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Title: LGBT Oral History: Richard Hause

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Contact:

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

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

Interviewee: Richard H. Hause

Interviewer: Nancy Datres

Date of Interview: September 20, 2013

Location of Interview: Richard's Home in Harrisburg, PA

Transcriber: Sara Tyberg

Finalizer: Mary Libertin (May 18,2020)

Abstract:

Richard H. Hause was born in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, on May 21, 1947, moving to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, after he graduated from high school in 1965. After coming out to his family when he was eighteen, Richard began working for the State Government in the Department of Highways, and he eventually retired from the State Government in the Department of Public Welfare just eight years ago. While Richard discusses in his interview the difficulties of identifying as LGBT in both personal and professional spheres, he also illustrates the vibrancy of the gay community by citing memorable experiences both occurring in Harrisburg as well as in nearby communities such as Washington, D.C. He expresses his regular interest in LGBT activism, from supporting the Human Rights Campaign Fund to participating in the local Pride Festival every year to being an active member in the Dignity Chapter of Central Pennsylvania, one of the first LGBT organizations started in the area. Throughout his interview, Richard expresses the historical changes he has witnessed in the gay community both nationally and locally, and he emphasizes his distaste for organized religion, asserting its negative political influence on the gay rights movement.

ND: Good afternoon. Today is September 20th, 2013... Friday. We are at the house of Richard Nause.

RH: Hause.

ND: Hause. I apologize. And how do you spell your last name?

RH: H-A-U-S-E.

ND: Alright. And what is your birthdate?

RH: May 21, 1947.

ND: And where were you born?

RH: I was born in Pottsville, Pennsylvania.

[video cuts; they begin the interview again]

ND: Today is Friday, September 20, 2013. My name is Nancy Datres. I'm here with Bob Kegriss. We are here interviewing Richard Nause.

RH: [corrects] Hause. [laughs]

ND: Hause. I apologize.

RH: It's alright.

ND: And would you spell your name, please?

RH: H-A-U-S-E.

ND: Alright, and would you tell us your date of birth and where you were born?

RH: I was born in Pottsville, Pennsylvania on May 21, 1947.

ND: And what were your parents' names?

RH: My mother's name was Ruth Nelson Hause and my father was Harvey Charles Hause.

ND: And do you have any siblings?

RH: No, I was an only child.

ND: And what were your parents' occupations?

RH: My dad was always a blue-collar worker, and my mother was a devoted homemaker all her life. She made the best upside—pineapple upside-down cake in the world. [laughs]

ND: That's good. Tell us when you moved—what year you moved from Pottstown?

RH: Well, I—I really grew up in a small town in the western part of Schuylkill County [Pennsylvania] of two or three hundred people. And I—there wasn't much to do there. [smiles] It was small-town. Everybody was German-American, and they were Protestant, Republican, conservative... Everyone knew everyone else's business. And, when I was eighteen, I decided it was time to get the hell out of there. [laughs]

ND: And where did you go?

RH: I came here to Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] in 1965, right after I graduated high school.

ND: And did you move here by yourself without knowing anyone?

RH: [nodding] I moved here by myself without knowing anyone, and my dad came with me, and we looked at a small apartment on North 2nd Street. And it was \$50 a month rent... yes.

ND: Wow.

RH: It was a small-efficiency, one large room with one bathroom and a kitchen. And my dad said that I'd never be able to afford it, but somehow, back then, I cleared \$101 bi-weekly at my first job, and my phone bill was \$3, and my electric bill was \$4.

ND: So, you were able to get by, and what was your first job?

RH: My first job was with the State. It was then called the Pennsylvania Department of Highways, now called PennDot. In the materials testing lab over near the State Street Bridge. It's on that ramp that comes down from the—the State Street Bridge, and that was—I was there a couple of years.

ND: Okay. And then, what occupation did you go into after that?

RH: Well, I was always in the clerical field. I was—my profession throughout my entire life was secretarial work. So, those jobs weren't hard to come by, but they didn't pay a lot back in those days. [phone rings] And, it was some rough going, but, you know, I made ends meet. [smiles]

ND: And [phone rings] you did mention the name of your high school, right? Would you tell us again what that is?

RH: Porter Tower, which is now [phone rings] Williams Valley. It later merged.

ND: Okay. And, are you a member of any [phone rings] church?

RH: No, I'm not. I was—I would say I—I [phone rings] have spirituality, but I—I'm sort of opposed to organized religion.

ND: And what about your parents? Were they...?

RH: They—again, sort of like me, they had religious convictions, but they never went to church very much.

ND: Were you ever married?

RH: No, I was always single.

ND: And, do you have any children?

RH: No.

ND: And, when did you—are you retired, I should ask?

RH: [nodding] I am retired for eight years, now.

ND: For eight years. And where did you retire from?

RH: I retired from State Government from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. I had 35 years there.

ND: Wow. Did you ever serve in the military?

RH: No.

ND: Do you have any memberships in any, like, community organizations or fraternal societies or professional organizations?

RH: I pro—I—I support the Art Association of Harrisburg, and I'm also very generous with the Human Rights Campaign Fund.

ND: Okay, now we're going to turn to when you first realized you were gay, if, in fact, you identify as that. Do you identify...

RH: [nodding] Yeah.

ND: What do you identify as?

RH: As gay... gay man.

ND: And when did you first recogn...

RH: Well, I never had a great epiphany that I was gay. I guess I—about maybe at 12 or 13, I realized I was attracted to boys or men, and it was never much of an issue for me. I was one of the lucky ones. I got through high school—grade school and high school—without any bullying. That isn't to say that there wasn't an occasional rotten apple in the barrel that caused—called me a “sissy” or whatever, but I—I didn't have too much trouble, but that was a different time back then. You know, school principals and teachers ruled with an iron fist. And, they didn't put up with a lot of shit, so... you know, there wasn't a whole lot of that went on back then. Now, I turn the TV on, and I hear about it all the time.

ND: Mhmm. How about when you left your hometown and moved here to Harrisburg?

RH: Mhmm.

ND: Did you experience any harassment or...?

RH: Well, not really, you know. It was a much different time then. Harrisburg back then was an altogether different city. It had a very vibrant, bustling, busy downtown. There were like, three major department stores. There were all kinds of specialty shops and restaurants, movie theaters, the whole bit... and, I think for younger people to be able to understand what it was like back then, you kinda have to look at—at—at the social stigma that prevailed. First of all, the sodomy laws were still on the books in Pennsylvania. Most states had repealed their sodomy laws back in the 1950s when they were challenged in court, but not at good ol' Pennsylvania, always in the

Dark Ages. They didn't repeal theirs until the 1980s. Secondly, the American Psy—Psychiatric Association considered homosexuality a treatable mental illness. And the churches—most of the mainline churches told us we were an abomination before God and were doomed to Hell. So, there you were—you had, you know, the state saying we were criminals, the psychiatrists saying we were sick, and the churches saying we were sinners. So, that was a hell of a lot of baggage for anybody to carry back then. And, don't forget that we were in the middle of the Vietnam War. Back then, there were peace demonstrations all the time. The Civil Rights Act had just been signed in the mid-1960s, so there were race riots. It was a very difficult and tumultuous time. But discrimination, yes. There was a lot of discrimination went on back then, and I think younger people today can't even identify or imagine it, but—for example, I had friends who would go to look at an apartment they were interested in, and they were told, “Well, I'm sorry, we just don't rent to your kind.” I knew of people who went on job interviews, and they were told by the employer, “Well, you're well-qualified, but we don't think your kind would fit in here.” Or it was not uncommon to go into a restaurant, and the owner or the manager would tell the waitress not to wait on you, and you'd sit there like a damn fool. And, that's just sort of the tip of the iceberg, I mean, it was—it was a very, very difficult time.

ND: Did that—did you experience any of that, those examples you just...?

RH: [nodding] Yeah, I did in employment, and I remember going on interviews where they didn't come right out and say, “We don't want you, because you look like you're gay,” but it—the handwriting was on the wall. It wa—it was pretty obvious. I always had—I guess I'd call them sympathetic or understanding landlords. I never had the problem of being kicked out, but I did know of people back then that, you know, were thrown out of their apartments, their leases were terminated, because they were gay. A lot of couples back then didn't live together for that reason, because when two guys lived together for any amount of time at an apartment or a house, people draw their own conclusions and make a lot of assumptions, so they wouldn't take that risk, and they lived apart. [swallows]

ND: Do—what—did you travel to any other cities when you lived here in Harrisburg to kind of socialize...?

RH: Absolutely, yeah. We used to—there was a lot more social activity back then. There were private parties, dinner parties, cocktail parties, picnics, things like that—there was more of a sense of camaraderie. But we occasionally would go to Baltimore [Maryland], Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], [Washington] D.C.—the first gay bar that I was ever in in my life was the Georgetown Bar and Grill on Wisconsin Avenue in D.C., and here I am, you know, a boy—a little boy from a small town, and I walk in and they're all of these men, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. [everyone laughs] And it was a real eye-opening experience for me. But yeah, we did—we—Atlantic City [New Jersey] was the place to go in the summer. Now, everyone goes to Rehoboth [Delaware] or other pla—but, so we used to go to Atlantic City and stay at the—I think it was called The Chester—The Chester Inn, yeah, yeah... went through all of that.

ND: What impact did coming out have in your work life, if any? Or, when did you come out?

RH: Well, I came out very early—I guess I was only 18 at the time—to my parents. And my dad—well, they both had a difficult time of it—with it—but my dad eventually came around and understood and accepted me, but my mother never did. She—[clears throat]—since I was an only child, I think she wanted grandchildren, and she kind of held that against me up until the very end.

ND: Oh no.

RH: She di—she died about five years ago.

ND: Mmm.

RH: But, I always thought that she felt I was an embarrassment to the—the family. And my dad, [shaking head] with him it wasn't an issue. But I never really had much trouble in employment. Worked out pretty well.

ND: Okay, what about your coming out and the impact it had on your political life, if any impact?

RH: Well, from the—I grew up in a very Republican area, but when it was time for me to register to vote, I was a Democrat. [laughing] It was—that was my decision. And I always felt, you know, that the Democratic Party was always going to be the one that was more in favor of—of rights for gay people, but back then, that was hardly an issue. The—the subject never came up politically.

ND: What about—and I know you said you're not into any organized religion, but even in that non-organized, spiritual way—did your coming out have any conflict for you in that manner?

RH: No, not really. I—I tell you, I don't know how many gay and lesbian people share my view on this, but I think that organized religion has been the one thing that has caused the most grief to the gay community for years, because a lot of this nonsense they hear from the pulpit—today we have all of these televangelists and these megachurches and everything—and most denominations—save very few—have always been very anti-gay. And, I think that organized religion is really the sore spot there. Back in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was elected and those characters like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson surfaced... they pushed their way into politics, and I think that they have done an awful lot of harm, I really think they do. I think the public—the public would not be as anti-gay as they are today had it not been for organized religion. That's—I think the source of all of it. They quote the Book of Leviticus, and, they're always, you know, ready to burn us at the stake, and I just think it's—it's a lot of shit, I really do.

ND: What—have you been staying active in any of the current LGB programs or activities or parades or marches...?

RH: Well, yeah, I go to the Pride Festival every year, and I—I've been involved with the Dignity Central Pennsylvania since it started back in the 1970s. It's kind of withered away a little bit—we still have a little core group.

ND: Could you—and for people who might be viewing this who won't know what Dignity...?

RH: Dignity is—was a gay Catholic organization, and the late Jerry Brennan back in the 1970s felt there was a need for a chapter here in Harrisburg [Pennsylvania], and he was very instrumental in forming that chapter. And, at the time—that was probably 1974, 75—Dignity Central Pennsylvania was the only act in town. There were no other gay organizations. And our membership, at its height, I guess had swelled to like, 120 people. And we did all kinds of—we had religious services that... I could take or leave, but we had a lot of social activities and that—most of the—of the—of the members were Protestant or Jewish—there were very few—handful of Catholics—but we still survived the day. We had picnics at Pine Grove Furnace State Park, we would have dinner nights out throughout the year, all kinds of events, seminars... and it was really, it was a dynamic organization. And after Jerry passed away, it started to dwindle away, but we're still here. [smiles]

ND: How did Dignity make itself known? For example, if someone moved to this area, how would they have found out about Dignity?

RH: Well, that's a very good question. I guess it was more by word-of-mouth. We used to hand out leaflets in the bar—in the bars, and a lot of bar owners were very, you know, cooperative and would—they had bulletin boards where they would put things up, and we had a contact number there listed, and you would call, and then the person would be told where and when—we used to meet at the Friends Meeting House. They were the only religious organization in Harrisburg that would take us in. And for years and years, we had our religious services there, and then they had a social hall downstairs where you'd have potluck suppers once a month and usually followed by a program—in addition to all of these other social events.

ND: What would you say had been the most—the two or three most important—major turning events in your life?

RH: Wow. [smiles] That's a real loaded question. Well, I guess when I met my partner. That was back in 1970, and we're together now 43 years. Which isn't a short time. [laughs]

ND: Uh huh.

RH: Seems like 83, but [laughs] that has to be one of them. And, I guess when I retired, and I came to the end of my career and my working life, that was another one. And, of course, coming out very young—that was really the whole turning point of my life when I accepted the fact that I was gay and was going to make something of it and make something of myself. [nods]

ND: What books or music is of particular significance to you and why?

RH: Oh my. Gee, I've always been a history buff, so most of what I read is—is American or world history. I read Obama's last book, *The Audacity of Hope*, which I thought was—was very inspiring. Music—I'm into all types. I like classical. I like rock. I like—my favorite though is

new-age. I have a lot of new-age CDs. But there isn't like one piece of music that I can say is really inspired me tremendously—or one book.

ND: Alright. How much of—what are some of the major challenges—is what I really want to say—do you think—even though gay rights has come a long way since—you said—mentioned your coming out was totally different back then that, in the here and now, what challenges do you think the gay community still faces?

RH: Well, as you say, the last decade or so has just been monumental in terms of the advances we've made, but I think we still have a long way to go. I—I come back to organized religion now, you know, interfering in politics, and it's really politics that we have to look to for relief in the courts and for legislation. But, there's still, I think, a lot to be done. I'm—I'm fearful sometimes that, you know, there may be a backlash somewhere along the line, and that worries me a great deal, because I'd hate to see this long, hard fight chipped away and lost for some reason, but we can only hope that this momentum continues. I hope it will, and it certainly looks like it will, but, you know, politics and the courts and all of that—that's strange—strange things can happen, so I don't think we're—we're anywhere near where we should be, but we're on our way.

ND: Alright. Anything that you can think of that you thought we would ask that we didn't ask? Or anything you want to add to your interview?

RH: [swallows]

ND: Again, thinking that people...?

RH: Well, sure. From—from a historic point of view, let me get back to Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] and the way it was—I mentioned earlier that there was a lot more camaraderie then—it's more private, social events, parties, and picnics, and things like that—and even though it was a very difficult time, the gay community was much smaller back then. And I think that the reason for that was—was—was two-sided. First of all, a lot of gay men and lesbian women, given the discrimination and the—the—the downright hatred, went into the closet and slammed the door and never came out. There's, I think, another element of gay men and lesbian women who caved in to peer pressure and parental pressure and got married, feeling that someday, you know, maybe they'd—their spouse would turn them straight or whatever, and back then, that was a common belief—you—oh, you—you meet the right woman or meet the right guy, and you're gonna be okay. And we've all been down that path, but the—the community by at large was—was really much smaller—and when I say community, I mean those people who were out and embraced the gay culture and participated in it. Bars—we had two bars back then: The Warner Hotel Bar, which was a real dive, and the 400 Club at the corner of 2nd and South Street, and they were the only two bars in town. Bar nights—like, Friday and Saturdays were the time that people came to the bars, because all the little surrounding communities around Harrisburg didn't have bars. So, people came in from out of town. It was much different time back then. But, no, you didn't ask—I thought your interview—your questions were right-on. [smiling]

ND: I would—I would like to ask you one question that I thought of—do you mind telling us how you met your partner, since you've been together for 43 years?

RH: I met my partner through a mutual friend, and he was fresh out of the Navy. And, at first it was touch-and-go, because he came from a strict, religious background. And, we worked it out... we had a lot of ups and downs, but it eventually worked, and he's been a really good partner. That isn't to say that we haven't had our bumps in the road along the way and had to work a lot out. But we're both retired now. We're both enjoying our retirement, and I highly recommend it. I think for young gay and lesbian people today, there isn't enough of an emphasis on relationships, and the key to a good relationship is true and lasting love—that has to be there. [smiling]

ND: Have you—do you mind my asking—again, because I'm so impressed with the fact that—the longevity of your relationship, and you're still together—because, I agree, I think the media and other organizations try to paint the gay community out as just bed-hoppers...

RH: Right... Right.

ND: ...going from one to another. Have you or your partner ever wished you could legally get married?

RH: Well, to be honest with you, it's not a real big issue for us. We're comfortable with who we are and where we're at right now. I don't know—if—if the—if the proposition ever presented itself, I think we'd give it serious consideration. A lot of our friends who've been—some been together longer than we have—some not so long—have gotten married, and—in other states, and I certainly support them one hundred percent. I think it's wonderful. But for us right now, it's—it's not—not the big priority.

ND: Alright. I think that concludes our interview today. I'll answer you a few questions when we turn off, if you have [video cuts off]