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## **Interviewee: Alanna Berger and Blaise Liffick of Silent Witness**

Interviewer: Mary Merriman

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### **Abstract:**

Alanna Berger and Blaise Liffick are the co-founders of the Silent Witness Peacekeepers Organization. Alanna was born in 1954 in Hummelstown, PA. Before committing full time to Silent Witness, Alanna by profession worked as a systems analyst after having received undergraduate degrees in philosophy and computer science. Alanna also serves as an adjunct professor at Lebanon Valley College in the Women and Gender Studies department. Blaise Liffick was born in southern Indiana (his birthdate was not mentioned). Blaise by profession is a faculty member at Millersville University in the Computer Science department after receiving his doctorate in computer science from Temple University. Alana Berger and Blaise Liffick are married. Alana and Blaise are a part of the congregation of the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg. In 2005, under Alanna's initiation, the Silent Witness Peacekeepers Organization was established as a service to peacefully alleviate conflict between street harassers and the LGBT community during special events and ceremonies. Their work does not emphasize anti-protesting, but conflict averse strategies to guarantee the safety of all parties. In this interview, Alanna and Blaise discuss their path to starting this organization, several fond memories of their work, as well as, discuss the presence of street preachers and protest organizations like Westboro Baptist Church. They discuss their commitment to the LGBT community and their plans for the future of Silent Witness Peacekeepers.

### **MM-Interviewer BL-male AB-female**

**MM:** Hi, this is Mary Merriman and I am interviewing Alanna Berger and Blaise Liffick for the Lesbian Gay History Project (pause) and Alanna and Blaise are involved with the Silent Witness of PA project. I'm going to start the interview with Alanna and just ask for some basic information. Your name, date of birth, who your parents were all that kind of thing that situates you as to where we are.

**AB:** Okay. My name is Alanna Berger. I was born July 20<sup>th</sup> in 1954 to Ruth and Lewis Berger. They-my father was from the Bronx in New York and my mother was from Hummelstown in Pennsylvania. And so when my father came here (Hummelstown) to visit his brother he fell in love with my mother and decided to stay in central Pennsylvania.

**MM:** Do you have siblings also as well, Alanna?

**AB:** I have a sister who was adopted when I was nine years old and I have two kids from my previous husband and they are in their early thirties and I have two grandchildren.

**MM:** Okay, alright. Can you talk about a little about your own educational background, religion, that sort of thing?

**AB:** Sure. I was raised Jewish and so living in Central Pennsylvania, that meant traveling to Lebanon. My father's family came over from Eastern Europe and for them education was very important. So, from an early age I knew I would going to college. I ended up at University of Maryland because of its Jewish population and got a bachelors degree in philosophy and unfortunately that was not a lucrative occupation. [chuckles]

**MM:** Understood. [chuckles]

**AB:** And I ended up going back to school at Millersville and getting a degree in computer science after raising the girls.

**MM:** Okay. So, your degree is Master's degree? Doctorate?

**AB:** Both degrees are bachelor's degrees.

**MM:** Bachelors. Okay, alright. And how about work? Were you working at now?

**AB:** Well.. after I got the degree in computer science, I had a job at AMP then later, TYCO. And after 17 years, I decided that I was looking for a change. So I resigned my position as a systems analyst and...because I wanted to focus more on the work I was doing in the LGBT community, specifically with Silent Witness Peacekeepers. So, and I was also doing a lot of work with the Freedom to Marry ministry at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg.

**MM:** Okay.

**AB:** And that required... I spent...Blaise was complaining after I quit work I was spending approximately 60-80 hours a week doing volunteer work so I spent less time at work than I did after I left TYCO [ph] But.. It was very rewarding work.

**MM:** Good. Good. And how about religious affiliation?

**AB:** At this point, I mean I've always been Jewish so I think that's something that has heavily influenced my life. When Blaise and I got married he was not Jewish and he offered to convert, but I felt that with raising a blended family with my two kids and his three two kids, it would be better to find a common religious home. So we found that at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg. So we've been members there for over 20 years.

**MM:** Okay. Alright. And Blaise talk about your family. Did you grow up here in this region, or?

**BL:** No, no. I am originally from the state of Indiana. It's where I was born. Then we moved around a bit. Did live some years as a boy in Northwestern Pennsylvania, in Franklin in Venango County [ph] and then moved to southern Indiana where I spent my teenage years before going off to college. My parents...Howard lived until the ripe old age of 93 and passed away four years

ago. I am one of six children, next to last in the list. Two brother and three sisters. I-- So I grew up in Indiana primarily, went to college at Perdue in Indiana where I got my bachelor's degree. Later to the University of Pittsburgh for a masters and Temple University for a doctorate.

**MM:** And your doctorate is in what field?

**BL:** My doctorate is in computer science and I've been on the faculty at Millersville for 33 years.

**MM:** And likewise—religious background?

**BL:** I grew up Catholic, but once I became an adult it didn't quite fit me and so I sort of didn't do anything for a number of years until I met Alanna. And --she told me about the Unitarian Universalism because her mother apparently had gone to the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg. It seemed to fit with my perspective of the world so it—it was a pretty natural thing for us to join I think.

**MM:** Okay. Good. Alright. Okay—one of the thrusts of the interview is to talk about gay and lesbian people growing up in central Pennsylvania and their experiences but we're also opening that to different organizations that are participating in some way in the nurturing process. I think —Silent Witness is certainly one of those. Is Silent Witness only a local project or is it a national project? Do you know?

**AB:** No, Silent Witness Peacekeepers Alliance is an organization Blaise [Liffick] and I formed. It was sort of a natural progression from the silent witnesses at the MCCLV Church. Which when we talk about how that all came about --will become more clear.

**MM:** Okay.

**AB:** I think both of us—as we were being raised as children were – I think we were both raised by very liberal parents and so, for instance, my father's cousin was gay and Dad remained friends with him. He was a part of the family. And when we go to New York we visit him and you know—we'd go see Bob and Bobby. And then when I went to college in the early 70s at University of Maryland was where I first met gays and lesbians. I worked at the women's center and many of the women were lesbians and I know at one point I was reading—reading my Brown's book, Rubyfruit Jungle, and I loved it. So I said “We've got to have her speak here.” So I picked up the phone and called her and said “Will you come speak at University of Maryland.” She was more than willing to come do that. So that was my experience- gays and lesbians were my friends. They were no different from my other friends. So that was my experience. I did know several of them when they came out to their friends and family and were immediately disowned and that was tragic and unfair. So that was my early experience with gays and lesbians.

**MM:** Okay. Alanna, just by way of reflection. You knew a number of people who were disowned by their families, can you put that in a time context?

**AB:** Sure, that was the – that would have been 1974-1975 was when that first happened. That I watched that and it was incredibly painful—and- it was –and – it was “ You can be a part of my

family now.” And my parents had no problem with that. So they were, you know, open and affirming even then and probably because of my father’s cousin.

**MM:** Okay. Okay—and how about you Blaise?

**BL:** Well- although my parents were very liberal, I don’t recall knowing about the gay or lesbian community at all growing up—other than the.. the use of some of my friends—the use of derogatory terms. But it wasn’t a part of my general consciousness until much later in life. In fact I had to say pretty much until I met Alanna the--I take that back. I worked with some folks in the late 70’s. I was working for Bite Magazine, which was a computer magazine, up in New Hampshire. And there were some folks in that group who were gay or lesbian. And, I mean it didn’t matter to any of us, it seemed. It wasn’t even commented on, in general, it was just a part of who everybody was. And – I think my nonchalance about it probably came from fact that my parents were so good at being inclusive when I was growing up. There just wasn’t any hint of any racism or anything of that sort that would lead me to think that people who were different were bad in some fashion. So it just didn’t even enter my consciousness- I don’t think.

**AB:** Yeah, and I think that—something about my parents—looking for the inherent worth and dignity of every person was something I found in your parents as well.

**BL:** Mhm, Yeah.

**AB:** They would never say a bad word about anybody. So that was something that I think was—we were both raised with.

**MM:** That does seem to be—you can almost think sociologically to a shift in time because I think my family was raised with some of that as well. But certainly, experiences changed over time too. But I do think there maybe was a shift, a societal shift about free speech or something that seemed to work into that.

**BL:** Well, certainly—us growing up in the 60s with all the issues of racism and feminism that was going on and while there wasn’t a lot of news at that time, I think in the Midwest at least, about issues related to the LGBT community certainly there was no discussion of stonewall when that happened that I can recall. You know, it still was I think part in parcel with the general consciousness raising that was going on related to people being different.

**MM:** Mhm. Okay then—so—how does that connect with Silent Witness? How did that come about then?

**AB:** Well, in 2003, Common Roads was going to be showing “Jim in Bold” which...

**MM:** And Common Roads, can you explain that?

**AB:** Sure, Common Roads is the organization for LGBT youth, and I believe early on included questioning. So I was familiar with that organization through a woman at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg whose son is gay. And they were going to be showing the documentary, “Jim in

Bold” about the young boy in Lebanon who committed suicide and ultimately Fred Phelps’ organization heard about that and they were going to come to Harrisburg to picket and my friend Sparky Radcliffe called me up and said, “Did you see that article in the newspaper? I said, “No” and I looked at it. I looked up their website and thought this guy is a lunatic. I mean who is going to pay attention to him. And the more I read about it, I saw that Susan Wheeler was going to be speaking before the movie, and the thought of having lost a son to suicide and then having people standing outside saying that my son was burning in hell really upset me as a mother and so I thought I really need to get involved. What are we going to do about this? And at the same time, Spark, I believe her cousin was a member of MMCC. I mean MCC (Metropolitan Community Church) in Harrisburg and they had these silent witnesses who surrounded events facing the audience, the community with signs of support. So I got in touch with them and they told me that there was this training program that you could go through to be a silent witness. They welcomed anybody from our convocation to participate because they did not have enough people surround the event. This was being held at the state museum. They didn’t have enough silent witnesses so they were happy for additional volunteers. So there were dozens of us from the Unitarian church that went through the training in order to do this and it was a fantastic day. When I talked to Greg King, he said that they were hoping to sell enough tickets to pay for the cost of the movie. They ended up selling out two or three times, and ended up raising close to 10,000 dollars.

**MM:** Wow..

**AB:** Our congregation raised about 1,000 dollars just selling t-shirts. And the event itself was amazing. We stood there. We surrounded the community. The Phelps group ended up being in the front of the museum and were quite a ways off. I think we got more hugs and kisses that day than I think I had ever had. There was no violence, there was you know... it was just wonderful...and because the state of Pennsylvania had treated it like a potential hate crime they had city police, capital police, state police, bomb sniffing dogs, SWAT teams on the rooftops, helicopters...it was a crazy day! But I felt as though I had actually done something that was just an amazing gift to a community. I think it came from my Jewish background..you know.. not standing idly by the blood of my neighbor. That I had to stand up and do something and...so that was...I just felt wonderful after doing that. Then, following year...Westboro Baptist Church came back. They were protesting because was putting up a monument to Jim Wheeler and they decided to picket the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, so we had all these trained silent witnesses and we were going to you know- do the same thing that we had done before. Again, very successful, nobody got arrested and everybody felt safe. The attendance at the church was higher than ever that day and it was wonderful. The following year after that, the silent witnesses asked if we would help them, now that we were trained and obviously experienced--would we help them with pride festival and we said sure.

**BL:** And it should be pointed out that at that point in time, that group were counter protesters, right. They were basically protesting against the protesters who were coming to pride festival.

**MM:** So Silent Witness became a counter protest.

**BL:** It originated as a counter protest group.

**AB:** Yes, (you're ) right. It originated as a counter protest group. Because they were holding signs supporting the community and so that was the message counter to what the protesters had and they you know.. remained silent but welcoming to the community so that the community could focus on these folks instead of paying attention to the protesters. And—so we said, “Sure, we will come to pride festival.” There were about a dozen of us who signed up that day for one hour shifts and when we got there that was the first year that the street preachers had figured out that they did not need to stand in a free speech zone and so the silent witnesses were standing being the barricade as the police had asked us but the street preachers were just wandering everywhere getting in peoples faces and trying to pick fights.

**BL:** There were like 50 of them—all over the festival.

**AB:** A huge number of them! And it felt like suddenly, our strategy of holding signs welcoming the community was not working anymore. Blaise and I would just drop our sign, jump over the barricade and try to prevent fights from happening. I think one of the defining moments was when- you know- there were two fights about to erupt. There was the mother of a lesbian screaming and crying to a protester, “That’s my daughter! She’s perfectly fine!” and the lesbians quickly dragging her mother, “Mom, just leave them alone.” And- I sent Blaise off to one where a straight couple with three kids..

**BL:** The guy was about 6’4” and he had his armed cocked back ready to deck one of the street preachers and I knew that was the wrong thing to let happen- so I got in between them and almost got decked myself. And- because it was impossible to make it clear that I wasn’t with the street preacher because I was just dressed in street clothes and the signs we had were not easily distinguishable in any way, so it made real clear to me that there was a problem with the process we were using—but it was the only one we could do that day was get in between-- try to convince people to go into the street festival and leave the street preachers alone.

**AB:** We were only supposed to work a one hour shift and we ended up staying until the end of the day because there were just not enough silent witnesses. It was a really hot day, my best friend ended up collapsing from a heat stroke and it was awful. By the end of the day, we were so exhausted, we didn’t do the one thing we were told that we needed to do at the end of the day and that was detox. We just went straight home and I woke up in the middle of the night with nightmares, sobbing two weeks after that. It was- that was quite possibly one of the worst days of my life and—you know, I wanted to do something different. We—we had to fix this. I felt there was something we needed to do to fix this and I felt the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg needed to be part of that. So the following February, we decided that when we saw the call for the pride committee—we wanted to be on the pride committee. We wanted to help. And we contacted the original silent witnesses and said—invited them to a meeting at our congregation and then serendipitously three other congregations wanted to get involved too -- and so we sat down and had a meeting. “What can we do?” Blaise had already come up with the idea of having safety vests that clearly identified who we were because as he said, people coming to the festival couldn’t tell us a part from the street preachers without the barricade. And then one of the original silent witnesses remembered the angel wings that were used at the Laramie Project, Romay [ph] Patterson’s angel wings and she said, “What about that?” I said, “Wel, these people

are Unitarians, I don't know that they're gonna do angels, but I had brought my umbrella that night because it had rained and I had it open and somebody pointed to that and said, "What about umbrellas? Those rainbow umbrellas." And we said, "Let's try it!" So we developed a strategy for using them. Rosemary Morocco got The Home Depot.

**BL:** A donation.

**AB:** Homedepot.com to donate 25 rainbow umbrellas and we came up with a strategy on how to use them. We did meet with Harrisburg Park and Recreation Office. We met with the police—to make sure that this was going to be acceptable to them. They loved it and they said here are some more ideas—and so that's pretty much how we started. It was also the first year for the parade and so we marched down in front of the parade. We had—oh gosh, I forgot how many people—I think we had close to 30 people. The first year of the parade.

**BL:** In the parade- yeah. Overall we had over a 100 volunteers that year who were silent witness peacekeepers. That was the point at which the organization morphed from being counter protest to being active peacekeepers and our sole job at that point became preventing confrontation rather than standing idly by. Not that there was anything wrong with that as the organization began, but you know that 2005 festival, it became clear that that strategy didn't work anymore and—and so we needed to take an active role rather than something more passive.

**AB:** Because people were still getting arrested—whether it was the street preachers or, you know, people driven to some kind of violence- you know, whether it was attacking the street preachers, or whatever. So—we trained everybody. Everybody had to go through approximately a two hour training program where we talked about—you know—how they needed to behave, intentions of the street preachers, who they were and how to handle an umbrella because these were big umbrellas, you know and—and so we put people through this training and when we got to the festival that day, by the end of the day nobody had been arrested and the police all came down and shook our hands and thanked us profusely.

**BL:** Ohh boy, they got in a line to shake our hands. It was truly amazing.

**AB:** Right. Yeah, yeah they did. They were incredible grateful for what we had done because a lot of times, their hands are tied. They can't do anything until a law is broken and so what we did is make their job easier by making sure there were no confrontations. We found out later that the mayor said that if there was one more arrest at the pride festival there would be no more pride festivals in Harrisburg.

**BL:** Because it was costing the city too much money.

**AB:** Right, tens of thousands of dollars and so that was—we thought that was just phenomenal. We figure this was what we would be doing—you know, one event a year. The following, I think it was January, York suburban high school was going to put on The Laramie Project and Fred Phelps was going to come protest this event. Members of the community were excited that the kids in York were going to be doing this and they wanted to support it but they were afraid to go knowing that Westboro Baptist Church was going to be there—and they said we'll go if Silent



Witness Peacekeepers are there and so we said, “Sure!” and we—it took some effort to get the school district...

**BL:** The school district didn't really want us to go. The police didn't really want us to go—but we said, “Well, the LGBT community has asked us to be there and essentially we're going to use our own right of free speech here and we'll be there”. What ended up happening was that over a hundred counter protesters showed up to protest against Westboro Baptist and they were starting to, you know, get kind of vocal and not very—quite, shall we say. And so finally, I went to the police chief and said, “Look chief, you've got to let us do this job we've been trained to do and help you keep this crowd quiet.” And he finally agreed and so we deployed and kept all confrontations from happening and afterwards they asked for our help in getting Westboro Baptist church to their cars which were parked on the other side of where the counter protesters were. We actually escorted Westboro Baptist to their cars so they could get there without being assaulted.

**AB:** Right. The police were...

**BL:** The police were glad to have us there.

**AB:** So after that event, then Reading started their pride festival. They wanted us there. And then at that point-- our table was right next to Lehigh Valley Pride Festival and they said, “What-what's this thing with protesters? We've never had protesters.” Two weeks before their festival, we found out that the street preachers were going to be at their festival and so we called them and they said, “Please come!” so then the following year, Lancaster had their Pride Festival—Wilkesbear [ph] they all asked us to be there. We've had requests for training in various parts of the country. We've gone down to Charlotte, North Carolina—trained folks down there, for their pride festival. We've been out to Overland Park, Kansas—trained folks out there. We've been up to Michigan, we've started a group of peacekeepers on college campuses in Pennsylvania. We've counseled various organizations all across the country. They'll contact us when Westboro Baptist Church is coming or, you know, they—we can see where they have followed our strategies. You know, we'll see pictures, “This line of umbrellas...protected people getting married in New York the first day people were allowed to get married in New York”. Westboro Baptist Church showed up and they had a line of umbrellas shielding the folks who were standing in line to get married.

So it's--I think a part of our strategy is respecting the rights of everyone--especially the rights of free speech, the rights to practice religion. We've come to know who the street preachers are and you know, that's movement that's growing throughout the United States. Since we've started doing what we're doing the number of protesters had dropped to almost none. We had one in Lancaster and he's actually from Harrisburg, but the organizations of street preachers we've dealt with over the years have stopped coming to central Pennsylvania. I think it is one of those things that, you know—I now teach a class on LGBT Issues in America at Lebanon Valley College and I do a whole section on bullying and—and one of the surveys done—I believe it was in—at a university in Iowa—80% of the people who had been bullied said that they wished people had stood up for them and I think that is what we're doing. We're standing up against the

bullies and as a consequence they are not getting any traction and because that is what a bully depends on they are going somewhere else.

**BL:** Well—and they are also not drawing a crowd. See, when we're not there the preachers are pretty adept to getting a big crowd to shout back at them which they are more than happy to have done. They don't mind getting people angry, it's actually a part of their strategy because it's getting the devil out of people if you do that. So we actually prevent crowds from forming and as a consequence they are not getting their message out the way they had before and so I think they are finding it frustrating and avoid the places they know we are going to be at this point.

**MM:** In the other regions you had said—at Lancaster Pride there was only one person there. What's your expectation for a couple weeks from now in Harrisburg?

**AB:** I would image Steve Gristo [ph] will still be there.

**BL:** The same one who was at Lancaster. He's been at the Harrisburg Pride festival essentially every year—since we started and we don't see him going away anytime soon unfortunately.

**AB:** No, I think—He's a known quantity in Harrisburg. He's had, as far as I know, there are still two restraining orders against him for preaching at school bus stops. According to one of the judges who heard the case, he had crossed the line between free speech and predatory behavior because he was not just preaching to the kids but he was following them home, offering them milk and cookies, asking whether their parents were home and so he's kind of crossed the line.

Most of the street preachers we deal with are for the most part very sincere people. I think when you look at somebody like Westboro Baptist Church that's an anomaly in a different way and that they are more of a cult and they have a whole different set of issues. They are a group of people that really need to be ignored, just like you would ignore any other paranoid schizophrenic person screaming at you. Not necessarily ignore but engage with. But with most of the other street preachers like the folks from Repent America, Life and Liberty Ministries tend to be very sincere in their fundamentalist view of the Bible. They take a very literal view of the Bible and most of them are pretty sincere. They're the ones who have really stopped coming to protest at Central Pennsylvania Pride Festivals.

**MM:** In the other regions as in Wilkes-Barre and that sort of thing, do you think that—have you had a lot of experience with those groups yet or is it something that's starting?

**AB:** No..no..in fact- you know, I'd have to go back to my notes and look but Lancaster and Allentown and Reading have not had street preachers for several years.

**BL:** For several years... I mean it's the first year in Lancaster in four years—first time in four years. Now, Wilkes-Barre—there is a local group up there that had been protesting at the NIPA(?) It was a local church and they did that for a couple of years, but they didn't attend last year.

**MM:** They are losing energy for it—it seems like.

**AB:** Yes, yes they are.

**BL:** We're just hoping that it continues, but it's hard to tell.

**AB:** Part of that, I think, was driven by somebody from North Carolina, Operation Rescue. So the first year, they were preaching there---his name is Dante Poskovich (?) and they were preaching an anti-abortion, anti-muslim and anti-gay message which sort of took me by surprise because I am looking at a gay community thinking they aren't interested in anti-abortion—and I think because of his...

**BL:** Insistance really..

**AB:** His presence, that's why they were there. Last year, they did not show up. I think its- I think street preachers are on one hand diversifying but they are going elsewhere, where they can get a larger crowd. They do like to go places where there are young people and alcohol because they get a huge response from that group. They are also focusing on anti-abortion. So they are more likely to be at abortion clinics or even medical waste providers—people who take medical waste away from an abortion clinic. They are trying to shut them down. One of the street preachers was actually hanging around a strip club until 3 o'clock in the morning and they still go to college campuses quite a bit.

**BL:** That's actually where we see them more frequently now than at the pride festivals and so I've done a lot of training at the state schools in particular since I'm on the faculty at Millersville—its pretty easy for me to get contacts at the state schools and so we've trained at Shippensburg, Kutztown, Slippery Rock and Edinburgh That seems to be where we are running more into street preachers these days.

**AB:** And again, they've diversified their message. It's not just anti-gay. It's anti-abortion, anti-binge drinking, abstinence before marriage..

**BL:** Anti-evolution

**AB:** Yeah, they don't want science professors teaching evolution because the world is only 6,000 years old.

**MM:** Is the—I was thinking about Westboro Baptist, now that Fred Phelps has passed. If that church has dismantled yet?

**BL:** They're still pretty active.

**AB:** Fred's children who have stayed with the organization are—have been carrying on actually. Fred...Fred..has not been participating in any of the protests. It's the kid who have been.

**BL:** He hasn't for a couple of years..

**AB:** Right, his kids have been carrying on the business. We've talked to Nate Phelps, one of his children who has escaped from the cult when he was 18 and he firmly believed that the kids would continue. There might be somewhat of a power struggle, because Shirley Phelps, in particular, felt that she should be running the organization but he said the boys wouldn't let her. So now I believe it's eight sons and sons in law that are now in charge.

**MM:** Interesting...

**BL:** It has fractured somewhat over the last dozen years that some of the—Fred Phelps' 13 kids..

**AB:** No, I think it's 16 of his grandkids...

**BL:** Well, but I mean—he had 13 kids. Four of them left and about a dozen or so of the grandkids left. So there has been some fracturing—you know, there is always a hope that it will continue to do so and that the power struggle will tear them apart enough that they lose power.

**AB:** Right.

**MM:** I think that the other thing that—a couple things that I kept in mind as you were talking is the changes that are going on across many denominations that are beginning to open up to gay and lesbian people and whether or not for street preachers if the balance now is shifted, that they don't have the ability. They don't have strength as much because they don't have a lot of people at their back.

**BL:** I think part of it is that they are feeling more marginalized and that certainly makes it easier for members of the LGBT community to ignore them because—you know, when it seemed like the power was on the side of the street preachers I think they felt more vulnerable and more oppressed and now that—you know, for instance Pennsylvania now allows same sex marriage it takes some of the steam out of—you know, the vitriol of the street preachers.

**AB:** I think even before the same sex marriage—I think what really helped in central Pennsylvania, for instance, was it just wasn't the Unitarians and the MCC (Metropolitan Community Church). It was St. Stevens Episcopal, it was St. Michael's Lutheran, it was the UCC congregations who were open and affirming and as the community began to see various individual congregations being supportive even if the denomination wasn't—I think that made them feel less vulnerable. I think part of the business with the street preachers has to do with the very fundamentalist viewpoint.

I know there was one organization preaching in Millersville condemning brick and mortar church buildings, but that's not what Jesus' original message was. A lot of people are becoming disenfranchised with organized religion. I mean the numbers of unchurched people have gone down significantly in the past couple of decades.

**BL:** Unchurched has increased.

**AB:** Yes, you're right—increased.

**BL:** Yeah, the number of people who are members of the traditional religions has decreased steadily over the last several decades.

**AB:** Yeah—so, I think that helps the community feel less vulnerable because people don't support the street preachers. I think that was what we saw early on—was that people, you know, people in the community—people were coming to an event just blocked out everybody who was Christian. They didn't want to hear it because as far as they were concerned all Christians were condemning them. Now that the more liberal folks and mainstream Protestantism have accepted them, I think it has become easier for them to ignore the street preachers.

**MM:** I've also seen some extensions of Silent Witness in areas where Fred Phelps was doing the military funerals and using their mantra to—protesting gay people. Have you been involved in any of those kind of events? Have you been called into those?

**AB:** We were asked--and there were—there is an organization, the Patriot Guard. The riders, who for the most part were handling that. The hard part for us was that the individual who had passed away was not likely gay—so we would offer our services, if we were asked but the family really didn't want to have that kind of attention drawn to it and so our advice when Westboro Baptist Church was coming to protest was, you know—line the street with American flags, you know—surround them with American flags.

**BL:** If it was a military funeral—sure.

**AB:** As opposed to rainbow umbrellas and you know—just show signs of support for the family.

**BL:** We did get involved in an incident in Perry County a couple of years ago where there was the death of seven children in one family in a fire that Westboro had threatened to attend and we were drawn into that because members of the community that know us started asking if we would be there to help and we started looking at Facebook pages that showed, you know, thousands of counter protesters were going to show up and try to combat, essentially Westboro Baptist and that certainly would send things in a direction of a riot. So—we actually did investigate that situation. We did a lot of talking with the various groups that said they were going to be there. We tried to council them about what's appropriate and what's not and then we got in touch with the Sherriff's department in Perry County and started offering them advice. While we did not intend to be there as the Silent Witness Peacekeepers—because it had nothing to do with the LGBT community per say—we did manage to help calm the situation down, get the family to issue us a request for these counter protesters to not come and ultimately, that message did get out and listened to and everything stayed nice and calm—and so we worked behind the scenes in that particular case and others like that, where we would help the authorities get a handle on how to deal with the situation.

**AB:** Right, because one of the things we do when we are asked to participate in an event is—you know, scope it out and we went up there to Perry County. The town had 1800 residents. The streets were back country roads with no sidewalks

**BL:** No sidewalks, no public space [laughs].

**AB:** People were—you get all these people...they were going to be bussing people in and there is no safe place to walk, no safe place to park. It was—all the fields were muddy and it was—it seemed kind of crazy to us at first.

**BL:** It would have been total chaos.

**AB:** Because we were also talking to the state police at that point, who were more familiar with this. In talking to the state police and the sherriff—you know, we said just have the family tell people to just not come and the police said that they can't tell people that, you know—it's their right of free speech. But I said that the family can request it—and so that is what they did. They asked the family to make that public request and as soon as the family went on the news and said, "We are deeply appreciative of the support—please don't come. It is a private event." The facebook pages shutdown, but there were still people who were likely to go up just because they wanted to be gawkers but the other thing was when I was talking with the sheriff and the state police—Westboro Baptist Church does two different things. One is they sound out faxes to everywhere, threatening to be in all kinds of places but if they are actually going to be there they will call the police at least two or three days in advance and ask for protection. So I said, "Have they done that?" and they said, "No, they haven't". So they tried to call Westboro Baptist Church and their response was "We haven't decided yet"—so I said that it was pretty much guaranteed that Westboro Baptist Church is not going to be there and sure enough, that's exactly what happened. They had no plans on being in central Pennsylvania.

**MM:** So while—so by mission statement, if you will—do you have one just specifically for Silent Witness.

**BL:** Yes, we do.

**MM:** Which is...and I know we are toward the end of it but the branches are going out—so how do you stay in your center.

**BL:** Well-it's very much the case that we were focused on the LGBT community and that our main purpose was to provide safe and peaceful events for that community and we made a conscious decision early on to limit our activities as much as possible to that community because we wanted to stay focused.

**AB:** Right—we've been asked to—you know, would we provide screeners at abortion clinic. You know—we thought about it and we thought the LGBT community is not unilaterally pro-choice necessarily and so we didn't want to do that. However, we—when we first did this, one of the first silent witnesses had said he had not participated in anything like this since he marched with Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. So Blaise started doing all this research on non-violence—Ghandi and King, and the principles of King and non-violence. We took workshops on compassionate listening and non-violent communication and so many things became—it opened our eyes.

**BL:** Well, ultimately were built into our training as well. They became a foundation, a philosophical foundation for the organization and then we incorporated a lot of that into our training as well. It's not just about learning to stand there and not say anything or even learning to escort somebody but it actually becomes a very spiritual process for all of us and it becomes something that transcends the task that we're doing. It is an important—there is an importance to it that goes beyond the immediate.

**AB:** So for instance, I was dealing with one of my legislators and talking about House Bill 300 and I was talking to his assistant and she said something that literally put me over the top and I am thinking to myself—silent witness training don't fail me now. You know, it had nothing to do with the LGBT community, it had to do with my Muslim son-in-law. And I got to thinking, my training came in very handy. You know—know my opposition, listen to them, find common ground, and treat that person as the worthy individual who is likely afraid, doesn't understand where I am coming from. So it wasn't just even our state legislators. At one event, we were asked, "Can you use these tactics for anything else?" and we said, "Well, I can't imagine why not. What did you have in mind." She said they had an autism conference coming up and we already know we are going to have protesters and I said...

**BL:** Which boggled our minds at first.

**AB:** I said, "Well yeah, know your opposition, protect their right of free speech, treat them with respect.

**BL:** You know, it had to do with their being two different philosophies about dealing with autism. Those two were in fairly vehement opposition to one another and as a consequence, they sometimes get protesters at them.

**AB:** Right, so that whole strategy works for a number of different things and I see that when I am watching talking heads on the more conservative television shows and you see them just yelling and being nasty to each other—I think this is what people see and I think that's the appropriate way we're supposed to interact and if we could just sit down and listen to each other. Again—sitting with one of my legislators— you know, using the compassionate listening and the non-violent communication.

Well, ok—we both agree marriage is important and we started from that common ground. Then, we got to explaining why we thought marriage was important for the LGBT community and he was talking about his religious convictions and by the end of the conversation he said, "You know, I could support civil union. I get that. I understand now what you are talking about." And so this is something that has grown out of the work we have done and like Blaise has said it has become a spiritual path for us.

**MM:** So what's interesting, I think, is that—the umbrellas at this point puts a space between the people yelling at each other and says essentially that you have got to find another way to communicate.

**BL:** Well—it is-it was-symbology was intentional in terms of being protective and in having there be all this negativity that would bounce off the umbrellas...to protect the community. So it was you know—although it was serendipitous in the way it had started. It became very much and important symbol of what we do.

**AB:** I think too that some of the comments that we've have gotten were—people would come up to me and say, “We were at an event and I was talking to my partner and afterward she said “Y’know, I didn’t see any protesters this year”. Her partner replied, “Of course they were there, but all I saw were the umbrellas because of the bright colors.” People were focused on those and never even saw the protesters behind us. It’s not like we had this huge, impenetrable wall. When we look at pictures of us, there is three feet between us and yet people still saw the colors, our smiling faces. We would walk them and ask how they were doing and just engage them in conversation and they never saw the protesters. So I think the umbrellas...

**BL:** That’s when we knew we did our job right.

**AB:** Yup and certainly we’ve been to enough pride festivals where it rained—that we were really glad.

**BL:** Or it was such bright sun and 908 degrees that we were we were thankful for the portable shade.

**AB:** Yeah, yeah...but I think the umbrellas really did their job. I think the other thing to is—later as we started learning more about hyper arousal. We invited a mental health crisis intervention nurse to educate us on how to handle people who have a meltdown. She was really helpful in terms of helping us understand when to recognize symptoms and how to diffuse them. There is a point in time where we will put the umbrellas down and put them across our bodies and they become another tool to help keep people calm. We now feel confident enough to let people have conversations with the street preachers.

**BL:** As long as they stay conversations and not arguments.

**AB:** Right. Right, people have walked away from that—this happened at Lancaster this year. A guy talked to a street preacher and walked away from it saying “You know, he’s really sincere in his belief. I don’t agree with him, that the preacher was really sincere in his belief. He didn’t agree with him.” But you know he was able to have that conversation and come to the realization that the street preacher was not somebody evil but was in fact somebody who had a different view point. So it has been exciting. I think that people--

**BL:** It has been an education for us.

**AB:** People originally would ask me, “What’s your goal? Are you going to have chapters all over the United States?” I said my goal is to put ourselves out of business and we are this close to it. So this is—I am kind of glad to be a part of this project, because I am thinking it will be one of the last times we really get to do something like this. We are going to write our book...



**BL:** Hopefully!

**AB:** Hopefully, we move on.

**MM:** Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything I have not asked or anything else you would like to add to this?

**BL:** I certainly want to say thank you to the LGBT Center, in general—for the hard work they have done over the last 10 years or so—it becoming a reality. In supporting us as well and the LGBT community in general. That we've had nothing but acceptances—just a couple of old street folks—we feel like we've been accepted by the community and that feels good to us.

**AB:** When I look—

**BL:** They're family.

**AB:** Yeah. When I look at all the people I have met over these past—however many years—11 years since we've been doing this work and that very first event, the number of hugs and kisses I got that day and the gratitude kind of got me started but it is my gratitude to be able to give this back. To be able to look at the way things have changed, if nowhere else, in central Pennsylvania.

**BL:** And to make our community safer and a happier place. I mean, you know, a part of what got us started was the thought of not in our backyard. This stuff is not going to happen in our community. Westboro Baptist is not going to come in and stir up hate and we will not stand by and let that happen. It's been a hard 10 years in this work—or longer—since we became advocates. Not only as silent witnesses but advocating to the state legislature and such.

I thought it would be a lot longer to get to this point where things are starting to mellow out and people are becoming more accepting. I mean we have same sex marriage available in the state now. I never thought we would have that in this point in time. I know we've contributed to that and have certainly self-satisfaction about that, but I also know how hard everybody else has worked in making that a reality as well and making our lives easier as our peacekeepers. At the events we have gotten a lot of cooperation from the community and the work that we do as well.

**MM:** Well, I want to thank you two. I was just thinking also in the process of doing some writing about 10 years before you guys started and thinking about the people, as we were interviewing about how important allies have been. It means that for every community that is marginalized is finding allies—to kind of have their backs if you will or at least give you a chance to breathe and to be safe. I was thinking back, again, in the time I was doing some things that it was some people in the background that were incredibly important. Certainly in the foreground as well. So I want to thank you, it has been just a blessing.

**BL:** And our pleasure.

**AB:** And that was something—When we first started doing this we were also involved in some anti-racism work. One of the things we kept hearing was racism is really white people’s work. Anti-racism is really white peoples work. They cause the problem, they have to solve it. It was really easy to say homophobia is straight people. They caused it—it’s our work. We have to educate people. And that’s been easier than I expected it to be, but I still come across people who just astound me. We were talking to one of our legislators aids and he said, “Okay, so you’ve got this continuum with bestiality on one end and Amish dominatrix sex on the other, where would you put homosexuality?” And we were gob-smacked. I was like – this is not about sex, this is about people.

So, when we come across those kinds of things we certainly not quiet in educating people. As to, you know... I am amazed at the level of ignorance about this and the more people who know somebody who is gay the easier it becomes for them to say “Oh well, yeah, I know that person and that person is great!” This is why people like us really need to stand up.

**MM:** Well thank you very much.

**AB:** You’re welcome.