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Interviewee: Barbara Darkes

Interviewer: Anya Janssen

Present: Katherine Morales

Date of Interview: 26 March 2015

Location of Interview: Harrisburg, PA

Proofreader: Katie McCauley

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Abstract:

Growing up in the conservative Lebanon County of central PA, Barbara Darkes attended grade school through the beginning of her pre-law college career without experiencing any attraction to women. It was at her summer job at the local YMCA during college that Barbara met and eventually fell in love with her long-term partner, Kathy. This same-sex relationship was the first for both of them, for neither woman had previously identified as a lesbian. Due to the conservative environment of central PA, the two women kept their relationship secret for years, which proved emotionally exhausting for both of them. Fortunately for Barbara, her work environment at McNees Wallace & Nurick, LLC, proved to be accepting and embracing of her intimacy with Kathy, and it became the site of the beginning of their coming out experiences in 2012. Although Barbara and Kathy encountered some painful disapproval during their coming out process, they also found spaces of acceptance that embraced them. The two married privately in Maryland in 2013, and they continue to have a healthy and loving relationship with each other and with Kathy's kids. Barbara uses her position as a community organizer and as president of the LGBT Center to work towards generating a more accepting environment for LGBT people in the larger central Pennsylvania community.

AJ: Okay, so as you know, we are doing the LGB Center—LGBT Center is conducting interviews to try to really put experiences on the record, you know, in first person.

BD: Mhm.

AJ: To share the experiences of these people of this community. So I'm not going to go too much into that.

BD: Okay.

AJ: But my name is Anya Janssen, as the interviewer. Here we have with us Barbara Darkes. Would you mind just spelling your name so we have it on the record?

BD: Sure, sure. It's B-A-R-B-A-R-A, last name D-A-R-K-E-S.

AJ: Thank you. We are here at—in Harrisburg at your office of McNees—did I say that right?

BD: Yes.

AJ: Okay, and it is Thursday the 26th—okay, perfect. Do I have your permission to conduct this interview and video record it?

BD: Yes, you do.

AJ: Okay, thank you. And as we finish up the interview, you will be able to use your discretion—if anything you don't want in, we can take out. So just so you're aware of that.

BD: Okay.

AJ: So without further ado, I guess—can we just start with giving, like, a brief overview of your basics? Like, where did you grow up, your family life?

BD: Sure.

AJ: When, where did you go to school? Things like that.

BD: Sure. I grew up in Northern Lebanon County in Pennsylvania, which is just a county east of Dauphin County. I went to Northern Lebanon School District all through gr—you know, grade school all the way up through high school.

AJ: This was public school.

BD: It was public school.

AJ: Okay.

BD: Yeah. And the community I grew up in was a very rural little town. I was one of five in the family—my mother, my father, and I have an older sister and an older brother. And—lived there all my life until I was in college, and then my mother and I moved to the city of Lebanon. My brother and sister had matriculated out—my parents had divorced—and I was with my mom and in the city of Lebanon, then, until—I don't know, I was probably 23 or 24 when I moved out on my own. But stayed in the city of Lebanon.

AJ: Okay. So after—did you, I'm sorry, did you go to, like, a college after your primary education?

BD: I did.

AJ: Okay.

BD: I did. I went—sorry, I completely skipped that.

AJ: No, no, no, don't be sorry.

BD: I went [laughs]—I went—after high school, I went immediately to—to college. I went to West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where I studied criminal justice.

AJ: Okay.

BD: And I graduated from there in—December of two—of 1987. And I immediately began to work for the county of Lebanon in probation and parole. And I worked full time there for about—let's see, that was '87, I started law school in '91, so I actually took a break between college and law school. I went to law school, then, from 1991 to 1995 at Widener [University] in Harrisburg.

AJ: Okay. During that break, did you take a break for a purpose, or was there any particular reason for that break? Or...

BD: I took a break because I thought I was done going to college.

AJ: Okay.

BD: I didn't really ever have aspirations, at that point, of going to law school, but being involved with the criminal justice sector and being in court a lot, I grew interested in it, and then Widener—which is actually based out of Chester, Pennsylvania—opened a law school in Harrisburg, which was offering an evening program. So I attended the evening program, which is a four-year program, while I continued to work full-time.

AJ: And where were you—you say you worked full time. Where were you working at this point?

BD: At that point, I was—when I started law school, I was working for Lebanon County. I was working in the probation and parole department—

AJ: Oh, okay, that's what you mentioned—okay.

BD: Yeah. And I was—I was an adult probation and parole officer there from 1987 until 1993, and I left there in 1993 while I was midstream in my law school to go to work for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania at the Department of Transportation, where I worked full-time as a legal intern until I graduated from law school in 1995, and then got a full time position with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a—as a starting attorney.

AJ: Okay. During—during this whole time of going to school and working, did—did you participate in any religious groups, or have any religious affiliation whatsoever?

BD: I did. I grew up Protestant. I actually converted to Catholicism when I was in college.

AJ: Did you? Okay.

BD: I did. [laughs] I did. And I—I was active in the Catholic Church probably—I think I was probably about—this is hard to remember, it's been so long. I want to say 30 to 35—it's probably—it's probably not even that long—it's probably longer than that ago. Maybe until

about I was about 30 years old, and then I completely left the Catholic Church, and I am not—I am not affiliated with any organized religion at this point in my life.

AJ: Was there some particular moment in your life that made you break your ties with the Catholicism—or what?

BD: Really, just—it was very clear that my lifestyle and the Catholic faith didn't jive—is to be perfectly frank. So it was—I—I decided I wasn't going to live a charade in the Church, and I just—I fell away from the Church.

AJ: And when you say your “personal lifestyle”—is that your sexual identity that you're speaking of? Or...

BD: Correct.

AJ: Okay. Can you talk more about that?

BD: Not only. Not only that.

AJ: Okay.

BD: But other—other—other—other philosophies of the Church that I—as I matured, realized I did not agree with. But the biggest one was the fact that, you know, I was involved in a same-sex relationship, and that clearly was not anything that was acceptable to—in the Catholic faith.

AK: Right. Okay. Can you talk a little bit more about your personal life—and you said it didn't jive with the Catholic Church, can you just talk a little bit more about why and what else you were affiliated with or doing at the time?

BD: Well, I mean, clearly the, you know, message of the Church has been—continues to be—although there's some movement to loosen that a little bit—that, you know, homosexuality—anything other than male-female relationships in marriage is unacceptable. And I was in—like I said, I was involved in a same-sex relationship, the same one I'm involved in today.

AJ: Wow.

BD: And it—it didn't—it didn't work. And so I knew that for me, I didn't want to be in a situation where I was participating in a faith half-heartedly.

AJ: Exactly. Did you have—so you said you were in a same-sex relationship—

BD: Mhm.

AJ: So did you have—was there a moment in your life that was a big, like, coming out experience for you? I mean, was—did that, like, mark—

BD: [laughs] There was lots of them.

AJ: There was lots of them? Really?

BD: There continues to be lots of them, actually.

AJ: Okay.

BD: It's interesting, because I, you know, I grew up—I didn't really date a lot in high school. I never really had a long-term relationship with anyone in high school. I—in—throughout school was interested in—in males, even through—through college.

AJ: You were?

BD: I was.

AJ: You were. Okay.

BD: But I never—I never got into a rel—a long-term relationship with anyone. My current spouse is the first person I ever had a long-term relationship with. And she—we became—we were friends first. We were—we became very good friends. I was—I was young, I was—I was just out of—I was in college at the time when we became very good friends.

AJ: Was she your classmate?

BD: She was not. She actually—I met Kathy at my summer job.

AJ: Okay.

BD: I worked as the lifeguard at the local YMCA during the summers when I was in college, and Kathy was there also working day camp, doing arts and crafts with her four children.

AJ: Oh wow.

BD: Who were between five and—let me think—Jen is...probably between, like, five and 12. So I actually met Kathy's kids first in the swimming pool. [both laugh] And we just became friends. And honestly for quite a few years we were—we were friends. And—but we—it became obvious that we had a physical attraction to one another, and we had a very, very deep relationship. And so really the first coming out was coming out to ourselves.

AJ: Okay. I'm sorry if this is too personal, but was she—so this was your first?

BD: Mhm.

AJ: Okay.

BD: Yeah. This was my first—this was my first same-sex relationship, and this was her first same-sex relationship. So—and Kathy actually is—she’s 11 years older than me, so she was—

AJ: Oh, wow, okay.

BD: So she was in her early 30s at the time. So anyway, she, you know—we recognized that there was something more than just friendship, and it just—it went from there. But really, well, the first thing was coming out to ourselves, which is not an easy step to get through. I mean, I think there are some folks who, from the time they’re 10, will say, “I know that I’m attracted to males and/or females.” In fact, Kathy’s son, who is her youngest child, is—is gay, and it was interesting ‘cause just recently, he—we asked him when did he know he was gay, and he said—because I was talking to somebody else who said that by the time he was 10 he knew—and Steven said, “I was very young—probably younger than that.” Which I thought was—

AJ: And how—wait, how old is he now?

BD: Steven is now 35.

AJ: Oh, so he’s much older, okay.

BD: Yeah, he is 35 now. But he didn’t come out to people until he was in college. So anyway—so really it was coming out to ourselves first, and to each other, and we didn’t come out to anyone else until 2012.

AJ: Really? Wow, okay.

BD: [laughs] So it was a long—it was a long time of a very secluded lifestyle.

AJ: And was this because it was just your personal choice? You were afraid of the repercussions?

BD: Fear. Fear, yeah. It was predominantly fear. It was, you know—Kathy has four children, she didn’t want to lose her children. I don’t think that would have happened, but we didn’t know. Also other fears of losing family members, because, you know, Lebanon County—I mean, obviously central Pennsylvania is an incredibly conservative area. Lebanon County is more conservative than even Dauphin County or Cumberland County. So it’s not—I still frankly—I—I still don’t know where the LGBT community is in Lebanon County. And I’ve asked other people, and where, and nobody seems to know, so it’s—it’s interesting. It’s a very sheltered thing. So it wasn’t until 2012 that we decided, “Enough,” and we came out to our families. And there was—you know, that was driven by a couple of things—I’ve—I started working here at McNeese Wallace & Nurick in 2000. And Kathy was around—you know, she used to work in Harrisburg. She’d be around at things. After—after work people would see us together, and there were a lot of presumptions made.

AJ: Okay.

BD: The first time I really made any step toward any admission would be when I did my will, and everything was going to Kathy and her—you know [laughs]—so it became apparent to one of my colleagues, and again, that was a presumption drawn that, you know, I was involved in a same-sex relationship and so—and not in a—not in a bad way, it was a very accepting thing. And then a few years later, they allowed us to put same-sex partners on our health benefits. And so I signed the form. And so that was a second kind of wave of coming out.

AJ: Was that through, like, the domestic partnership? Or, I mean...

BD: Mhm. Yeah, we weren't married at that time.

AJ: Right, exactly.

BD: But yeah, it was a domestic partnership. So we—so that was kind of the second wave, and then Kathy attended—Kathy really didn't attend formal events with me, you know, we have a dinner dance every year—I always went solo. If I went to fundraising events or, you know, other dinners that we get invited to, I would go alone. And there was an event where I was being recognized that we were, you know—I was told you can invite whatever, whoever you want to. So I invited my mother and my brother and Kathy and her—I think her daughter, one of her daughters came too. And that was that. I mean, there was some colleagues there, but you know, at some point in that evening, it was clear to me that somebody must have said something to somebody, as in, “Who is that?” because there was another dinner that—four or five months later—that I had been asked to attend. It was a fundraiser, and I said I would go, but there was still one seat at the table empty, and one of my partners came into my office and said, “Why don't you bring Kathy?” You know, so it was—it was the—that was—it was clear to me at that point that it was okay.

AJ: Okay.

BD: So I said, “I'll ask,” so I asked, and she came, and that was the beginning of the end of, you know—as far as people knew here, Kathy was my significant other.

AJ: And that was largely accepted by your colleagues?

BD: Yeah. I mean, accepted, embraced—

AJ: Embraced. Okay.

BD: Very—very much so. 'Cause in fact, the people in this building are probably the reason that we decided that it was okay to come out. Yeah. So it was pretty powerful for us to be accepted like that, because I won't be sh—you know, we're pretty conservative folks in this building too [laughs], so it's—but it—it was okay, and—and that was the beginning of the end. And I, in 2012, probably in the spring, early summer—I just went home to Kathy one day and said, “I want to come out to everyone. I'm tired. I'm exhausted.” I mean, it's exhausting, because you go to things alone, you're constantly—not living a—it's kind of like living a lie, because, I mean, we never lied about it—we never really got asked about it.

AJ: Okay.

BD: But it's just one of those things where—it's a don't ask, don't tell thing, right—so you're not saying anything, but everybody seemingly seems to think that's the case, but you don't say anything, and it truly is an exhausting, exhausting way to live your life. I mean, it's like you have this—you have this life, and then you have the secret life over here.

AJ: Right.

BD: And Kathy and I—I mean, we lived together for 16 years, but—

AJ: This whole time you were living together?

BD: We lived together—we have lived together—yeah, about 16 or 18 years now that we've actually lived together. But I mean, there were times when her kids were with us, not with us, but again, nobody ever asked the question. So we just—and we never—we never spoke about it. So we did lead—lead—we led a pretty secluded life socially. Not that we didn't do things together, but when it came time to—for us to have other events—I mean, Christmas, I went to my family Christmas, she went to her family, and, you know, that's just the way it was. But it—and, you know, I said that to her, and she wasn't quite ready, 'cause she still had this fear of really, the kids—her losing the kids, and again, they're all grown adults at this point, but we also have two grandsons, and that was weighing heav—heavily on her mind. She didn't wanna not be able to see her grandsons, and, you know, she shocked me in August of that year. We were on our way home from Virginia, we had been to a wedding, and she said, "We're coming out today." And literally we—we drove from Virginia, two of her children were in western Maryland, and we drove from—through Virginia up through western Maryland, stopped with Julia and Steven, told them, and then proceeded to Harrisburg—and that with her oldest daughter, who has the two—two sons. And then went to pick up her second daughter, because she needed a ride, and told her. And so all in one Sunday afternoon, we came out to her four kids, and the Earth didn't end, and it was all okay. In the course of the next week to months, we proceeded to come out to the rest of our family members. And once that was done, I mean—that seemed to us to be the most important people to come out to.

AJ: The family.

BD: 'Cause who else do you—those are the people you worry about the most—

AJ: Of course, of course.

BD: "What about my family?" And you just have to get to a point where you have to be ready to accept whatever comes, and if that meant we were gonna lose people, then we were gonna lose people.

AJ: Okay.

BD: So you just get to that point where you say, you know, “To heck with it. I can’t continue to live my life this way.” So.

AJ: So the—the kids—her kids didn’t know, even though you were living together. They just—

BD: Again—

AJ: It was like a don’t ask, don’t tell

BD: It was like a don’t ask, don’t tell—

AJ: Okay. Okay.

BD: I think I—I mean, there had to be some suspicion—

AJ: Right.

BD: They’re not stupid people. [laughs] But...

AJ: It wasn’t out in the open, regardless of what they—okay. Okay.

BD: Was not—it was not out in the open, and none of them ever asked, and we just—you know, we didn’t talk about it. It just was not an issue that came up, and we just continued to live life, and it—that’s just the way it was. It was a kind of a—a “Really?” but, you know, that was the one thing we—we wanted very much to not put that on them, and say, “Obviously you know.”

AJ: Of course.

BD: We didn’t do that. We basically said, “This is the situation.” And for the most part it was accepted. I mean, you know, it was—it— and it’s always an interesting thing to go through, because initially there were some folks who—[sighs] who were—who vocalized to us that they were okay with it, but then we would hear things later on; things, frankly, that we probably never should have heard. Things in particular, like, family member things that were said and—and they hurt, but again, you have to get to that point where you have to say, “Okay, you know, it’s not my problem, it’s your problem. And you have to—you have to deal with it. I’m the same person as I was.”

AJ: That can’t be easy to just, you know, get to that point.

BD: It’s—it’s not. It’s—it’s a very difficult process. But it is by far the most liberating thing I’ve ever done. Because I—there’s nothing—there’s not a chain around my neck anymore. So—because there was always that fear: “Well, what if somebody asks? What am I going to say? You know, if somebody says to me, ‘Are you and Kathy more than just friends?’ I don’t really have her permission to say yes”—because there were these pent-up fears, but really, nobody ever asked. And so—

AJ: That's almost telling in and of itself. Wow.

BD: Mhm. I mean, the other thing with—with coming out that I will add is that it's an ongoing thing.

AJ: Okay.

BD: It never ends. I mean, when somebody asks me—I had somebody ask me last—just somebody I had never met, asked—yeah, they asked in casual conversation, “Are you married?” “Yes.” “What does your husband do?” “Well, actually...” You know, and so—you've gotta go in through this litany—it is a constant—it is a constant thing, because there are presumptions made that if you're married, you're married to somebody of the opposite sex. And so that's frustrating, so I think, you know, if there is one message I would give to society—is don't presume anything, and it's hard, because I do the same thing, you know?

AJ: Mhm.

BD: But to think before you ask—you can phrase the question differently so you don't even have to broach the issue.

AJ: It doesn't have to be exclusive.

BD: Correct. Yeah.

AJ: Right. So now, the—can—can we talk about when you went from domestic partnership, living together, to marriage?

BD: Sure! So tell the story?

AJ: Yeah, like, what—when did it happen, how did it happen?

BD: Well, after that—well that—we came out in August of 2012, and I mean, we knew we wanted to get married. We hadn't really set anything—set anything up. And initially we had talked about getting married—having a—having an actual, just a commitment ceremony in Pennsylvania, 'cause it was not legal in Pennsylvania—

AJ: Until 2013, correct?

BD: Correct. So we had—we were talking about commitment ceremony and—and having, you know—inviting guests and all—all of this. And we got away from that, because, you know, I wanted—well, I decided if we were going to get married, we were going to actually legally be married. Because I knew Pennsylvania had to honor it if I went to another state and got married, or at least the federal government would acknowledge it. So we actually—in May of 2013, actually, we decided to get married in Maryland, just the two of us. We didn't invite anyone—in fact, we didn't tell anyone until the night before. So—we told one person the night before. And so we just—we went down to the Baltimore city courthouse and got our marriage license. And

when you get your marriage license at the Baltimore city courthouse, you have to get married in the city of Baltimore. So the plan was that we were going back to the courthouse on Friday, May 3rd in the morning and lassoing two witnesses from the hallway. [both laugh] Which is what you have to do. And I—I obviously spend a lot of time in court, and the Baltimore city courthouse is—is one of the dreariest places you’ll—you’ll ever want to go to, and decided that we weren’t getting married in the courthouse, so I actually found an officiant to marry us, and we got married on the—on the Broadway Pier in Fell’s Point. But Kathy didn’t know that, that was all a surprise. It was—it wasn’t—

AJ: Oh, so you planned this beforehand.

BD: She thought we were still going to the courthouse, but I went to Fell’s Point, and she’s asking me what we’re doing here, and I said, “We’re going to get married here.” So it was—it was fun, we had a great time. And then we went off and spent the weekend in Annapolis, and I actually had an—I had an event to go to [laughs] so we went to Annapolis to a Bar—a Bar Association event. And we had a great time. People were surprised. You know, people—it was funny, because we didn’t really talk about it, but I was—we were sitting at a table, and one of my—one of my partners here was there, and she was sitting across the table, and I—I must have had my hand up at some point—she saw my rings. And I had been wearing an engagement ring for months—

AJ: Okay.

BD: And she—but—and she just bound out of her chair and said, “Oh my goodness, you’re wearing rings!” And that was the end of that. Everybody found out pretty quickly that we were celebrating our marriage, but—so that’s how—that’s how we got married. And there—again, there was some dissention about that because we didn’t invite anyone, but, you know, again [sighs], we didn’t want anybody to be uncomfortable. It was something we wanted to share with one another without any—any grief or aggravation, and we just decided that that was the way to go, and there were some people that were unhappy that they didn’t get to see that or be a part of it, but it was the—and there were some people who vocalized that they were glad they hadn’t had to witness it.

AJ: Wow.

BD: Including family members. And again, that was—stuff got back to us that, you know, kind of goes through you like a knife. But I can’t—I can’t change that.

AJ: No, you can’t.

BD: So anyway, we had a big party then in the fall, at our home.

AJ: Okay, you did. Okay.

BD: We did, we—we invited lots of people. We had probably over—I don't remember how many—probably over 100 people at the house. We had tents and a caterer—it was a catered event, it was great. We had a—we had a fantastic time.

AJ: So that's what really matters—the celebration. So you—when you—you said you got married in Maryland. Was that—was that because—the Pennsylvania hadn't—?

BD: Correct. We got married before Pennsylvania's law changed.

AJ: But was it already in the works? Because that was going on for a while, right?

BD: It was. Yeah. But I mean, nobody really knew for sure when it was gonna come down, or what the decision was gonna be.

AJ: Yeah, exactly.

BD: We decided, “We're, you know, we're pressing forward with this.”

AJ: Okay.

BD: And—and so we went to Maryland.

AJ: Okay. Just wanted to clear that up. So just one more thing on the family, and then we can move onto, like, organizational things. I'm curious, did—did you—so it—it's Kathy's children. Did you do any sort of process of, like, adopting them? Or does it matter, 'cause they're already adults now? Or like...

BD: No, I—I did not. And they—they were adults when we got married, we—[sigh] I mean, their father is still around, so I mean, it would never be a situation where that ever would have happened. But I did spend a lot of time...helping—is the best way to say—as far as raising them.

AJ: Okay. Okay.

BD: I mean, I—they—we didn't live together when they were growing up. We—we were together, but not living together.

AJ: I see.

BD: But her oldest daughter—I was living on my own—her oldest daughter, when she came home from college, lived with me for a little while. And then her second oldest daughter lived with the both of us for quite a few years, actually, and then her son, Steven, lived with us for just a little bit in between college and other things, so—but I was—I've been a part of their lives for a long time.

AJ: Okay.

BD: And still am.

AJ: Good.

BD: So—in fact, we were just at an event for her youngest daughter last night, who’s actually getting her Master’s degree from Shepherd University, and she’s doing her thesis stuff right now. So we went to an event and I’m introduced—she introduced Kathy and I as her moms.

AJ: Oh, she did? Okay. Okay.

BD: Yeah. So some people are very accepting. Others are still, you know, antagonizing over it. So. And it’s interesting, too, because it’s—my brother and sister have been very accepting, and my mother—she’s on the fence, sometimes better than others. And they attribute it to her age. I mean, my mom’s in her early 80s, and I don’t give her that by, because I know a lot of people in that age bracket who are very accepting. I also know that there are a lot of people in younger age generations that are very unaccepting.

AJ: Oh, yeah.

BD: So it’s—it’s really not an age thing. It’s what you’re, you know—how open-minded you are about things. And whatever it is—I don’t know what it is. For me, if—if—if you can’t be fully accepting, at least be tolerant.

AJ: Okay.

BD: And don’t say hateful things, because you know, inevitably hateful things get back to people.

AJ: Yeah.

BD: And it just—it chews away at relationships.

AJ: All right, so moving on—just to more, like—less, like, family/personal, more of, like, society organizations. Like, what—can you kind of, like, map out—I mean, how did you get to be the president of the LGBT Center? You know, like, what—what, like—can you kind of, like, map out the organizations that you started with? Or—what inspired you?

BD: Yeah. What—when you say—you mean—you mean LGBT-related organizations? Or just any organizations?

AJ: I mean, I guess yes, specifically, and/or if anything else brought you to here—like whatever—it doesn’t have to be limited to these.

BD: Well, we—we are—we—McNees Wallace & Nurick has a very strong philosophy of giving back to the community.

AJ: Okay.

BD: So we are all encouraged from the minute we walk in the doors here to get involved in the community. So I was involved for quite a few years in other organizations—non-GL—LGBT-related, and—but in—[sigh] let's see, this is my fourth year on the board, but I started attending the LGBT Center's fundraiser—Kathy and I started to attend that probably six years ago. They have an event every November, it's called FAB—the Fall Achievement Benefit—and it is our largest fundraiser. So we started to attend that—that was the beginning in my involvement with the Center. And it was about two years later—it had to be, because I've been on the board for four years—that Bebe [Elizabeth] Mullaugh, who is one of my partners here, who has been—she is an ally to the community, has been forever. And she asked if I was interested in being on the board, and so that was what got me into the board. And how I elevated to the president—I'm still not 100 percent sure. [both laugh] But it all just happened. And I was happy to do it—it is—it is an organization that I am not only involved in because we like to give back to the community, but because it's a very important organization to me. I mean, I'm very—I'm very lucky because I work someplace that I feel as though I'm treated equally.

AJ: You do?

BD: Regardless—absolutely, yeah, I—I don't think I've ever been treated anything otherwise. And if there's anybody in this building who doesn't approve, I don't know about it.

AJ: Both as, like, a woman and—? Okay, wow.

BD: Mhm, yeah. I have no reservations about how I have been treated here. So—so it's, you know, a very important organization for me, and I'm happy to do what I'm doing for the organization, and hopefully I leave it a better—better organization than when I started. So the—I mean—the other things that I'm involved with are really all non-LGBT-related, which is fine with me. I'm on—I'm involved with the Foundation for Enhancing Communities, I'm involved with the James S. Bowman [American] Inn of Court—do some things with the Dauphin County Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Bar Association. But really, my mainstays right now are with the Inn of Court and the LGBT Center, and, well—and the Foundation for Enhancing Communities is getting busier. So.

AJ: Okay. So there was no—nothing, like, in your earlier years—like, of college—

BD: Nothing.

AJ: Nothing, okay.

BD: I wasn't out. Yeah, nothing.

AJ: Exactly, like you said, it was only in—okay? So I guess we've talked here about your work here a little bit, but can you—I'm not, like, completely clear—like, what exactly is your focus, and, like, what do you do here?

BD: Mhm. Sure, I—well, I came over here in 2000 from PennDOT. I was an attorney at PennDOT. I did a lot of motor vehicle and driver license-type things at PennDOT, so I came over here because we have a very large automobile dealer practice, which means we represent car dealers in anything under the sun, from consumer complaints to regulatory compliance to franchise disputes to buy-sells and, you know, mergers and acquisitions and things like that. I focus my practice with auto dealers on day-to-day regulatory compliance, trying to help with consumer disputes—usually that means a lawsuit—and also with franchise disputes. I don't—I don't—I rarely get involved with any of the buy-sell work. If I do, it's regulatory-related. So that's—that's a lot of my work. I also do a lot of transportation—not a lot—but a fair amount of—20 percent of my work is transportation related, so PennDOT and federal motor carrier-related transportation things—again, mostly compliance and day-to-day regulatory things, and then I also do any other regulatory administrative law-type things in the Commonwealth. I do a lot of liquor license practice, some professional licensing work. So anything—anything government-related seems to come in my direction because I had the government experience.

AJ: Okay.

BD: So that's what I do. I am in our litigation group. I co-chair our litigation group. And so I help people solve their problems. So.

AJ: Very good. Okay, so I guess we've covered almost all of this. Is there any—besides, like, the life events and the turning points you've already mentioned—is there any other, like, life event that should be noted here in the course of your experience that relates to, you know, your identity, any—any other...

BD: I mean, the only other thing I would—I guess I would say, and I never really had a discussion with my mother about this, but I wonder if part of—I think part of the reason my mom has been so resistant to full acceptance of—of my relationship with Kathy is that, you know, my father left when I was 14, and I didn't see my dad after that—I mean, maybe three or four times since then. I completely lost touch with him, and I think there are times that my mom blames that—and the fact that I didn't, you know—that there was a bad event there, in which she considers a pretty prime time in life, as maybe what drove me to have a relationship with a woman instead of a man.

AJ: Oh, because—so the reason that you—it's because of your father's leaving, she's saying.

BD: Well, she never said that, I think. I mean, and that's the only other life event—but I would say that had absolutely nothing to do with it. I mean, it was a situation where I happened to fall in love with a woman. It was not planned, it was—it was nothing I had ever felt before—it just happened. And it had nothing to do with my dad leaving, but I think there are people who put those two things together, and I would suggest that, for me, it had nothing to do with it whatsoever. And—and I guess maybe for some people it might, but it didn't for me.

AJ: Okay.

BD: But—but I think, you know, the main life events were just, you know, at certain places at certain times and—and then, you know, with the whole reaching a point of no return as far as coming out—it was just everything that I’ve already talked about.

AJ: Right, exactly.

BD: So nothing—nothing else that really stands out for me that was remarkable, as far as deciding to get to where I’m at today.

AJ: So I’m—I just have a question, this—stop me if it’s, like, too personal—but would you say that instead of, like—it’s not necessarily, like, Kathy’s gender that you are attracted to, but what attracted you was just her as a person? You know what I mean? Like some people—like, “I’m attracted to women—the femininity.” Or—

BD: Right.

AJ: Or is it just the particular person that you are attracted to?

BD: You know, it’s interesting because yes—I mean, it was really—I was attracted to Kathy. I fell in love with her. If I—if I—if I were to lose her tomorrow, I don’t know that I’d ever look for anyone else. And I don’t know if I—if I did, it wouldn’t necessarily be—I don’t know that it’d be a woman. I don’t know that it would be a man. I mean, I just—yeah, that’s—that’s where—that’s how I am with that. And I talk to other people who it’s very clear that they are attracted to the same sex and—or opposite sex, but it’s—so for me it wasn’t—it was the—it was the—I think what it was was just such an intense relationship that we became physically attracted to one another.

AJ: Okay.

BD: So I’m sure that’s happened for other people too. So I—that—yeah, hopefully that answers that question.

AJ: Mhm. So, okay, just to talk a little more about, like—you are a president of this LGBT Center, and so—do you have—I guess this is a two part question. What are your goals? What are you trying to change—do you have any specific, like, like, goals that you are trying to reach? And what are the biggest challenges, like, societal challenges that you think are remaining in today’s world?

BD: I—I mean, overall—I mean, we have lots of little missions for the center.

AJ: Little missions, okay.

BD: And it’s still a very early, young organization, it really is—I think it was only officially founded in 2006 or 2007. And I mean, there was—there was a—there were different organizations before that, but the actual LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania was, I believe, started in 2006. So it’s—it’s still very young, and it’s still kind of getting its legs, but we’ve

made tremendous strides even since I've been on the board, because we actually went from just having an office space to actually having a full-blown center where people can come, and we have events and things like that. And we have events for folks of all ages—youth to aging—aging adults, so.

AJ: Okay.

BD: My hope is that we can continue to sustain the Center, make it more—more—more vibrant than it even is, and just—just overall, to create a better awareness of, you know—LGBT people are—are not just in the community, they are part of the community.

AJ: Yes, okay.

BD: And—and you know, people need to respect us, just like, you know—and—and I'm not asking to be treated differently, I just want to be treated the same, you know?

AJ: Mhm.

BD: It would be nice, you know—I still get—I still—it's still very clear, I just said this to Kathy not that long ago—there are still times that we walk into something and there's clearly a whisper down the lane type of thing. Not in a vicious way, but just kind of a: “Oh, there's Barb Darkes, and that's...” You know, I can hear it! I can—I have never heard it, but I can hear it happening and I can see it happening. And maybe it's just my imagination, too—

AJ: No, I doubt it.

BD: But it's just—it's a funny phenomenon—it's—it's—you know, it's the same sort of reaction if somebody—somebody's in an interracial relationship, you know: “Oh, there's so-and-so ,and that's her husband.” You know? Whatever—whatever the case may be. So it—it would just be nice—and I think what makes—what makes me think about this is—is the two grandkids who are now almost four and six—the one is six, will be seven, and the other is—is almost four. And it's very clear in those young years: they are blind. They don't see differences in people. They—and—or if they do, it's transparent to them. It doesn't matter. But then suddenly they get foiled with people's biases and prejudices that develop into their own biases and prejudices. And, you know, it's—it's very frustrating that we do that as a society. So it—for—for all folks, it would be wonderful if we could stop that. And that would be utopia.

AJ: That would be.

BD: We'll never get there, but we can continue to strive to get there. And, you know, I—it would be nice not to ever be looked at as—as different, if you will. But it's—you know, I'm going to keep living my life like I'm living it, and hopefully we'll continue to get there and get better and better and better at that, so that it's not kind of a different thing. The other thing that, for me, that I—that I—I always—I—whenever I get asked to do something, whether it's joining a board, getting promoted here—whatever the case may be, I always say to myself, “Is this because I'm qualified, or is this because I help you meet your diversity quota?” So it's always in

the back of my head. And—and I’ve, you know, I’ve never bluntly asked people that, but I’ve often wondered it. And I mean, I know—I mean, folks who are in diversity categories don’t like to be tokens—you know, you don’t want to be the person selected just because. But it’s—it’s a really real thing that—it’s for anybody who is in, you know—I hear the same thing from individuals of different races. When you’re at—you’re trying to fill board positions with diversity—the first thing you’re looking for is somebody of a different racial background. And [sighs] it’s hard. And—and for those folks, you can get real busy real quick—and you don’t want to be that token. And most people who are chosen aren’t chosen to be tokens—they are chosen because they—they qualify, but it’s always something that eats at the back of your mind. So—but it goes back to, you know, “Don’t treat me any differently, hold me to the same standards as you hold everyone else to.” And the fact that I am, you know, identified as part of the LGBT community is, I guess, maybe an added perk. I don’t know. So.

AJ: When—so you’re identified with the LGBT community—it’s okay if you—if the answer’s no, you don’t need an explanation, but do you identify as a lesbian? Is that—

BD: See, I’m not—I’m not really huge on—on labels—

AJ: That’s totally fine—

BD: I guess if I was filling out a questionnaire—

AJ: [laughs]

BD: I always say, you know—if the fact that I am married to Kathy makes me a lesbian—well, okay, if I fit that definition, then it does. But I don’t—you know, I don’t necessarily put a label on myself, but do I think I’m part of the LGBT community? Absolutely, yeah.

AJ: Absolutely. And it doesn’t sound like—I mean, when you mentioned diversity quotas and hinting at, like, affirmative action, but it doesn’t sound like you were really denied, necessarily, equal opportunities.

BD: Not at all, no.

AJ: It doesn’t sound like it at all.

BD: I’ve had lots of opportunities. Sometimes more than I’d like to have. [both laugh] I’m not very good at saying no, either.

AJ: Okay.

BD: But I’ve—every opportunity I’ve had has been, for the most part, remarkable experiences. So I’m—I’m, again, I’m—I’m very blessed to work where I work, to have the opportunities I have. And—and to be able to have the education I have and being able to prosper. There are a lot of folks, whether—you know, I often think there are a lot of people who, regardless if they’re

part of the LGBT community, or just generally part of the community, who would love to have half of what I have.

AJ: Mhm.

BD: So I—every day I wake up, you know—I feel blessed to be living the life that I live. So.

AJ: Good. Well, I think we've covered a great amount. We've covered everything I need to cover. Is there anything else before we end this interview that you feel is a pressing matter that you would like to share with us that we missed?

BD: I don't...I don't think so. I mean, I think, just—just the one kind of theme that I always think about is, you know, the only thing I think—well, the number one thing I think people want in life is to be happy. And, you know, I—I've talked to people who are struggling with coming out, and it's—it is very, very hard to get to the point where you just throw your hands up and say, "That's it—I'm—I am who I am, and I'm gonna be who I'm gonna be." But it really does help your happiness and help your fulfillment in life, so. You know, for folks who are—whether it's somebody experiencing the "I want to come out" or if it's somebody who's—who has somebody in their life coming out—I think just surrounding them with that acceptance is the best thing anybody can do for them. Even if you don't quite agree with it or understand it—and I think that's the biggest issue, is ignorance. People don't—people can't—there are people who can't get their head around the concept, and so it's ignorance. So my answer to that is: "Read some books. Maybe you'll get it." I don't know! I mean—I mean, it's clear that society—it's very—it's much more prevalent in society now—you know, we have television shows, we have movies, it's—it's an element in so many things. So I think there's a better awareness, but I really think that to some extent, until it touches your life closely with a family member, you don't really know how you react. Because I—I know for example that, you know, my mother knows other people who children or relatives who are in the LGBT community, and she was very accepting of them, but when it touched her life, it took her a long time to really—and I don't even know if she's still completely comfortable with it—but she's so much more comfortable now than she was two years ago. So...we just keep workin' on her. [laughs] So.

AJ: Well, not to put you on the spot, but, the—I just have this last thought, and it's okay if you don't have an answer—but I'm just wondering—I think, like, you mentioned, like, youth, and you mentioned your—the, the grandkids. Do you have any, like, advice that you would give, let's say, to an LGBT youth who is, like, struggling? Like, do you have any, like, maybe words of wisdom that you would—like, you know what I mean? Like, to say...

BD: For youth? I—I can't even imagine being a teenager in high school, and—'cause it wasn't an issue for me. I—I was, you know, I was—I was looking for young men at that time in my life, so it didn't touch me as—as an issue. But I think—I think the biggest issue is to—for youth—is to seek—seek somebody out who you can talk to honestly about it, and deal with it, because there—there's way too many youth, in particular, who are feeling the pressures of—of their family. I mean, nobody wants to lose their family, you know? And kids who—who—they, I mean—I mean, they may hear lots around the house, and lots of hateful things around the house about LGBT community, and so the last thing they're going to do is go home and—and—and

tell their parents. So if you can't tell your parents—I, you know, find someplace where you can feel safe enough to communicate with people who will understand and support you. And—and that is one of the things that, you know, at the—the Center offers, we have something called Common Roads, which is one of our programs. And those are youth meetings, and there are many youth who come to Common Roads whose parents don't know where they are. I mean, they—they're—they're at these meetings without their parents knowing that. But that's the way it has to be for them. But it offers them a place where they can be themselves, where they can be accepted, and where they can start to hopefully get to a point where they can live a more fulfilling life. Because, you know, it's—it's hard enough to grow up, but when you're growing up with something like that—and we have far too many kids, you know, doing extreme things like taking their own lives or acting out in some other way because they can't get over—and get to a point where they're comfortable. And I think that's the hardest thing, because I grew up in a family where, you know, LGBT stuff was kind of—it was kind of a joke, if you will. You know? It was kind of made fun of—a joke—that sort of thing. So, you know, when you know that, it's—you feel—you gotta get comfortable with yourself first, and—before you can ever think about coming out to somebody else. And there are—and you know it's—it's—I find it very sad that there are people who will live their entire life not—living this secret life of—of being attracted to same sex but being afraid to tell people. And it's—

AJ: Which—you experienced this.

BD: It's got—and I lived it! I did experience it. And then—and now I—when I talk to people who have done that for twice as long as me I think, “Oh my goodness,” you know, it's—it's—it's painful. It's very painful. And so I, you know, that's for—for kids: get someplace safe, and a place where you can really express yourself to other people. And I think half of that—that will help people get to a point where at some point they'll be able to come out to their family and—you know, their—sometimes their reactions are way different than people expect, from parents, in particular, but it all depends. You never know for sure, but—I think that's the biggest issue. Get—get to someplace safe.

AJ: Well, thank you!

BD: You're welcome.

AJ: Thank you. Okay, so the last thing before I have you sign the release—which, you may have already done this, but if—do you have any materials that you would like to donate? I'm sure you've already—as president, you know.

BD: Oh my gosh. I actually haven't donated anything!

AJ: You haven't?

BD: I don't know that I have anything!

AJ: Okay.

BD: I have—I have to think about that.

AJ: Okay.

BD: You mean things to go in the archive at Dickinson?

AJ: Right, exactly. And I can leave you—we—we have—I can leave you a sheet.

BD: Okay.

AJ: And you can do that—yeah.

BD: Yeah, I have to think if I have anything...

AJ: Or if Kathy maybe, you know...

BD: Yeah, I have—I honestly don't know if I have anything. I know you guys have lots of neat stuff because I've been down to see the Archives.

AJ: Yeah, mhm.

BD: Lot, lot of great stuff, so I will definitely think about that.

AJ: Okay.

BD: And if I do, the more stuff I can get rid of, the better. [both laugh]

AJ: And is there any name at the top of your head right now that you think we should add to our interview list? If not, that's okay.

BD: Not off the top of my head, no.

AJ: Okay, all right. Well, with that, if you would, this is the consent form. I need you to sign here, and—oh, nope, I need you to sign at the first X. And then if there is anything that you spoke about today at the—

BD: No, there's not. Should I just put "none"? I'll put "none."

AJ: Okay. Yeah, that's fine. And the first X is—

BD: You want me to sign here, right? 'Cause that's narrator. That's you, right?

AJ: Yeah, you can—you can shut it off—

[End of tape]