-Ho which has been opened since 1970, I mean these gay bars had started, so then you began to make friendships and you began to self-identify as gay and then there was the coming out to your parents.

For me, my father always said, "It's not what you believe but it's how you take what you learn and apply it in a set of beliefs that work for you. So I'm not going to tell you that you have to have a rigid set of values in which you must operate your life, but as long as you know how to think and as long as you know how to process, you'll end up being fine". So because my father was as different from his father on issues like music instruments in the home, whether or not you wear plain clothing, the Mennonites and Amish always separated themselves by clothes, so he was very different from his father, so he said, "As long as you're educated, as long as you're making positive choices if you're honest with me, I'm going to love you." So I knew from my father there was not going to be a rigid rejection. My father was just too wise and too important Church figure as a Church leader to be able to do that.

And so that began the journey, so I came out to my parents right before I headed off to college and we I remember I sat them down and I said, "Okay, I'm going to tell you something on one condition. I'm not going to tell you if you don't agree to my condition. The one condition is you can never bring up this subject or ask me about it ever again." I was like, "Dad, mom, do you agree?", so after some hee-hawing around and stuff they said, "Yes, we agree" so then I said, "Well, I'm gay and I don't know what I'm going to do about it yet, you know, I just need you to know but I have to control the message and who I'm going to tell and what kind of situation we're going to get into" and as a result of that, then I dashed off to college. And for about a year and a half we didn't talk about it at all. I told them, I wanted them to adjust to it, I wasn't telling all my other family members, but then within three years, that had all changed.

So then I ended up taking a job for the Mennonite Church during these coming out years, they had a ministry to their students and young adults and they had a publication and the Mennonites were made up of two different denominations, there were basically the old Mennonites which came over here at the invitation of William Penn from Central Europe and then there were the

new Mennonites who in Europe had migrated to Russia and then came over after the Bolshevik Revolution and they settled in the central plains like Newton, Kansas, so there were the general conference Mennonites and the old Mennonites and together they formed an organization that would minister to the people who had left the Church. So we had a lot of our Mennonites at universities and in college campuses, in anti-war activities, because Mennonites were always pacifists and this ministry was to minister all of those folks and they selected me to edit their magazine that was published monthly. So this was like a magazine, sort of like news week and we would collect articles from thinkers and writers and we would publish this and I was the editor while I was living in Washington DC. So this was paid for 50% by the general conference Mennonites, 50% by the old Mennonites, so my salary was coming from these two different denominations. That was the year I was coming out and somehow having a gay employee working for the Mennonite Church didn't work out very well, but because they didn't want to fire you for being gay, they just cut off funding and they shut the magazine down.

So I still remember them delivering that message and we sort of knew what the real reason was and the one Church leader who had cut off the funding was a young conservative righteous person who at the same time that he was cutting off my funding, he was forcing me to kneel with him and putting his arms around me and praying for my soul and firing me at the same time and I still never always remembered that as being one of those times where, "Where does abusive power really come from?", when there's somebody who's telling you they're firing you but they still love you and they want your soul to be saved because you're gay. It was the weirdest kind of experience.

So after that the Mennonite Church decided they were going to kick me out, so I left the Church at that point and I really hadn't looked back from a fake perspective, and from that point on then I was just out in my work life and very active in the community.

MM: Okay. Are you married? Do you have any children or grandchildren?

PW: My partner is Steve Dinnocenti and we have been together for- we're coming up on our 29th anniversary this summer.

MM: Congratulations.

PW: So when Pennsylvania marriage became legal, up to that point we had decided that we would just going to wait until it was legal in PA and not worry about trying to transfer our license in, so last summer the courts basically said, "Okay, it's going to be legal in PA" and we were number two at the Courthouse, we let somebody go in front of us, but we raced down there as soon as they told us in Lancaster that, "You are going to be able to get married", we went down, we got our application together, so we applied for an application in the first day it was legal in Pennsylvania, but then it took us about a month to plan what we wanted to do. I didn't want to spend a lot of money because we'd had a big 25th anniversary about three years beforehand and we invited hundreds of friends and I spent our wedding money on our 25th anniversary, so I didn't have to then plan a wedding.

So Steve and I, because he was a guidance counselor and he was a special ed teacher in the public schools, he always had children that he was dealing with all day long every day and he said, "I just don't really want to come home and have to deal with that", so we made a choice at that point to probably not adopt or bring a child into this world, so no children.

If that sign is causing a problem you just need to tell me, I'm going to put it right behind the bar so I can look at you without having to squint, but if the light is weird please make for sure that you tell me.

MM: Okay, no problem, thank you. Do you have any military background?

PW: I do not. Yeah, Mennonites are basically pacifists so we did a conscientious objector status, but I'm at the age, at 57 years-old that I'm right between the Vietnam War having to register for the draft and when they made everybody register again and there was about four windows in there, four years in there where they don't even have my number, so no, I never served.

MM: Okay, so can you talk to me about when you first got started in the LGBT activism in Central Pennsylvania?

PW: We moved back here when I was 28 and prior to that I was just out to family and friends and sort of out in the community and I'd say I probably was more active initially because of HIV and there was just so much discrimination and so much fear and so much loathing that happened when people either tested positive with HIV or they became sick and they were dying and so we were organizing groups to help take care of people who were sick and this would have been like in the early '80s, '84-'85.

Prior to that I would've gone a bunch of Gay Pride Parties, we used to rent Ski Roundtop and hire a bunch of bands. Then we would go to the Gay Pride in New York every year, we would do things in Philadelphia, but I wasn't particularly active except in the Mennonite Church, so in the Mennonite Church we had an organization called The Brethren Council for Mennonite Concerns. It was founded in 1972 and then I served on its national board and at that point we were organizing groups to go to the church conferences and we would basically speak out to the church who was still debating this issue of sexuality. At that point they were trying to make a decision what to do about this and they decided to go conservative for like 20 years, so they basically shut us down, but at that point we were still in dialogue and I would go to these church conferences a youth person and we just ran around and pranced. We were young gay guys who were trying to tell the church that they should accept us and love us and...

So I did the church thing, then I did the Lancaster AIDS Project, the formation of that, the ministering to other people and the issues around that and then there was a group of us here in Central Pennsylvania who decided we needed to sort of take control of both the education and the political persuasion issues and so there was a group of us in Harrisburg that formed two of the first sort of joined public and private gay pride events and so I would've worked on those steering committees and on a variety of activities around that. I would've done a lot of fundraising in the early days because the early vestiges of the LGBT movement were either in

the AIDS service organizations or they were over in Planned Parenthood. And Planned Parenthood gave us space in their building to be able to have all of our meetings and organizing.

In the early days there was a number of activities you could participate in, we had up a hotline and people were able to call the hotline, so if you're thinking of killing yourself, you needed someone to talk to, there was parents group, there was a parents support group because a lot of—particularly in my case, it was guys, they would end up coming out, but it was after they were married. I mean these were the days where everybody got married because that was what you'd do.

So my most intense activities around gay civil rights would have been as an activist would have been in planning those gay pride events in Harrisburg and Lancaster. Once I became more successful in business then I was much more of the quiet influencer that helped organizations be able to make for sure that they would offer LGBT benefits for instance. In my company we were pioneers, we had to teach the insurance company what that was all about, because we were a fairly large company at that point and we were able through self-insurance to offer domestic partner benefits and then in the organizations I've worked with, every organization I've worked with, I've made for sure that they were willing to change and be able to offer domestic partner benefits.

So the last one, the most sort of stuck in the way, was Lancaster General Hospital and it's called Lancaster General Health now and I'm actually their incoming board chairman, but in 2006 finally, we got domestic partner coverage for everybody and we forget what those days were like, but basically if you were in a partnered relationship and you got sick with HIV or you were disabled or you retired, you couldn't get benefits and you had to each basically have your own benefit tree and everybody else who was married got to share those things, so you could come on my health plan and you could get my social security and before gay marriage this was a big issue and conservative organizations that either had faith based roots would routinely just denied benefits, unless they had somebody progressive who went to their HR departments and said, "We're going to change how this works. We may not be able to have marriage, but at least we're going to be able to have the benefits that come with being in a partnered relationship."

MM: Great and you were that person.

PW: I was, I played a role in that, yes. [laughs]

MM: Could you speak more about the Lancaster AIDS Project and HIV in Central Pennsylvania?

PW: Let's see, I just want to reflect on that a little bit. So, trying to think, '85, I first heard the word HIV I believe in '85, I had my first friend tell me he was HIV positive in '85. There was no treatment at that point. It might have been in '84 because we started *Isaac's* in 1983 and I hired several people who worked for me who were HIV positive and everybody was like, "What are we going to do about this? It's a death sentence and we aren't organized" and so there were a number of activists in about 1985 who came together and wanted to form an organization where they could go out and—like the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York, they wanted to take care of the people in our community because you have to understand how bad it was.

Families wouldn't want you there, there wasn't knowledge whether or not you could be infected by blood and body fluids, there was a real fear that if you hugged somebody and kissed somebody or did any of those kind of activities that you were going to get infected, so people really got isolated and so when someone got sick they had nobody but their friends to take care of them and so there was a real compelling need to take care of people and to raise money to help provide that support structure.

Then there was more the political thing of 'how do we stop the spread of HIV?' and we have to tell people they got to start wearing condoms and stop having oral sex and they got to be using dental dams and needles exchange, a lot of folks were IV users back then, just like heroin today's really big. There were a lot of people back in those days that were doing smack and not only gay people, but others and it was just there and we had to come together.

So in the early days of HIV, United Way wanted nothing to do with us, they wouldn't fund us, we were pretty desperate, but I had office space in my company and I basically said to them, as we formed the initial group, "You can have the office space and let's set up an organization, let's actually go file as a non-profit status, because that way we can apply for grants and that way we can funnel money into the organization" and then we set up committees to take care of different pieces of it; some were on prevention, some were on taking care of people who were sick and then some were in much more of the political activism, we could do other things. So I was the board chairman there, I believe for about three years and we had a whole host of people that died. I mean I've been at the bedside of at least a dozen people when they took their last breath and it will shape you for the rest of your life, it just burns right through you, because they are people your age and my age, people in their 20s. You just die for having sex, if you don't know better, it's very, very sad, so I would say there was probably about six or eight years between 1984 and 1990 that that was probably pretty much the focus of at least the men in the community, but most of the lesbians I knew, they came together and joined us. It was a time when we had to take care of our own rather than relying on other people take care of us.

Until the medical science got to the place that you can have physicians and others in the community, it was said, "This isn't that big a deal if you prevent it, if you have safe sex, as an example, you're not going to get HIV". And then, you know, by the early '90s, they at least came up with stuff that slowed the disease down and fast-forward to 2000, they had retrovirus and people were then living for a long period of time after that, but it was all about your friends being infected with HIV and so much of the early LGBT movement was how to organize, how to do direct action and how to try and change a society's attitude about this disease and I will tell you, people were a lot more scared about HIV than they were about having some queers living on the block or do something in the neighborhood. [laughs]

MM: Okay, how was that and your LGBT identity implements other aspects of your life whether it's social or political or religious or civil, even spiritual?

PW: Well, we had these formative years between adolescence and then we basically had sort of settled in in a career and raising a family, that are the very formative years and these really formative years for me, I mean it's put me in a situation where I would say, within my estate planning right now, LGBT rights and gay marriage are the highest priority for me. I'm thinking

of changing that, now that gay marriage is here. There are other people that are suffering in a lot of other ways and it's not just LGBT rights and that kind of thing, but there was a time when I didn't think we would necessarily get there because the opponents of gay marriage were very strong and in the early days we wanted to stop job discrimination, to stop housing discrimination, and we thought that was enough, if we could get people to just live their lives and have freedom and flexibility not to worry about being fired for being gay.

And I never, in fact in the early days, I remember going to some of the activists meetings in Philadelphia and places like that and people would say, "If we could go for gay marriage." There was this bodybuilder couple, I can't remember what their name was, but they were like, they've been on *People* magazine and they sort of been stars in the community and stuff and they were like, "We should, we should propro (ph?) gay marriage" and I remember being one of those guys to say, "Gay marriage? No way, because that's way too in front of where we are right now, we need to start with non-discrimination, we need to handle that first" and if I knew now what I knew then, I would've said, "Gay marriage? Yes." because it solves so many problems and so many issues that basically make this issue almost go away for a lot of people because it brings the conversation into the community conversation and all of a sudden, when you have the President of the United States talking about gay people and talking about gay marriage and you have this bay, basically being—I can be out to anybody now without ever, I talk about my husband now all the time.

It's funny, almost 30 years after we got together to be able to refer to him as my husband is really hard, because I'll be dealing with the contractor in here, I was working on this cabin and I'll say, "My husband doesn't like this" where in the old days I'd either said 'my partner', I'd have said 'my spouse' and I just people don't even swallow hard anymore, they just sort of like look away and they smile and I think people like it. I think they like the idea that I've got a husband. I do, I like it. [laughs]

MM: That's fantastic. Are there any other important events or turning points in your life that we haven't discussed?

PW: Let me think here a little bit, if there's anything I wanted to say. [pause and looks at notepad] I don't—To me, I've been around long enough to make some observations, it used to be that we would gather in these very special places. I remember the very first time I walked into a gay bar. It's was out in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, I was at a church camp out there in the Laurel Highlands and somebody said, "There's this little gay bar in Greensburg, Pennsylvania called *The Safari Lounge*", and I was so nervous, I mean I did not want to walk in there at all and I went in and of course I went up and hit some juke ball, I mean there was a pinball machine and some guy came up and stood behind me at the pinball machine and I was like freaking out, but we used to have these very special gathering spaces called gay bars and you know. There are some days I mourn the loss of that real close sense of community because today gay rights have more moved to mainstream and like in Lancaster for now, we probably have five bars that are gay owned, but they all have mixed people, so it's not like an exclusive, so now you go into these bars, you meet all of these guys, you don't know whether they're gay or not. You meet all these young people who come out to a jazz club, I mean I don't know if you've ever been like to the Belvedere in Lancaster, but it's not gay, it's where everybody goes that wants to be at a cool

place and to me that means I think the movement has been successful, but it has somewhat separated us, so I don't know.

Many of my friends have created a hardcore gay identity where all their friends are pretty exclusively gay, they go on gay cruises, they do vacations with gay people and stuff. For me, I was much more wanting to take the part of me that was gay and say, "This isn't that big a deal, I have all these other interests, I have all these other issues and community projects I'd like to work on and being gay is just no different than anybody else." So I think, I think it's pretty exciting to say, "Okay, that goal of mine which was to not have this be so important in all my interactions has actually come true and I'm really delighted that we've made that much progress in my lifetime".

MM: Well, on that, you've mentioned some of the changed that you're already seen, like gay marriage here in Pennsylvania, but what challenges remain?

PW: I think that the political challenge will still be here for another 20 years, but I think most of the challenges that are here today have to do with individual family units and the struggles that individuals have when they are unable to accept that their child may not be the perfect, you know, Barbie doll or the perfect, you know, Bruce that they want him to be, you know, so for me today, it's the issue of young people and those individual family units that are not accepting where I think that we need to pay a lot of attention. And I think society is, the It Will Get Better campaign that they did for gay youth and others. I think those are the things that are really important because while on this global issue we appeared to have made a lot of progress where we become part of the conversation and those of us who have a lot of self-confidence and had parents who love us, have no issues whatsoever with being gay. We can move right through it.

What you don't have though is these families. It might be a family that's from Guatemala that's never ever even knew what it was, but they just know that they don't want their son to be that way, because they have words for that in Guatemala. Or it might be a family in the hillbillies in West Virginia where they just they still use the F-word all the time and they call everybody out and you get sort of isolated and young people, I think, who feel different and to them the family culture that they grew up in need to make for sure that they know that there are alternative places that they can go for support, particularly when the parents are totally rejecting and kicking these kids out.

You might know more from your class than what I know today, but you keep reading these studies so the number of people that are homeless and in New York and places like that, but a lot of these young gay people end up getting kicked out of their homes and they have nowhere to go except they hit the streets somewhere and that's really sad to me, so I have a lot of interest in trying to help young people come to the sense of awareness and self-awareness and self-acceptance that I've been able to have and that is a powerful thing because when you're not separated, like your faith over here and your sexuality over here, and your family here and your belief system over here, we need to bring those together, it really helps to create a sense of who you are, that you can basically accomplish what you want to do.

I find it fascinating, as I watch the transgender movement happen. In the early days, we had fights at the gay pride parties that we would plan, what roles the drag queens could have. Because we weren't really talking transgender 25 years ago and it was all the drag queens and what do the drag queens want to do. And for some people on the planning committee, to have the drag queens do all these shows and do all these lip-synching and all these outrageous costumes was fun and we could laugh at ourselves. And for other gay people this was so outrageous, this is like "these are going to offend other people. So if we're trying to get civil rights why do we want to put our most offensive people out front?"

Underline all that is this gender challenged issue that many gay people have and then to understand what's different about it from gay people. And so, I am still learning today, as we hear these stories of people who are transgendered, and initially I thought it was pretty straightforward. Some men are born to think they're girls, some girls are born to think they're men and for those who want to transition, it's okay. But, you know, this idea that we have a gender identity, that's separate from our sexual identity. Because some people who have a gender identity don't necessarily, automatically, want the other gender than what they were born with. Sometimes they want the same gender. So, it's two different things and that's been a real growth opportunity for me in today's society. So I think we probably have more room to grow in that area, as well.

MM: Have we missed anything? Is there anything else you want to state for the record? Anything I didn't ask?

PW: No, but I am glad you're doing this project. I think this is a good thing and I'm happy for you.

MM: Thank you. I guess my last question is, do you know of any others that you think we should contact and interview?

PW: I know there's a group of us in Lancaster, who used to do some of the planning, we're going to go together and that was one of my suggestions to the leaders of the central PA LGBT project. Because when you get people together in a room it really helps to trigger memories and then the stories get better. Because you'll find, 25 years from now, you will forget a lot about what you did right now [laughter]. And so, I need people to help me trigger some memories to tell those stories. But I did have fun today, going back through my old boxes, and going through my library and pulling a bunch of stuff out. In fact, I am going to make a PDF of something and send it, and I can even send it to you. In 1981, in our Brethren Mennonite Gay Rights group called the Brethren Mennonite council for gay and lesbian concerns, I got my dad to write a column about what it was like to have me come out to him. I got my sister to write a column about what that meant and then I wrote a column. And here, with three people in the same family-- that was in 1981, that was almost unheard of. We published our story and I hadn't read that thing forever. Funny thing is, my dad, he's 96 years old and he wrote a letter to his beloved Mennonite Church about nine months ago, and that darn letter went viral. As a result my wedding was actually on [laughter]-- we were in *People* magazine and you'd read it in a viral magazine and on BuzzFeed. And my dad's letter went in all this, it was called [An Open] *Letter*

to my Beloved Mennonite Church, and dad has become a soldier for gay wedding and he wants our Mennonite Church to change and accept people.

So, what I did was, I read his column in 1981, where he wasn't really in favor of gay rights, but he loved his son and that was the over dominant thing to where he is today at 96, 97 and he is this guy that everybody in the Mennonite Church says "Oh, he's our Moses, because he's telling the Church we really have to change" and because his letter went viral on our publication here, it got like I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of views and all these thousands of shares. And it's really cool to have him as my father and to have him come to where I was and I'm just really happy about that.

MM: That's amazing.

PW: It is. I can send you the link to that if you're interested.

MM: Absolutely. Do you have anything, like to show us any photo albums or books or anything of you today?

PW: You mean to just do it on camera or to show you afterward?

MM: Either whatever you're comfortable with.

PW: I did have a stack of books over there, I have an early quote project book and a bunch of others but I don't think it's necessary to show those on camera. Sometime, if somebody's interested, at a later point and I'm still available and you're taking a look at this, feel free to contact me. I'll bring you to my library. But, there was a time when one of our gathering places was the gay bookstore and then mainstream publications wouldn't publish gay authors so a lot of us had stories to tell. Whether it was the coming out stories, like that *Front Runner* that I read, or whether it was the early AIDS stories. There was so much pain and anguish going on and a lot of those writers were writing about that experience and what it was like to be young and dying, and taking care of people that were your friends and lovers and watching them die, and seeing the government not responding to that. I had this whole library of books, I just bought everything I could and read in those early days. And now sitting at my other house, in all these shelves I am just looking at and all these books and I am like "Oh my God, it was a lot of history here in the last 30 years. [laughter]"

MM: Thank you so much, I think that's all.

PW: We good?

MM: Yes.

PW: All right.

MM: Thank you so much.