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Title: LGBT Oral History: John Barns

Date: December 16, 2015

Location: LGBT Oral History – Barns, John – 005

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Interviewee: John Barns

Interviewer: Cathy McCormick

Date: December 16, 2015

Place: Camp Hill, PA

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Abstract:

John Barns was born in Perry County, Pennsylvania. He comes from a family of farmers and is Pennsylvania Dutch. He grew up on a farm, joined the military during Vietnam, and then worked for the Pennsylvania government for 30 years. He discusses his experience of being gay in a small farm community and the conflicts that arose within his family because of his sexuality. He discusses the gay community in Perry County, Lancaster, and Harrisburg, as well as relationships that developed in each. The most prominent relationship that he discusses is his relationship with Walter Lear, the Regional Health Commissioner of the Pennsylvania Department of Health. He also talks about Dignity, a Roman Catholic organization that was a refuge for gay Catholics and/or gays of any religious background in the Harrisburg area. He discusses the impact that Dignity had on the gay community in Harrisburg and as well as on him. Also, he touches on certain people in his life that helped him come to terms with his sexuality.

KB: Alright, we are now officially recording.

JB: Okay.

KM: My name is Cathy McCormick and I'm with the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania. I'm here today with John Barns. John, would you please give us verbal permission to record this interview for the LGBT Oral History Project?

JB: My permission is given to record.

KM: Alright. Thank you very much. So we are just going to be real casual here. If you want to start by going back to, you know, your family of origin, your early development, and just share with us whatever you would like.

JB: Okay. I'm from Perry County. Born in Perry County, my ancestors have lived in Perry County since the early 1800s. I'm of three-fourths German background. My ancestors came to America in 1754, at least for one family. The other remaining fourth of my family is of Irish, Scotch-Irish background and we lived in Perry County. My grandfather, my great-grandfather, my great-grandfather are buried in Perry County. I come from a family of farmers. Both maternal and paternal were farmers. All my aunts and uncles and cousins are all farmers. So that is our roots. Protestant background; so I was raised church people, still are church people, still consider myself a faithful Christian. My father is deceased. My mother is still living, 93 years old. I have a sister, she has a son and daughter, and so I have great-nephews and great-nieces.

Religious background, we'll cover that here. Protestant background, they gave me – my parents gave me a good grounding in Christianity. In 1972 I converted to Roman Catholicism. 1992 I

converted to Russian Orthodoxy, so I am currently a Russian Orthodox. OCA in American as you would know it. And I have four godsons. They're a joy to have. So that's basically – that's basically who I am. Graduate of Greenwood High School, 1960. I have one year of college here and there. Employed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania until 1999, 30 years' service, worked in Department of Labor and Industry and the Department of Health. Went to the Army in 1994, 'cause I was of draft age. It was – Vietnam was gearing up, so I joined the Pennsylvania national guard. Was in the armored tank division until my term of duty was expired in 1998. [looking off camera] Yeah, 1970.

KM: I was going to say you said 1994, I thought maybe you meant '74... [Laughs]

JB: [laughs] 1970 I was out of the military. I said I had a year of college, basically, you know, get some core subjects in. I like to write. I've published a book. I write for a stamp magazine. I have done articles on religious art, and I have lectured a good bit about religious art. Done some exhibitions of art and like I said, I had one there at the Gay Center in last fall. And currently I'm still working. I work at the West Shore Farmer's Market, started my 16th year. So that's – that's basic background for me.

The second portion of my oral history is sort of get back to grandparents – had wonderful grandparents. Spent lots of time with them, that's my father's people. You know farm life, centered around farm life, the seasons, as were all my relatives. So I know where I am rooted. I know who my people are and what we come from. You know, friends still, you know, kid me, "Oh you're a country boy, you can't get the country out of a city man!" [Laughs] I know that's where I'm kind of rooted. Alright well let's talk then – that second portion is, you know, my growing up and development, and that would probably – that would start at 1st grade. Went to a country school for six years, you know, one room school house, outhouse for a toilet, you know. The great experiences of that kind of school, sledding at school and playing baseball in the parking lot, that kind of activity, but I also realized that it was probably my first experience, sexual experience, was in first grade. You know we're sitting there and I was right up front, and those were the desks where two people shared a desk, and the guy I was sitting with said he wanted to see my pecker and I said, "Sure!" and of course I got caught! [laughs] Got caught, but you know, that was it, no punishment. As far as I know they never told mom or dad or anybody like that, but that sort of was that experience.

Then from there I went to the High School in Millerstown [Pennsylvania]. The brand new high school, so I was the first class to come to this modern, brand-new high school building with the 7th to 12th grade. Traumatic experience. I'm a farm boy, a country boy, used to one teacher, you know, teaching two classes. Here I am: you change class, you had a different teacher for each subject, that was a traumatic experience. I hated to go. I hated to go to school. I did not like it. And first time introduced into organized sports. Did not like that. I do not like sports. [laughs] Never did! It's not in my being to play sports. There I was introduced to sports I had never heard of. In all my life had never heard of basketball. Somebody knew something about baseball, you had your local home team and my father would make me go to these horrible games, but I never heard of soccer. I never heard of basketball. I never hear of a jock strap! I remember asking some

guy, “What’s a jock strap?” Well, he didn’t know either! [laughing] Of course we did find out what they were.

And it was then in high school that I probably fell in love with my classmate. Probably the end of the 7th grade, definitely in 8th grade this developed into... Yeah, I was attracted to this man, hung around with him, hung around with his buddies. I was tolerated but that was, you know – that was kind of it. A loner, I’ve always been in a sense a loner. Still am. I am content being alone. So this man, who I really, you know, was greatly enthralled with, I remember I invited him home to stay overnight. And I mean, that’s what kids did those days! You asked your school mate to come home and spend the night at your home. And my mother gave me their bed and you know, we slept together in a double bed and I put my arm around him in bed. Never said “No,” never – but he did tell. He did tell the three guys he hung around with, because they came and asked me and said, “Did you do this?” and I said, “Yeah.” I mean [cat gets up on lap, shoos it away] Yeah, yeah, yeah. That was it, you know. This, you know – this attachment to this man went through 9th grade. I realized I wound up... You know, I was that taken with this man. Did his homework, you know he said, “Do this for me,” and of course I did. 10th grade in my high school you started then your career. You made your career choice, what classes were your core classes for what you were going to take. So I took agriculture! Can you believe it? Took agriculture. I was not going to be no farmer, simply because this other man did, he was a farm boy too. And so I did one year of that. You know, I’m glad I did it. I did learn tools that I can still use in my life. And come the end of 10th grade I knew, I just knew that this was it. I said nothing more. Nothing. He did nothing either. I no longer hung around with him. That was it. Certainly no, I was not attracted to dating. I never dated. I did have to go the prom and I asked a girl to go to the prom – horrible experience, horrible experience [laughs] having to do this, just so awkward at that.

When I look back and think on my history, you know, I never knew of another gay person, another gay man. You know, you read life stories of gay men who talk about having experiences as teenagers, messing around, the typical things that teenage boys do and experimenting with their sexuality. Never had that experience. Nor did I know of anybody doing it. So in that sense, this whole idea of sexuality was totally not part of my life. I certainly knew I was attracted to men. Without explaining that, trying to put it into any kind of perspective, you know, warped me in a sense, because always protecting. Always very protective of, you know, “There’s a faggot, there’s a queer.” You heard those stories in my community, and I only every knew of two men who the gossip said they’re queer. And that was a man who hung around at the movie theater, bowling alley, soda fountain, where I learned to go and hung out. And, you know, I knew my parents saying these things, “You know why he doesn’t have any kids, why his wife doesn’t like him”. But I never saw that man do anything inappropriate. The other gay man who lived in Millerstown, you know these stories were about him. Not nice stories, and I look now – look back on that man, how badly that man was treated. And sometimes I think of – that’s who I am. I walk home from work carrying my bags and I always remember, Mr. Unsbull was his name, walking on the street carrying his brief case and shopping bags with his shoulders down. You know, a sad man the community despised. So I was aware of that.

You know, it was usually my father who would talk about this, “Oh well you know, this and that.” Never from anybody else. I’ve often wondered these things about my father. You know, when you sit back and look at that. My father would come home from work, and I mean, I could hear these conversations with my mother and he had oft talked about... My father was a Greyhound Bus driver and he would talk about “The queers who hung around the bus stations.” And he’d say, “They were always hitting on him.” I thought, “Really? Why?” I mean, he would come home and talk about it, just sort of as a conversation. Never went anywhere, never went beyond that, but I’d hear these things coming out of his mouth. So I have often thought back on “Who is my father?” I can remember, we have a picture in our family album at home, my father was outside in the driveway in his jockey shorts and he had tied two papers towels, made breasts, and put a towel over them, and he is just standing there in a very proud pose. And I thought, “Why would my father have done that?”

KM: Interesting.

JB: Yeah, why did my father have done that? Why did he do that? I can remember when he did it [laughs]. You know, I’ve often thought about that. Who was my father? My father was a tough man. Father-son relationship, my father didn’t tell me nothing nor show me nothing nor teach me anything. He thought I should have known that. Like, it was my grandfather who did that. So I saw that family dynamics when my nephew came along, which was my father’s grandson, teaching him all these carpentry, my father – my nephew is an incredible carpenter. But my father taught him those skills, but didn’t do that to me. My father thought I should know how to get into a car and know how to drive. That was... that’s the way he operated.

KM: Interesting.

JB: So I did not in a sense really like my father. Not like my father. Living in Perry County, again how I felt different, an outsider. It’s a hunting culture. Every man – every male is expected to be a hunter and brag about your 6-point buck or you killed 10 rabbits or shot so many pheasants. And it is still that culture. I go home and that’s what I hear talking and I – that was never a part of my life. I wanted nothing to do with that. My father did make me go hunting with him, but I was his hound. He would see a squirrel in a tree and he’d say, “Go around that side so that the squirrel comes around to this side so I can shoot it.”

KM: Interesting.

JB: But wouldn’t give me the gun or to do it. So I hated...I really despised that and hated my father for doing that to me. So, that’s that background.

Well, I talked about hanging around this movie theater, bowling alley, pool hall, soda fountain... Thank god it was my sister who encouraged me to get out of the house. I was already working, had a car, I had my own money. You know, I sat at home Saturday night. So when my sister had a boyfriend and she said, “You need to go to the movies. You need to go downstairs and have a coke.” So, thank god, my sister did that for me. And so, yeah, I suddenly fell into having peers, both men and women. Go to a movie, go bowling, hung around... Those were the night times of drive-in theaters, all night drive-ins, you know. And that was my – the next phase of my life as a

20 year-old, the whole years of my 20s. So there at that highway, that hang out I got to know three brothers. And of course, you know, I fell in love with each brother in their turn [laughs]. The eldest who was a little bit younger than me, we hung around and – really the first time really that I had male friends. Invited me to their home, asked to me do things with them. They were farm boys. “Hey, we’re baling hay today. Did you want to come up and help us? Be a part of it.” Things like that. I enjoyed that. Ultimately became the bus man for the oldest of the three brothers. We did a lot of double dating. I did do dating. I did not enjoy it. Very awkward as I have often heard. So I’d sooner been in the front seat or in the back seat with my buddy... The front seat with my date [laughing] especially if I was doing the driving. So he got married and left, but then I became attached with the next two brothers, who were twins. So that – you know, I was still a part of those three brothers. I did a lot of good hunting trips with them. Of course, I can remember coming home and telling my parents, telling my grandparents, “Hey, I’m going up to Tioga County for a weekend and we’re going turkey hunting!” Everybody was incredibly happy. You know, I bought a hunting vest. [laughs] I bought... Of course, I had to get a license to go. My family was absolutely pleased. I can remember my grandfather and grandmother were so happy that I was doing this. I was going because I was going with these three brothers, you know. And I did it. I certainly know about hunting, never killed nothing, never shot a gun [laughing].

So it was the third of the brothers who was still left at home, and that was the man I fell in love with. The first man I ever had any tenderness – being held, exploring sexuality, being fondled. No kissing, nothing like that. That’s what went on until he finally said, “I don’t like it.” I knew he was dating at that time and going with a girl. And so that was the end of that, at least that type of activity between us. And again I was his best man for his wedding. And it was... Yeah... That day. ‘Brokeback Mountain’, I suppose when that film came out... That was me. That was me. I fell in love with a blonde-headed farm boy and had to let him go, you know. I saw him once after he was married, invited me to his – where he was living. That was the last I ever saw him. But I do have, get a Christmas card every year from him. In fact, I just had it here the other day. He had a stroke. That was the end of – that was that portion of my life.

I became attached to another man at this hangout where everybody from Perry County hung out. Again it was that being enthralled, being almost – when I look back, I was compulsive. I did initiating. “Do you wanna go to a movie? Do you wanna go bowling? Do you wanna go get a dish of ice-cream?” He was a part of a gang of both men and women that I hung around with. That’s all that ever became. The summer of 1970 is going to be my turning point in my life. We had done an all night movie, drive-in theater – you know, six films. [laughing] Until the dawn comes and the movie’s over. And I said rather than he drive – he lived clear at the end of Perry County, I said, “Sleep over at my house.” And he did. And I said, “Get in my bed.” He did. That was, you know. And my father in the morning raised hell. I got up that morning, it was Memorial Day, 1970. I got up in the morning, this guy left, “See you. Have a good day.” The house was empty. There was not a soul there. I didn’t think nothing of it. My father comes storming in the house. “I want you out of this house! What you did even that dog won’t do.” I thought, “What’s wrong?” I thought, “I didn’t do nothing.” “If that man was here, I’d break his fucking neck! “I

want you out of the house.” My mother wasn’t there. My sister wasn’t there. I did what he said. I packed my bags. “What am I going to do?”

I called a co-worker, a female co-worker who was very good friends with Dotty – wherever you are, you saved my life. She said, “Come on down, stay with me. We’ll talk about it.” So that was change – totally radical change in my life. She lived here in New Cumberland [Pennsylvania]. I stayed with her and I said, “Now what I am going to do?” And she said well, “You gotta find a place to live. I have a job, gotta go to work on Monday morning, you know. Stay with me until you get set up.” Well I never – I’m alone. I have no place to live. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I certainly was not prepared yet to come and live in the city. I’m a country boy. Well I went back up home for the day to where my grandmother lived, and of course my father had already told my grandmother. She was upset and totally foreign to her what he was saying. My father told other people. Yeah, he told other people too.

KM: Wow.

JB: So through the grapevine, somehow I found an apartment. I lived – I found a one room apartment in New Bloomfield [Pennsylvania], on the second floor. One room. I drove back and forth until I could find a carpool from New Bloomfield. And so, I set up my life there that summer, 1970. ‘Cause then September I was going to Europe with this man’s twin brother! [laughs] He was going to Europe with another man who had come into our lives, who in a sense took me away from him, is the way I look back at that. I was not a happy camper. I had no idea what was going on. No understanding of any of this. So of course his twin brother wasn’t going to let his other twin brother get one up on him and he said, “I’m going to Europe.” And of course asked me to go with him. So I did. We went to Europe for 6 weeks. From September until November the first. We went to Europe. So I knew when I was coming back I was still going to remain living in New Bloomfield. I still couldn’t see myself leaving Perry County. I mean this man still lived in Perry County, I was not ready to break that off. So I found half a house, I could afford a half a house in New Bloomfield. So I lived in New Bloomfield for the next – till 1972. And 1972 becomes another watershed in my life.

I met another – an older man at work, who somehow I knew was another man who loved men. I don’t know – somehow, we got hooked up and produced something. I really don’t know remember how that happened. And I knew where I fit in, I said, “Here’s how I feel. Here is who I am.” So in 1972 was of course hurricane Agnes.

KM: I remember.

JB: 1972 was also the summer I converted to Roman Catholicism. The little parish church in New Bloomfield is where I did my catechism and acceptance of Roman Catholicism as my faith. June of 1972 somehow – I don’t know how, I got to know another man at work. Closer to my age, probably my same age. And we just started chatting and I don’t know how I knew these things, but he said or I asked him where gay bars were. You know I heard the rumors, you know you heard the stories, “Oh there’s the faggot bar over there. On this street,” or something. So I knew these things existed and he said, “Well when you’re ready to go to a gay bar, I’ll take you.” So he did. I finally said, I think it was after Agnes, must have been in July, I said, “Alright

Jimmy, I'm ready to do this." [laughs] I said, "I don't want to do it in Harrisburg. I can't do it in Harrisburg. I'm afraid to walk into that 'gay' bar." He said, "Alright, we will go to Lancaster, to Tally-Ho." So we did. First time I ever went to a bar full of men who love other men. I said, "I'm at home." [laughs] I knew where I fit in. And of course the first sexual experience, that some silly queen that night who sure, I went home with. So I went back and forth that summer to Lancaster 'cause I – this man who I met in the bar did become a friend. He certainly told me about life. You know, a silly queen, who liked to dress up in drag, and never saw him do that though. I saw pictures, but I never saw that man do that. You know, he really introduced me to gay – to gay men. So I went back and forth to Lancaster, probably every weekend. I got to know other men in Lancaster. I would think that probably that winter was the first time I went to gay bar in Harrisburg. I was tired of driving back and forth to Lancaster, you know. In those days, there was no super highway. We didn't have 283 [laughs] you went down to Steelton.

KM: 30. Or 230.

JB: [nods] You went down to Steelton, you went down to... E-town is where you could pick it up. So I started going to the – what was it called? Second Street, totally blank. Rose Rouge, I think? I'm not pronouncing it right. But that's where I started to go. So of course I was there, I couldn't wait until Friday and Saturday night. And you know I did – went back and forth there every weekend. Got to know a couple other men who... We did things. We went to Washington DC, we always heard Atlantic City was a hot place to go. We went to Atlantic City and discovered it wasn't so hot [laughs]. Those were the days that Atlantic City was a dump. You know, run down hotels and I said, "Nah, this is nothing we want to do." We never went back. So I went back and forth to Tally-Ho, back and forth to the bar in Harrisburg and there was the first time I met – first man I ever fell in love with as a gay man. Of course, he lived in Lancaster. So for the next two, three years... Either Lancaster or he came here. We went back and forth. And finally – I still lived in Perry County, still lived in the half of house in New Bloomfield and I said, "It's time to leave."

I worked in Harrisburg so that meant – you know, you had an hour on the road each way, come home, pack my bags, gather up the cats, drive to Lancaster for the weekend. Another hour and a half drive. And have to be in Perry County to go to work and get my carpool. So we had enough of that and I said, "Alright. I'm moving to Harrisburg." So it... Looked for an apartment in Harrisburg, though I wanted to look for – suited my needs. Have pets? Would they take you for a pet? No, no, no, you got pets, can't have you. So I did find a place in midtown in Harrisburg on Green Street. Very nice apartment. So there I settled. There I settled. Now I lived in Harrisburg. Access to go to the bars in the middle of the week, go every night if we wanted to. Yeah, I slept around. Yeah, I fell into that. You know, I'm 34. It's the height of male sexuality, maturity. Other men who were willing to jump in bed? Yeah, I did that. The man I was dating, his name was David Moon, a wonderful man. The man taught me a lot. I mean he really was very loving and caring. I'm a county boy. I know nothing about having a nice house, dressing nice, having a nice meal, learning how to cook. He taught me those things. He was an art teacher, showed me how to do things in art that I was only trying to do. Our relationship lasted at least three years until he said to me one day, "It's over." I was devastated. I knew it was over. Of course he was

the one who had the strength to say it's over, I didn't. Though however, I did learn later on, I was overthrown because he was ultimately seeing an older man who was a doctor, which I never knew. Never knew until some years later. Someone told me, "That's why David left you." So I never knew that. He never was honest enough to say to me, you know, "I'm in love with somebody else," but he never told me that – just said, "It's over." Never saw him again. So I was rather devastated.

Alright so I am now living in Harrisburg. I saw in one of the local rags a man by the name of Jerry Brennan, who was having a conscious- raising session and this was the address. And so I called the number and became a part of that. That man, Jerry Brennan, I am going to talk quite a bit about Jerry Brennan – Oh, I'm sure you've heard that name many times. I became a part of that conscious-raising group. Jerry Brennan was very – had great insight. Very much believed in gay rights. This is '74, '75 – was really a fighter for gay rights. Became a part of that core group of men who formed around him. Michael, Aaron, Paul Foltz, at least those three names of men who are still very active in Harrisburg. In fact, Paul Foltz just had the costume design at the gay center.

KM: Oh yeah, I saw that.

JB: That was Paul.

KM: Oh, wow.

JB: These were the types of men who were in this conscious-raising group who believed in gay rights who were also faithful Christians. Roman Catholic. Involved in the church. I can remember we went to Penn State – again, Penn State gay life was being organized. Go there, how to organize and fight effectively. Talk to your representatives, talk to your mayor, talk to your senator, write letters, and how to argue for gay rights, you know. Really this is grassroots, this is the gay movement, grassroots, and it's the ordinary man and woman who is taking this fight. And doing it the way we do in America – you write letters, you go visit your senator. This is what we did. This is also the days that Dignity, the Roman Catholic gay organization, was beginning. We went back and forth to Philadelphia. Philadelphia already had a gay organization of Dignity. So we went to that branch to see how you start one. How do you get priests to say mass? How do you get a mailing list started? Who do you find out – who other gay men and women who were Roman Catholic? We went back and forth with them at the University of Pennsylvania. This was the days of the beginning of the gay movement. Of course colleges were giving room for that, providing this space for that to happen. So we did get a Dignity organization started here in Harrisburg. The gay Dignity national office was already formed. They gave you seed money, they gave you help how to get organized, and I was with Dignity from the start. It became my life, and Dignity is who formed me who I am, you know.

Jerry Brennan was also a part of a team of men who founded the Gay Switchboard. And that was set up to provide hands-on telephone, anonymous hands-on telephone counseling. "I'm having problems, I've been thrown out of my house, where do I find gay bars?" This type of thing, and so I was a part of that organization. You took a turn at manning the phones and those days it was 7 to 9, five days a week. You took your turn, you volunteered for a whole evening. When it

began, it began on Penn Street in an empty room in somebody's house. And the organization of course grew, became very well known in the Harrisburg area, and ultimately they wound up having a room at the YWCA there on Market Street. When they – when they set up that headquarters, we rented a room from them. You know, the Gay Switchboard was also a very important part of my life. We had fundraisers, we had parties, and we did a lot of on-hands engagement with the community. One of the major events in the life of Dignity and of the Gay Switchboard was we provided the training for Contact, which is that national help organization. So we always provided... When they had a new team of volunteers that was coming on, they got very intensive training. So, it was a gay community that provided the training for dealing with homosexuality. Contact always said to us, "It was one of their best training sessions." And it made or broke their new team of volunteers. If they couldn't handle dealing with gay issues, then they couldn't be a volunteer dealing with any other crisis. And so I was a part of that team that sat on the panel talking about ourselves, talking about gay issues. So again, Switchboard and Dignity really helped me develop into a full human being – understand who people are. No one understands about human sexuality and all its diversities.

I also became a part of a team who did a lot of public speaking and that there, that's 70s up into the early 80s. There was a professor at Shippensburg University who taught a class on human sexuality. So he would always invite at least a dozen gay men to come to Shippensburg and talk to this class of – I think they were seniors – about sexuality. That was a lot of fun. A lot of fun of doing that, talking about our experiences. This professor usually begun by showing a film of two guys picking each up and spending time in bed. I mean that shocked a lot of students. They only knew about gay life in the negative side. "Everybody's dressed in drag, everybody's a screaming queen." Many gay men in that class never had seen another guy sitting on stage in jeans and a shirt that looked just like them. They did not know how to handle that. I remember a black man in the class once... Only knew drag queens in a black community and he figured that's what gay men were. He couldn't handle a bunch of guys sitting on stage just like him, who looked just like any other young man on the street. He did not know what to do with that. So I was there. They were great times. That's really that whole great period of forming who I was.

This of course is Harrisburg. Jerry Brennan, of course within Dignity, again Dignity became the forefront here in Harrisburg area fighting for rights. You know, we talked to our senators. We talked to our mayor. I was a part of a group of men and women who went to City Hall when they enacted the civil rights for the protection of sexual minorities and fair housing – as a part of that group who were in that audience that night in City Hall.

KM: When was that?

JB: Had to have been the Reed administration – I don't know the date. I remember being in the audience that night. What did I want to say... Blanked all of a sudden... Well, to talk about Dignity. Dignity was very much a part of my life say from '75 until to really its demise here, about '91, '92. I always served on the Dignity board. I was secretary, probably treasurer. I really fell into the liturgical life. It became my job to ask all the Roman Catholic priests in the area, who we knew were sympathetic to religious life, sympathetic to other – to gay men and women, being a part of the Roman Catholic church. And so it was my job to contact these priests to come

say mass. We did that once a month. We had a permanent home at the Friend's Meeting House on 6th street – that's where we finally had our permanent home. So we had – the First Sunday of every month – we had mass. Father Sotti was our priest, or else you had a guest priest. We always had potluck and we always had an educational, or some type of a program. We'd watch a film, we'd have a speaker, or somebody in our group did a workshop. Self-awareness, self... Again, to be very positive. We had an ex-nun who became a part of our group and she did many of those conscious-raising workshops. I can remember her having a program about, "You're like any other American." "Look at the magnets that are hanging on your kitchen refrigerator, with your calendar and with the notes and with your shopping list." She did that to say that you're no different than anybody else. You know, that self-hatred for each other, the hatred for other gay men and women that is was rampant in the gay – you hated the people you loved. And you know, that destroys. That self-loathing hatred of the men you love is really destructive. No wonder we could never get our love life off the ground. The man you love, you also hate.

KM: Interesting.

JB: So Sister Kathleen was really a great person who wanted us to get rid of this and look at the positive side of who we are as men and women, who love other members of our sex. She was a wonderful person who did that. So that's why I say Dignity was really powerful in forming me, forming us men and women as to who we were.

KM: You said that they disbanded or went away? What happened?

JB: This is the – this is the 1990s. Oh, what happened? I changed. We'll talk about that – about that side also. Gonna go back more with Dignity. One of the things that... Jerry Brennan was an incredible man and his foresight and having to develop a... He was very much into having a gay, solid gay community living in our own ghetto. You know, we have gay friends, we do everything with gay men and women, and that did happen. I then, by that time, had bought a house on Penn Street in Harrisburg, midtown. So I got my own home, so I finally had my own home. I no longer rented. Jerry Brennan was also very instrumental in getting gay volleyball started, 'cause he knew gay men, gay women hate sports because we know how we've been treated in the straight world. And I was very instrumental in a part of that. I became – I organized that. We played every Tuesday night, 7 to 9, at the PAL Building, which was the Police Athletic League. They're on Third street. We played – so I always had to make sure we had the building for ourselves that night, had to pay the attendant, we took up a donation for everyone who played – you threw a buck into the pot – and I helped organize our team. So I did that for 10 years. It was a solid institution, a part of gay life in Harrisburg. Again, Switchboard knew about this, and you know, gay men and gay women who – new to Harrisburg, new to this type of life, "How can I meet other men and women?" It was co-ed. Come to play volleyball, you know, get to know other gay people outside bar life. Again Jerry Brennan was very much into saying, "Life does not exist around the bars." I never – I was never a bar person. I like a beer, but I'm not into smoke, noise, the life of living at a bar. Never a part of me, I didn't like that. He was very much into that too, this other aspect of gay life. So I was involved in the gay volleyball, and I know that in the archives that the gay center has established, there are things there from that.

KM: Great.

JB: I have lots of pictures which I have not given yet to the history project. When it's time to let them go, they'll go.

KM: Okay. But you're keeping them for them.

JB: For the time being, for some of the reasons we have talked about.

KM: Sure.

JB: So I was very much a part of that, that whole scene. Something I sort of forgot about – talking about myself as a teenager, the – all the years of hanging around the center up home in Perry County. Going to the movies, all night movies with this bunch of men and women, I never knew another person who was ever gay. Never heard any stories. Not in my radar. I've often have started to think about that – Never. In the military for six years, never knew of another gay man. Never met another one. Never heard anybody say to me, “Oh you know, he's a cock sucker.” Never heard that. Now I'm sometimes astonished. 30 years of my life, never met another, another gay person. I sort of now look back and think, “That's incredulous.” I mean you hear stories, you know, as I've said, you know, men in the military, men experimenting with sex with other guys. Never happened to me, nor did I ever know anybody who invited me to participate [laughs]. You know, yeah, I heard – you heard this gossip, “Oh you know, there's a queer bar, so and so in Harrisburg.” That was it. I knew a man who was in my carpool who went back and forth, you know, we drove. I lived at home. You carpooled in those days. Six people in a little car. And I always can remember one guy in that car once in a while would say, “You know those faggots hang out in Pomeroy's and if you go down the stairs to go to the basement Pomeroy's and pull the earlobe, that's the signal that you're a gay man.” I used to say, “What? And how do you know that?”

KM: Interesting question.

JB: “How do you know that?” I mean, I would never ask him about it, but I'd say, “How do you know that?” I don't know that [laughs]. I do know after I came to Harrisburg and was working for the state, I do remember once walking downtown on my lunch hour and some man approached me in the Five and Dime, and said, “When I get back to the bathroom, damn.” I was scared shitless. I never had such a thing happen to me. I didn't know what to do. I was very frightened. I remember I came back to work, obviously very shaken, and I said something to one of my co-workers who was my age. I told her what happened. All that she said was, “Well were you shaking your ass at him? Did you wiggle your buns?” What are you talking about? I mean that was it. That was it. Used to see this man on the streets. I hated that man. He tried to get near me and finally I pushed him one day and said, “You get away from me.” And he never bothered – never got near me again. What a horrible experience.

KM: Yeah, that's creepy.

JB: Very creepy, yeah. So that's – again, that's that dark side that I knew existed, and I said, "I'm not like that am I? Am I that type of man? Is that what I want to do?" That was not on my radar. [laughs] I'm sort of stuck here, Kathryn.

KM: That's okay, take your time.

JB: I'm sort of stuck here. I suppose I'll talk a little about my love life. I did talk about meeting this man from Lancaster who was the reason I ultimately came to Harrisburg to live. You know, simply to make back and forth with our lives easier. And of course our – that love affair ended. I mean, I certainly, you know, had lots of affairs with men. You know, never nothing permanent. Nothing really ever went beyond, you know, a tumble in the hay. Then we see each other a couple of times but it never developed beyond that. Certainly gave my heart to a lot of men, [laughs] but I always kept my head about it and realized, "No, there's nothing there." We had a tumble in the bed and it was nothing beyond that. Very few of those encounters ever developed much beyond that. However a couple men that I did have affair with, a tumble in the hay with did develop into very good friends, and still have them to this day. But that's rather few and far between – [cat jumps onto his lap] come on dear.

KM: Oh, I can hear him purring in the microphone, that's great!

JB: Yes, as soon as you pick him up, you got to purr. Met some wonderful men, some sadly I have – are gone. Died. Never be replaced, can never replace that. You know it takes 30, 40 years to develop into a friendship that's going to last, and at this stage of my life, that's not going to happen. You know, at 73, I don't have another 40 years, you know, so. I know that's reality. I'm stuck, Kathryn. [laughs]

KM: So okay, let me ask you a question. I was looking at our list – what changes have you seen in – with regard to LGTB rights and/or social life in your lifetime?

JB: Yeah that was something I had on my list to do and was blank. I've seen a lot of changes. I mean, I've seen from the grass roots. You know, I can't remember Stonewall. I don't remember – even know of that happening. Of course I know historically it happened, but I don't know nothing about that. I know from the days of – you could lose your job, you can lose your apartment, you can be arrested, and of course that is the situation yet in Pennsylvania. We have never been able to get that law passed. We're stuck. You know, we've talked about that to gay center. Yes, that bill is pending, but it's not going to be done nothing with the decision. The rise of acceptance of gay life, certainly those – that changes. To have the gay center, that's changed. That would have never have happened in 1972. And yet, I still think nothing has changed. As I said to you, getting ready and getting ready to do this program, I still want to protect myself. I still want to protect the people who I know. Those people who do not know my sexuality and who I don't want to know. My neighbor – my neighbor comes back and forth. I make sure when I see him at the door, I cover up the gay news. He does not need to know that. My parish priest does not need to know that. So I still have to de-sex my house, my house when someone comes. My godsons who I have, we have never discussed this. De-sex the house when I know they are coming. [laughs] So, in that situation, in that sense, it has not changed. It has not changed.

You know, I hear people today say, “Oh, I think gay people today are very different.” Young people growing up, I think, are vastly different. When I go to the center and if there are younger people there, they have no idea what our life was like in the 70s and 80s, even in the 90s. It’s beyond them. And yet I think that it still must be very tough for some gay man and woman living in rural area, farm people in an evangelical, Protestant religious background. I’m sure it’s still rough. It’s not easy. And so, in that sense, I see it has not changed. You know, the Gary, the permission to marry, vast change. Who would have ever thought of that in 1972? [laughs] Who would have ever have expected you could go to the courthouse and get married? [laughs]

KM: That’s pretty awesome! [laughs]

JB: Ah, yeah. We talk about that at the center. I have become a part of the gay book club, which is, oh, what a god send to have that. Somebody, in Harrisburg I think, connected with the center and started that. So I’ve been involved in that for four years. What a god send. I love to read. Love talking about gay life, that is now at this point in my life really is my extent with... I don’t go to bars. I’ve gone out a couple of times but I’m past that. [laughs] I’m past that. I came here to live in Camp Hill in 1972. So I no longer lived in a sense a “gay neighborhood.” In fact many of the people that I do know who lived there have all left.

KM: You said 1972 you came to live in Camp Hill?

JB: No, I came in ’92, sorry, thank you. Yes, I came here in ’92. I bought this house and I moved over here. Until life changed then. Of course that was sort of the end of my contact with Dignity. As I had said in the very beginning, I had made that change to Russian Orthodoxy I think ’92. My godfather is gay, lives with his partner. And so, that in a sense is my religious life and also my community. Very important part of my life. Of course, it excludes the sexuality, you know again that’s that protection cover up. Don’t talk about it. It’s not talked about. So there’s that – that side of how life has changed.

KM: Well. We’ve been – see –

JB: I do have some more things that I know I definitely want to talk about.

KM: You’ve been talking for one hour and four minutes.

JB: Oh really? I did it in an hour?

KM: Yeah! So – yep –

JB: I do want to talk about a couple of other things, if you’ve got time.

KM: Yeah, sure! I do.

JB: I said I would tell some stories. I think I want to go back and really say “thank you” to the people who gave me my life, you know. School teachers: 7th grade history teacher Mr. Dwyer, wherever you are, thank you. That man, 7th grade – I was 12 years old, introduced me to ancient history. A great teacher. Well of course once I discovered that, that became my life passion ever since. Greek, Roman, Medieval history. I’m a Byzantine nut now, it’s my great passion,

Byzantine history, religious history. And it was Mr. Dwyer that got that interest and who really encouraged me in it. Another teacher who was in my – that I had was Mrs. Wolf, wherever she is. Taught English and literature and introduced me to good reading and how to read books. You see my house. Of course I belong to a book club! She taught me how to do a book review, how to digest it [laughs]. How to talk about the characters, the plot, what was the author trying to talk about, what's the author telling you. It was her who did that. And it was – and her – and she took me under her wing too. Thank god in my school every class I was in, our teachers said, "You will read one book per semester and you will give an oral or written report." So of course I become an avid reader. [Someone knocks on the door] Oh...oh, who would...?

KM: Alright, I'll push pause.

JB: Oh, do you want – is it easier for you to go to the door?

KM: Sure. I'll push stop.

[END OF VIDEO ONE]

JB: Okay?

KM: We are rolling again!

JB: Okay.

KM: Now I'm going to stand for a little while.

JB: Alright, sure. So Mrs. Wolf introduced me to reading and reading literature and how to read novels. So when I was in high school, I read a series of books by Rosemary Sutcliff, and she wrote a series of books about Roman soldiers in Roman Britain.

KM: Do you want to hold those up into the camera if you want us to see them?

JB: Right. She wrote three books. [shows the books *The Eagle*, *The Silver Branch*, *The Lantern Bearers*. (The Roman Brittan Trilogy)]

KM: A little higher.

JB: In fact, one was made into a great movie a couple years ago. Based on the first of her trilogy. So these Roman soldiers – two Roman soldiers, they were always officers in the Roman military, and of course they become fast friends very quick. And I always used to say to myself, "What is Rosemary Sutcliff really trying to tell us without telling us anything?" So I left my imagination with that – play. So along comes, I'm now – this is in the early 60s, I of course, working, I have my own money so I can buy books. So that is the era of – where are they at, where are they at – that is the era of the books of Mary Renault. Her whole series of – set in ancient Greece and I read *The King Must Die*, *The Last of the Wine*, *The Bowl from the Sea*, and *The Mask of Apollo*. I knew what Mary Rose – I knew what Mary Renault was writing about. She's writing about men who like and love other men. This is the 60s. So she couched this and I now know that she could get away with this without being censored because she has it set in Ancient Greece. I loved her novels. I remember being in Dignity and in Dignity we were all, you know, both men and

women, we were great book readers. And we'd get to talking and saying, "You read Mary Renault!?! Well, every guy read Mary Renault and knew what she was writing about!" They knew what she was saying, and we always used to say, "Who is Mary Renault? Is this a man who's using a women's name?" Well, we never knew. So that I'm here in a book club that comes under the auspices of the gay center, I brought up Mary Renault, and we read two of her novels. I did discover Mary Renault was a lesbian, had a partner. She wrote some of the early lesbian novels that got published and there was an article that was sent to me by a very dear friend, who knows who I am, and there was an article that appeared in the *New Yorker* in 2013, and it's called *The American Boy*. That's also a man, who is now a writer, who read Mary Renault and he knew what she was writing about! And so finally here, and I think the reason then that he finally wrote *The American Boy*, he went – Mary Renault ultimately moved to South Africa with her life partner, and lived the remainder of her life in South Africa. So this man somehow got intact – in contact with people in South Africa. Because Mary Renault has now died, he went back, I think he visited – got to meet her life partner, who was still alive, now a very old women – got to meet people who knew Mary Renault, actually sat in her house where she wrote these stories.

KM: Wow.

JB: What a women who – what a great women. Made my life too. I wanted to talk about, again I'm talking about people who have made my life. A man who made my life was named Walter Lear. I met Walter Lear either in 1975 or in 1976. Walter Lear, I knew the name because I was working now for the Department of Health, I knew the name Dr. Lear because he was the regional health commissioner, ultimately my top boss. And somehow through the grapevine, I knew that there was going to be an organization or an organizational meeting of gay state workers. They were going to have a meeting, a social hour, and of course a dance. There was always a dance [laughs]. There was Walter Lear. I mean he was a great advocate for gay rights. Came out – he came out in – he was the commissioner for the state, he was also the commissioner for the health department and the City of Philadelphia. And he publically came out by appearing on the cover of the *Philadelphia Gay News*. It's the first openly government official who's a gay man.

KM: Wow

JB: So Walter was at this fundraiser organizational dance. Walter Lear asked me to dance with him, because he recognized my face at the Department of Health, you know, saw me in the office. He asked me to dance and the rest is history. [laughs] We fell. In a sense – fell in love. I, you know – he put a proposition to me, "Would you want to be involved in my life? I have a partner." He's saying, Walter is saying, "I have a partner. I have a house in Philadelphia. Do you want to be involved in my life? Do you want to do things with me? My partner does not like to travel, does not like to be involved in politics. Do you want to be a part of my life and go with me?" I said, "Of course!" [laughs]

KM: Sure! [laughs]

JB: Of course! He said, "We are never going to live together, it's not going to be this kind of an affair." That was fine with me. So Walter Lear was, because he – Dr. Lear, he has a doctorate in

health care, health politics, health organization, health administration. So Walter Lear was involved in the – come on here [looks through notes] – American Public Health Association. That's one of the premier medical profession, nurses, doctors, psychologists, all that. Had their annual conference every year. He asked me to go with him. Because he said to me, if I want to be involved in his life, "I want you there at this conference to be at my side."

KM: Sweet.

JB: You know, "I want someone special to be with me," and would I be that person?

KM: Nice.

JB: So I did. And there I got introduced, I'm already working the Department of Health. There I got introduced in health care for the average man and woman, and what that involved. What that involves in politics, how you advocate for health care. Walter was one of the founders of the gay caucus, he was the founder of the gay caucus of the American Public Health Association. I met incredible people – people who are physicians, people who are nurses, people who are psychologists, people who are surgeons, and who are gay, and who are fighting for gay rights and fighting for health. This is what this man introduced me, to me. I found all my pictures from some of those conferences. So I went with – someone might say, "You're a kept boy." Yeah, I was. I mean, he paid for it. It was, "Here's your ticket, you join me in Miami. Here's your ticket, you join me in Chicago, you join me in San Francisco. I'll meet you in the airport, you come when you can get off work. I'll be there." I did.

KM: I mean, wow. Sounds great.

JB: But what that man gave me? I was often in his home. He lived in Philadelphia. Huge home. Met his life partner. Welcomed with open arms. And I think that was the astonishing thing of Walter, that man's capacity to love people with no strings attached. He – I don't think that man had a jealous bone in his body. I mean, there I came to his house, and in those days we were still young men, in a sense. Walter was 20 years older than me. I slept in his bed, there, in his house, and his partner is in the other bed. No questions asked. No jealous bone, no... You know, I think that is what that man taught me: the capacity to love people with no strings attached. And to enjoy each other, enjoy each other sexually, with no strings attached. [laughs] What that man taught me!

KM: That's amazing.

JB: A man who loved art. Took me to my first opera. I went to the New York Opera and we went to see Boris Godunov.

KM: Wow.

JB: You know, he introduced me to that. Loved art. Collected art. Expensive art, too. That was the kind of man he was, and I knew Walter until he died in 2010. He was well-known, very famous in Philadelphia because fighting for the health for the poor, health for minorities, collected a fabulous library of health history. So I was in – I went to his celebration, I think of his 85th birthday, and he had already started this institute of – what did he call it – institute, institute

of – in his own house he collected, because he had lived in this huge house, and he had very rare specimens of books, material objects, relating to health care in America. I always remember he had that little button that you wore during the Vietnam War era, “War is not healthy for human beings,” or something like that. [laughs] So that man, and very few people knew that I was with Walter. He’d say, “Come down for the weekend.” You know, I packed up, went down, came back in time to go to work and rode AMTRAK, [laughs] those rickety wooden seats, rocking and rolling back and forth on that 10 o’clock train back to Harrisburg. So I did that until Walter died. 2010. What a man in my life. And you see, I’m imitating with these godsons I have. I’m going to love them and be the best godfather I can have, and help these young men – Well, one of them is not very young – he’s in his fifties – develop and grow and be a part of their lives and be a part of my life. He taught me how to do that.

KM: That’s awesome.

Another person that I really wanted to talk about is in the 60s when I started coming to Harrisburg, there was a book called the Penn Bookstore. It was on South Third Street. It was one of the best bookshops in the Harrisburg area. And I knew in the back corner, where the man kept – he also sold magazines, and he had some of the earliest gay newspapers that were available in this county. Most of that stuff was prohibited, but he made sure he got them. I knew he had them back there in the corner, he also had in that area you bought those male physiques, it’s the best piece of erotica, and that’s how I of course could get because of course it was for health and physique, you know. And so I knew he had them back there and of course I went back there and looked at them, very embarrassed to be caught doing that. Guilty. Well when talking with Jerry Brennan one time, Jerry Brennan said, “Oh! You went to Penn Bookstore also?” I said, “Yes, I did,” and he said, “You know what was back in the corner?” I said, “Well, of course,” and he said, “Well I was back there too, did we ever meet?” [laughs] But why I’m telling you this story is the owner of the Penn Bookstore was a Jewish man and he had said to Jerry Brennan, “I know that there are men like you. That’s why I have those magazines and books back there, they’re for you.” And now when I think back on that, what a loving man! What a caring man. What an enlightened man, way ahead of his time. But he had that stuff there. He had that stuff there for us to look at. I did find a bookmark from Penn Bookstore, [laughs] so that’s in the gay archives.

Another – I talked about Mary Renault – another person who was very prominent in my life was Father Wallace Soddy. He became involved in Dignity probably from the very beginning, when it got formed. When Jerry Brennan formed it, we got a chapter and so you needed of course a priest to say mass, because Dignity was the core of celebrating the Roman Catholic mass. The religious aspects of that, you know, being dedicated to Jesus Christ, living your life as a Christian. So, Father Soddy at that time was also a parish priest in Harrisburg area, and he was involved – because he came and said mass, he was a part of that gay conscious-raising, did workshops, you know, trying to reconciling your sexuality as a gay man, gay woman with your Christianity. That’s also the era of Father John McNeal who was a Jesuit. You know, the warriors of Christ. And he really fought for gay rights. Published those books, you know, about – oh, what was his major book – *The Homosexual and the Church*. Because in that era of fighting for gay rights it was also fight the bigotry in Christianity, the bigotry in all churches. Start to look

at the New Testament, the Old Testament. What is it really talking about? And discover that it's not talking about what it tells us, what preachers and priests are telling you. This is not what it really says. So Father Soddy had eye problems, really was declared legally blind. And so – he wore thick glasses, but he read like this [holds a piece of paper right up to eyes] and he could read. So Father Soddy retired as a parish priest, bought a house in midtown where all of us gay men live, and became really full time involved with Dignity. If I couldn't get a priest to be our guest, Father Soddy filled in. So Father Soddy is retired as a full-time priest, he takes up the “*podvig*” – I'm using the Slavonic term for your spiritual, your spiritual aestheticism. This – how you're going to live your life as a Christian. This aestheticism and he became the Diocese of Harrisburg at St. Patrick's. He became their father confessor, that's all he did, was hear confessions at St. Patrick's. What a burden to take, and people knew he was a loving, gentle priest. You want to hear – give a confession? You got an appointment with Father Soddy. I've heard many a person say that Father Soddy was a saint. Though he bought his house there in Midtown only a block from me. So he's now retired. So now he can really work in the gay community. He also did have permission from the diocesan bishop, to take this ministry of working with gay men and women, his house was open to anybody. You had problems with who you were as a man or women? We'd say call Father Soddy, go have an appointment, talk to him in his house, in his living room. That's what he did. He took a number of gay men who were dying of AIDS, took them to live in his house until they died. I mean, he put himself at great risk by doing that. And what a man he was again knowing how to love other people with no strings attached. He did that until then he sold his house – oh, I forget how old he was, in his 80s. He had a little apartment there in Harrisburg and there's where he died. I was one of his pall bearers. Yeah, he died. Father Soddy died January the 7th, 2006. A bitter cold day for his funeral, ground was frozen, crusted with snow. [tearing up] But we carried his coffin.

I think one other person, Kathryn, that I want to talk about is Ron Fink. Ron Fink had the Bare Wall, there on Green Street, a block off of Forester. Ron Fink was also a groundbreaker. He set up this little shop in his house on the first floor, he lived upstairs. I probably got to know Ron Fink when I was going with my boyfriend from Lancaster. Probably just walking down the street one day. You know, David would be here for the weekend, we'd go for a walk and I think that's how we discovered Ron Fink and his Bare Wall. That's what he called his shop. And of course, Ron Fink was absolutely friendly man, “Hi guys! How are you?” Probably introduced himself, invited us into his shop. So I got to know Ron Fink. And as I say, Ron Fink was an institution in Harrisburg. He's the first man that I knew you could buy gay greetings cards. You asked what was some of the events in that whole great period of gay awareness and establishing ourselves? You could buy gay greeting cards. In fact, I brought one out! [laughs] I still have it!

KM: Oh that's great! Hold it up higher so the camera could see it. Hold it up – more. [laughs]

JB: Yah know these sexy poses of some man, a photograph or painting. So, Ron Fink had these! [laughs] And you could go in there and you could buy your gay greeting cards.

KM: That's great! [laughs]

JB: That was the only place in those days, other than going to Philadelphia or Washington, you know, Giovanni's Room, or – oh, what was the gay bookstore out in Washington – Circle, in D.C. So, Ron Fink had these gay greeting cards. Ron Fink was a great person to hook people up. “I think you should meet so and so,” Ron Fink had his second floor opened, he said, “Oh, I'm closing up shop here at 6 o'clock. Why don't you guys come down and we'll have a potluck. Each of you bring something. We'll just sit around here. Talk.” Ron Fink also liked to read and he liked to read French classic, French novels and in French. I always remember that Ron Fink had a bay window in the second floor and it looked out at the capitol dome. What a view from his second floor. And again there was that – he was very much wanted gay men to enjoy themselves. “Let's have a potluck!” He was not like the bars. Did not want to go to gay bars. Nor was Ron Fink very much interested in activism. That was not in his theater of operation. But he provided that material outlet. [to the cat] Hey, get out of that food! [Laughs] Come on!

KM: Do you need me to get it?

JB: Yeah, he's getting into the fish...

KM: That's not good!

JB: That's not good, that's Christmas dinner! [laughs]

[SECOND VIDEO ENDS ABRUNTLY, SEEMS TO BE INCOMPLETE]