

**LGBT Center of Central PA History Project  
Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections**

<http://archives.dickinson.edu/>

**Documents Online**

**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Tom Boone

**Date:** November 25, 2014

**Location:** LGBT Oral History – Boone, Tom - 009

**Contact:**

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

717-245-1399

[archives@dickinson.edu](mailto:archives@dickinson.edu)

**Interviewee: Tom Boone**

Interviewer: Lonna Malmshemer and Don Fitz

Date of Interview: November 25, 2014

Location of Interview: Harrisburg, PA

Transcriber: Drew Strahosky and Sarah F. Wakefield

Proofreader: Emily Armando

**Abstract:** Mr. Boone is interviewed as an ally of the LGBT community. From a young age, he encountered members of the LBGT community but never judged or discriminated against them. He later joined the board of a Community Center, and through this Center allowed the expression of young LBGT community to flourish, specifically through theater. His daughter was very active with the LGBT community.

**DF:** Good afternoon my name is Don Fitz I am the interviewer today and we are interviewing Tom Boone in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Tom would you introduced yourself?

**TB:** Ok, I am Tom (laughs) Boone. I grew up in Harrisburg Pennsylvania in the 1940s and 50s. I lived in Philadelphia for a while returned to the city in the late 60s. Married my wife Rebecca in 1979, we moved to Los Angeles for a few years and we returned to Harrisburg then around 1983.

**DF:** Any children?

**TB:** We have one daughter, yes, she's 26 years old now.

**DF:** Ok, tell me about the, your growing up, tell me about where you, where you grew up and the kind of things that you were involved with growing up.

**TB:** Ok I grew up on Allison Hill near 17<sup>th</sup> and Paxton streets. My family owned a house there, my grandparents actually lived next door to us. I went to the Harrisburg schools, went to Shimmell School at 17<sup>th</sup> and Berry Hill and from there to Edison Jr. high on 19<sup>th</sup> Street, finally to John Harris High School. Mostly I focused on academic activities, I wasn't involved in a lot of social activities at school. I was more interested in studying literature, history, math, whatever came along. Growing up in this area and living that kind of life I wasn't aware of let's say a gay community in the area or of you know any lifestyle other than the one that I was living. It was only when I moved to Philadelphia in 1959 that I became aware that there were actually people who formed a community within the larger community. My first meetings with people who were gay occurred in places like the laundromat where I would begin a conversation with somebody and he would gradually indicate, you know, he was interested in meeting people, likeminded people let's say, and sometimes it would be obvious that he was living a different style. I know one time (laughs) in particular I was at the laundromat and a young man came in and he was dressed like an urban cowboy and I was kind of curious about what he was doing in West Philadelphia at the time. But then as he gradually began to talk to me I realized he had just arrived in the area and was probably looking for other gay people that he could associate with I told...

**DF:** You were a young adult at this time?

**TB:** Yeah I was you know in my early twenties and so I said to him well you know I wasn't associated with anyone that you know he may be looking for, but you know that was the kind of early experience I had meeting gay people.

**DF:** What was your initial, your initial thoughts, your initial feelings about having there - speaking with a gay person?

**TB:** Well it wasn't so much he was gay it was just interesting to me that for instance he said to me he said "Oh do you like music?" (Laughs) Well that's a pretty general question I said, "Yes I do like music." He said "Well," he said, he said "I have a pretty good record collection you know and." I said. Well you know I said, "You know there were certain kinds of music." "Oh well I like all kinds of music so I'm sure I have what you would like" and you know that's when it occurred to me, "Oh I guess he's trying to pick me up you know!" It was one of those interesting things and I said, "Well that's okay I'm not, I've got other things to do." I didn't want to you know turn him off by saying you "Hey, you know, stay away from me," I, whenever I encountered somebody in a situation like that I usually just made up an excuse like, "well I've got to run, I've got friends to meet," or something like that, or as soon as I'm done here I have to get back to work. I just didn't want to you know give the impression that I saw anything wrong with what he was doing. Actually, before...when I was in high school you know I mean I was interested in things like beat literature and what not so in reading Allen Ginsberg and some other writers, I had some awareness that there were gay communities out there and what their interests were and therefore didn't surprise me once I got to Philadelphia I would run into people like that.

**DF:** Now how did, how did that fit in with the way you were raised?

**TB:** You know I don't know that it ever came up at home. I mean I'm not even sure my parents where all that aware of it or if they were that you know they would see any need to mention it.

**DF:** You have a religious background?

**TB:** Well they were in the United Church of Christ. I myself, once I finished high school and moved to Philadelphia, I stopped going to church. I really don't have any religious affiliation to speak of, I tend not to like labels. I am registered non-partisan, that kind of thing, political and religious labels. I just, as far as whether or not the bible says anything about gay people it wouldn't matter to me because I wouldn't take it that seriously anyway if it was in the bible. Not that I don't think there are some truth to the bible, it's just that I know it was a political document that early on was agreed upon as a way to bring all the different Christian groups together. So whatever it might say about life styles or prohibition against any kind of behavior, would not have any effect on me. So it was actually - once I finished college, I worked for three years in Philadelphia. I worked for a large insurance company and I was living downtown, that was three years of being downtown, I had more contact with, I think, gay people on occasion. There were a few people in the insurance company I did learn were gay. Now they were not entirely open about it, but on the other hand they gave little hints. There was a woman in particular who played for the company softball team. In fact, she was the star on the company

softball team. She would show up to work in sleeveless blouses so you could see her biceps or what not, and everybody was pretty confident that she was a lesbian. Then I got to know a few of the other women on the team and they confirmed that she was. There was one section where I worked...

**DF:** [interrupting TB] And how was she viewed in terms of the rest of the work force?

**TB:** I don't think anybody...I don't know how her co-workers...because I never actually worked right in the area where she worked. It was just recognized that, "Oh yeah, that's her way!" [laughs] Like I said, with the biceps and everything, that's her style. So what others might have thought of the fact that she was maybe living with a woman or something like that, I don't know. Again it didn't occur to me, wasn't anything that I was interested in, I'll put it that way. "Okay fine." But then I did get to know one woman that I worked with fairly well. She had been married and divorced and was now living with a female partner. It was kind of interesting. We found out that we had a lot in common. We were both interested in the folk music scene, which was going through a resurgence at that time and we both had other interests. It developed into a nice comfortable friendship between the two of us because I think she felt comfortable talking to me about things that she generally would not have wanted to talk about at work. We were both kind of misfits in that environment anyway! That I think gave me a much more deeper understanding of the problems she might encounter or just some of her own confusion about whether or not she would see herself living that way for the rest of her life or whether it was something she was trying out because her marriage hadn't worked out or whatnot. That gave me some more insight.

Then when I moved back to Harrisburg in the late 60s, with that awareness I still wasn't seeing much going on in the Harrisburg area that reflected that kind of thing that I had seen in Philadelphia. Although it was interesting to me, right around 1968/69, a guy approached me in Harrisburg which reminded me of some of the guys I had met in Philadelphia and it occurred to me again, "Oh I guess he is trying to pick me up!" [laughs] That was, I thought, yeah know! He happened to mention that he was new to the community, which was gain interesting to me because well maybe people now are beginning to feel that there was a group in Harrisburg that they could feel comfortable with and hang out with.

**DF:** You were working with the state at that time?

**TB:** No, I was not working for that state at that time. When I moved...I did a lot of work in the 60s and 70s, after doing a lot of work with the insurance company, I did a lot of work in statistical research, particularly with health care programs. There were federal...something called the Regional Federal Program at the federal level, which was looking for solutions to heart cancer and stroke care. I worked with them for a while and worked with some other health research organizations...I had started out in the actuarial field. So I had a background that could play into a statistical career and statistical research. That's what I was doing during that era. Then I was actually the general manager of the Harrisburg Independent Press when I met my wife, she was writing restaurant reviews for us, and it was a job that in the long run didn't pay [laughs] so I ended up as a night clerk at the Summerdale Junction Motel up there for a couple of years. But anyway it was through the Harrisburg Independent Press, primarily I think, that I

again began to learn more about the gay community in Harrisburg. One of our sponsors was Ron Finch at the Bare Wall Gallery and that was kind of a dropping in place for new members of the gay community in the area; they would tend to be referred to him as sort of the person to...

**DF:** And this was where? At the...

**TB:** Right down on Green Street.

**DF:** And what was it called?

**TB:** I was called the Bare Wall Gallery.

**DF:** Gallery of...?

**TB:** Oh he just sold jewelry and craft items and what not, and he had a section in the back, he sold greeting cards, and there was little section around the corner from the greeting cards where he had greeting cards that gay people would find of interest, or be more appropriate for them to send to their friends. He always ran an ad at that time the Harrisburg Independent Press was being published, it was called Harrisburg: The Monthly News Magazine, and he always ran an ad with us. So every month I would go down to check on his ad and learn a little bit from him about the area. I know one time I used to drop in and buy little gift items there to support him because he was supporting us [laughs]. One day he made the comment, I guess it was father's day coming up, he said, "Well we not much of a Father's Day Photoshop here." [laughs] I mean his customers would not be that interested in items for Father's Day. But he for a long time, as I say, the referral point for new people in the community who wanted to find out where they would be welcomed with other gay people. Also then at the same time that was going on I was helping out with the distribution with the Harrisburg Area Women's News, which had...addressed feminist concerns and one of things that was developing in that group, and which I never quite got a full understanding of, but because I knew a few of the women who were involved and the women I knew were heterosexual, but here was also another clique within that organization which was more of a lesbian centered group, which was kind of interesting. They were at first suspicious of any guys who were interested in helping out [laughs]...

**DF:** Both the straight and the gay women?

**TB:** Well they had their suspicions of the straight women as well, particularly of men who were, you know...it was kind of interesting. The location where we had the Harrisburg Independent Press, it was on the second floor of the same building where they had a room on the third floor, and at times they would just sort of, they would make comments about the women they were working with us at the Harrisburg Independent Press, but...they would say, "oh there you go." That they were traders or you know, or "oh you're going to help out those people guys." That's the sort of thing we are trying to get away from and here you are you know...

**DF:** These were gay women referring to straight women?

**TB:** Straight women who were helping us out on the Independent Press. But at the same time I did, through my friends, help them out with some activities that they came to pretty much accept me as being okay, an okay guy because I followed orders, I didn't come in and try to direct anything, I just was there. "Okay that's what you want to do? Here, I'll help you do it." In fact, one of the lesbians in the group said, "Tom you're a real prince!" [laughs] so I suppose that was a compliment, I don't know! So that was my experience with the community in this area up to the late '70s. Then when Rebecca and I got married, we moved to Los Angeles for three years and coming back in the 1980s, I don't think there was much what I would call development in terms of, "Oh yeah things are a lot more open now," or anything like that and it just seemed to me that things were pretty much where they were when we left, in terms of the gay community. What actually brought it more to my attention, even with working with the state I didn't meet any people whom I could look at and say, "Oh okay, I understand that this person was gay." It just didn't seem like something that was brought up. Whether that was concern about jobs or whatever, I don't know. But it was actually through our daughter that we became much more involved with the gay community activities because she was in theater. She met friends who were gay and what struck me about it was, particularly by the time she was in middle school and high school, from the late 90s till 2000s, was the fact that the...it seemed to be no big deal. Now there may have been kids in the school for whom it would have been a big deal, but she wasn't particularly hanging out with those kids. We were...we became involved with the Lower Paxton Youth Center on Locust Lane. Their activities were...

**DF:** You were living in Colonial Park at the time?

**TB:** Yes, we were living in Colonial Park.

**DF:** And what school system was she in?

**TB:** Central Dauphin. Yeah Central Dauphin. She was in high school when they built the new high school out on Linglestown Road, or off of Linglestown Road. She and gone to the...she had gone to Philips Elementary which was kind of...there's a split within the Central Dauphin School District, between Central Dauphin East and Central Dauphin. I often I say it's often as if Locust Lane and Union Deposit Road is the Mason-Dixon Line or something with those two communities that they are serving, the Northern Part of the District and the Southern Part of the District. We lived just off Locust Lane. She went to Philips Elementary, and then from there she went to the Central Dauphin Middle School on Locust Lane. Well no she went to Central Dauphin East Junior High, which it was called then. But because she lived on this boarder line, they ended up sending her to Central Dauphin High School, even though she had gone to East in Junior high. There she had to make a choice, because at the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade they had to build a new high school then she had to make a choice between either going to CD East or going to the new school out on the hill. They were giving the kids who were in 9<sup>th</sup> grade that choice. She ended up going to school out on the hill because most of her friends were actually living in that part to the district. I'm not sure she was...well I don't think she was happy with the choice because new high school was built like prison. Every 45 minutes you're running from one end of it to another and you don't have time to get your locker and everything, but the group that she then became more and more affiliated with was the group that was coming together for activities at the Lower Paxton Youth Center. Her junior and senior years she actually did her half time

program between Capital Area School of the Arts, their theater program, and then, you know, classes at Central Dauphin High School for the other half of the day. That group in particular was very open to anybody. One of the things about the activities at the youth center, I became a board member of eventually, was that nobody was turned away and that nobody made fun of anybody. So if you were different that was okay. You're welcome to come in.

**DF:** Who sponsored that center?

**TB:** That was community sponsored. For years we just relied on donations. Now, if the kids had an activity, and they would have a couple nights a month where they would bring in local bands to play and that kind of thing, they would pay a nominal charge, like give bucks or something like that for a Saturday evening. That paid the bills for a while. Then I think social media probably had an effect because all of a sudden, kids weren't getting together to do things as much as they used to. It was like they could communicate with each other without being in the same room. We began to notice a drop off, there was a particularly active group, and it was the group that was in my daughter's senior class at Central Dauphin, and when they left there was not another group ready to step up and take over for them. So we began to do other things. We had some county money that we received to do anti-smoking, anti-drugs kinds of programs, building self-esteem among young people and what not. That happened to lead to our having a 21<sup>st</sup> century community learning center and Swatara Middle School for three years. That's a federal program that was run through the Department of Education in Pennsylvania. It was an actual after school program for middle school students. They would get tuition, well not tuition but the tuition was played by the Department of Education, so it was a free after school program for them. They would get tutoring help and they would have other activities going on until a bus picked them up and took them home at the end of the day. It was a big help to that community in particular where a lot of parents weren't home in the afternoon and it meant that their kids were in a safe place, getting help with school work and what not. That lasted for three years, it was a three year grant and then they made changes in the program and what not.

**DF:** That wasn't connected to the other community youth center that you mentioned earlier?

**TB:** Oh yeah, it was operated by us.

**DF:** Oh okay!

**TB:** Yeah we actually...it was a way for us to keep that youth center open because the money we were receiving to run the program at Swatara Middle School included util...money to pay our utilities at the office, that kind of thing. So we were able to keep that other program open even though it wasn't self-sustaining anymore. Right now we've had some problems. The club house is 50 years old and you know trying to maintain it has been a problem so we are in a situation right now where we don't know if it will continue or not.

**DF:** Well you mentioned that no one was turned away...

**TB:** Right, right.

**DF:** So what did that mean to the kinds of programs that were offered there? The kinds of...

**TB:** Well for example, if a group came to us and had a legitimate charital...charitable program that they wanted to support and instead of having the money at the door come to use, they wanted to have an event there that night where they would get to keep the receipts from the door and we could sell refreshments or something. So we did that on a number of occasions and we had some LGBT groups come to us for specific programs like that, and we ran them at the center.

**DF:** It would be open?

**TB:** Open to anyone and they were always well supported by the kids!

**DF:** But they would be openly LGBT?

**TB:** Oh yeah, yeah! Lilly Marvin and other people associated with him would be there...

**DF:** Is this before the center downtown?

**TB:** Yeah this would have been...when did that one open? I don't know.

**LM:** Commons Roads was already in existence I think...

**TB:** Yeah Commons Roads...

**LM:** The center, the center where it is now, was not there.

**TB:** Yeah, it didn't...it was before it actually opened at the Midtown Location.

**LM:** That is recent!

**TB:** That's what I though, yeah.

**LM:** Quite recent actually.

**TB:** Yeah these events occurred before that. As I say, it didn't matter to the kids that "oh well the money is going to go to this or that organization, yeah hey that's okay! They're cool, we're with them."

**DF:** And your daughter was involved with it?

**TB:** Oh yeah, yeah. She was always...we liked it because it was place for her to go because we knew she was okay because we knew people on the board before we even became involved. People who were friends of ours were on the board. I know I asked my wife one time, I said, "Well exactly what is this place?" And she starts, "Oh well you know that's..." and she names



people. “Oh that’s great! I know she’s safe there. I know she’s okay.” You, know that was are only concern.

**DF:** Was there any resistance from any members of the community?

**TB:** Not that I ever knew of. No, no. I think everybody just thought, “hey you know it’s a place where the kids can just hang out and have a good time. They are safe there.” So no one actually paid attention to who was arriving and leaving.

**DF:** So how about your daughter? How - what was her relationship to the LGBT community?

**TB:** Oh she was very open to it. She...Common Roads at one point sponsored a play that dealt with the whole issue of young people and how they had to...if they were going to come out how they would go about it. Whether they would have problems with their parents, problems at work, you know, problems in other social settings. She played a young lesbian who was still in high school and wanted to let her parents know that she was different and that was going to be her life. So, oh yeah, she was always very positive. A lot of her friends at school and through theater productions and what not were gay, and that was never a problem for her. She would socialize with them and you know, her friends, her other friends, that was up to them. She wasn’t going to turn anybody away.

**DF:** I think that, in my personal experience, that straight people who are involved with the LGBT community have something in their life where they made that transformation, where it was from either negative to something positive, to actually getting involved with the LGBT community. And it doesn’t seem to be that with you. It just seems to be a lifelong non-issue.

**TB:** Well yeah my wife and I, like I say from back in the ‘70s when we met, were involved in programs where there were gay people involved and it’s just “okay that’s fine.” [laughs] I don’t know if we ever looked at anybody and worried about if he or she...it just has never occurred to me to think of people in those terms. I guess our daughter just simply picked up on that and went with.

**DF:** What is your reaction or feeling about the last ten years?

**TB:** Well the last ten years, I’m very glad that the LGBT community has a place in Harrisburg that they can say, “here we are, we might have events here, everyone is welcome to participate.” I think that’s certainly a good thing. I think the fact that people now recognize that that’s always going to be with us is good. I think that I have concerns when I hear that a religious organization or something is still saying its...just when they call it unnatural I just find that kind of amusing because I think well if by nature a person is attracted to another person what’s unnatural about that? I just don’t understand! That...well that’s kind of interesting because our daughter’s adopted. We adopted her when she was three days old. One of the first things we learned was the idea that, oh okay, that she has biological parents and then she has her adoptive parents, or however you want to put it, but hearing people say “oh well then you’re not her natural parents!” It’s kind of amusing [laughs] to us, because what’s unnatural? She has been with us since she was three days old! What’s unnatural about it is that she has another pair out here who are not

with her, you know it's like...but yeah so we always used the expression birth parents or biological parents when we refer to those, but yeah it's kind of the same thing. This idea that you have natural parents, that you have a natural relationship with other people and unnatural, to me unnatural would have a much more sinister exploitive sound to it than just a gay relationship.

**LM:** You were talking about programming at the youth center and that gay kids wanted to have some programming there. How did their programming differ from the rest of the kids?

**TB:** It didn't. Now, one of the things that they would do, sometimes, is they would bring in lecturers or what not, I mean from the ACLU or from other organizations, and they would present ideas that might be new to some of the kids who were there. I am sure that just interacting, knowing that a particular program was being staged for the purpose of supporting a particular group, probably was something that maybe sparked the curiosities of some for the kids who came to attend. Then there were certainly people representing that organization there that they could talk to, but as far as the actual events themselves, they were the same as any other...

**DF:** These were all teenagers?

**TB:** Yeah, yeah. Sometimes young adult, college age, would come in. They would have the bands and any other kinds of things going on. Now they might between one band set and the next band set they might get up and talk about what they are, who they are, the money for this event is going to support us and what we are trying to do is reach out to the community have them aware of us and interact and that kind of thing. So I mean it was like...the kids that were coming there were not "oh wow I didn't realize that these people were going to be here!"

**DF:** You never saw any of that?

**TB:** No, no, no. There was never anything like that.

**DF:** I would expect that in some communities around here the parents would have an issue with that?

**TB:** Oh, I'm sure they were! I know just before I joined the board, was the first time that they wanted to bring in a speaker from the ACLU. I think that, there were some people who had been involved...see this youth center was a successor organization to a community group that had owned this, operated this property for about 40 years. The property had been donated by someone who lived in Colonial Park back in the early 1960s. And it was there and they had a lot of sports programs and they had, you know, families could come and hold events on this property, and I think as time went by, there were plenty of times throughout the community for that kind of thing. It just was falling into disuse and somebody said well, who was getting the most out of it, well the kids programs, those teenagers still want to do this stuff, and it became reincorporated as the Lower Paxton Youth Center. Now I would guess that back prior to that last ten years there would have been families in the community who certainly would have been concerned about having your gay group come in and hold some event there, particularly as a fundraiser or something, but once they turned it over they didn't seem to pay much more

attention to it. As I say there were times when I guess somebody must have question the idea of say, having somebody from the ACLU come in and speak to the kids, but at that same time...

**LM:** Why would they question that?

**TB:** Because again you have to look at the neighborhood. Harrisburg in the 1950s, there was a white flight to the West Shore. Then when Camp Hill, New Cumberland started to fill up, then they had to go East. So a lot of the families that moved into that Colonial Park area in those days probably would have had issues with any number of groups that would want to have used that property. Probably because the ACLU would support the rights of those groups, there were probably still a few people in the community who, when that issue came up decided that "I don't know if I want that." Actually the most active young person in that group, and our student advisory council that time, had just won an award from ACLU and clearly everybody was very supportive of her. So they let this guy come in and there may have been a few parents that decided they didn't want their parents there anymore so I don't know. I wasn't actually involved in it. It was only because after joining the board I was looking through this old minutes and they had this one meeting where all these parents came and they voted to go ahead and invite Andy Hoover from the ACLU to come out and speak. Then he was there a couple more times after that and they had other speakers, they would sometimes get somebody on the faculty from HACC or someplace to come in and talk about you know, the history of certain political movements and what not. I think some of the kids, that was there first exposure to a lot of things that went on before they were born maybe or when they were very young and weren't very aware of what it all meant. Yeah there was never, when I was affiliated with them, any big concern about anybody coming in.

**DF:** Is there anything that has surprised you in the last ten years that you want...as it relates to the LGBT community?

**TB:** Well the only thing would be on the national level. I do find it interesting how quickly marriage is being approved in so many different states. Some states I would not have expected it to happen. [someone says something inaudible] Yeah well we're still waiting [laughs] But no, I mean seriously, I think that has been reflected in surveys when they do surveys of early generations as opposed to our daughter's generation, so what do you think about this? What do I care you know? If they want to do that, that's fine. It's not affecting me in any way. I mean you can just go back and look at an earlier generation where the same issues would have been raised by biracial marriages and that whole thing. We got past that and getting past this, so...

**DF:** You don't see it as a threat to your marriage?

**TB:** [laughs] Certainly not!

**DF:** Is there anything that we have missed? Anything that you'd like to add that we didn't talk about?

**TB:** No. don't know unless there are any more question you have?

**DF:** No I think we are pretty good. I think we're pretty good. Thank-you very much.

**TB:** Oh you're welcome.

**DF:** I do have one paper for you to sign and that gives us permission. If you will just fill out the information to down here where it says interview signature. Down to that point.

**LM:** Ask him to put it on film too. That we have permission.

**DF:** yes, would you let us know on film that we have permission to use this video.

**TB:** Yes, you have my permission to use this video. How actually will you be using it?

**LM:** We are going to mess it all up.  
[everyone laughs]

**TB:** Well that's what I figured! You're going to edit it into something...

**DF:** Twist the words.

**LM:** We are going to make you a homophobe.

[everyone laughs]

**DF:** We will see how welcome you feel in this community.

**TB:** Yeah right. I'm going to start getting phones calls like, "How could you! What did you do?"

**LM:** Exactly!

**TB:** Okay [signs papers]

**LM:** It is interesting to me, in hearing what he has to say at how similarly we were raised as this whole thing being a non-issue.

**DF:** Yeah because with...

**LM:** Because I was raised the same but it was like...What are people upset about? Whatever!?  
You know?

**DF:** Yeah. When we interviewed Anne, it was a total opposite where she was born in a very religious community and she had to get told about things.

**LM:** Yah, yah. Cause I think, certainly...my father's a minister, a UCC minster, and certainly there were people in the congregation that might have been against the whole thing but [TAPE ENDS]