

LGBT History Project of the LGBT Center of Central PA

**Located at Dickinson College
Archives & Special Collections**

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

Documents Online

Title: LGBT Oral History: Walter Heiliger

Date: March 27, 2015

Location: LGBT Oral History – Heiliger, Walter – 046

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: Walter Heiliger

Interviewer: Nina Tirado

Date of Interview: March 27, 2015

Location of Interview: East Asian Studies Room, Waidner-Spahr Library, Dickinson College

Transcriber: Nina Tirado

Proofreader: Katie McCauley (June 24, 2015)

Finalizer: Mary Libertin (June 2, 2020)

Abstract:

Walter Heiliger was born in 1944 and grew up in rural Carroll County, Maryland, the second of three children. Walter, who describes himself as “severely hearing-impaired,” encountered difficulties in school and in connecting with others growing up, as he did not receive support for his hearing issues. Over the course of his career, Walter worked in a number of different positions at a variety of companies, including Head Ski Company and Black and Decker in Maryland and York Technical Institute and Freezing Equipment Sales in Pennsylvania. Now retired, he currently works part-time as a custodian at South York School District. Although he was aware that he was interested in men early on and had several relationships with men, he decided to marry a woman in an attempt to live a “normal” life. While the marriage was unfulfilling on many levels, Walter credits his wife for greatly improving his quality of life by getting him hearing aids and speech therapy, and it was through that marriage that Walter was able to have his three children. Walter came out in 1999, then in his mid-50s, and describes the varying levels of support he’s received from his family. Since coming out, he has slowly become more vocal in the LGBT community, joining PFLAG in Mechanicsburg for a time, attending programs for seniors through the LGBT Center, and working part-time at Altland’s Ranch in Harrisburg. In this interview, Walter shares stories from his life, including his relationship with Bill, his most serious partner since coming out, who passed away in 2006. He also discusses the importance of reaching out to seniors in the LGBT community, as well as married men, and the idea of LGBT rights as a human rights issue rather than a political one.

NT: So hello, my name is Nina. It is March 27, 2015. Now, do we, again, have permission to do this interview, and did you sign the consent form?

WH: Yes, I did.

NT: Okay, perfect, thank you. Can you please talk to me about your family of origin and your early development?

WH: I was, um, born in Baltimore, Maryland, August 19, 1944. My parents were city folks, but they moved out to Carroll County, Maryland, when I was two years old. And, for the most part in my 28 years, I lived in a rural environment. People live on farms, you know, and different places. I’m hearing impaired—severely. I’m tone deaf. I have—unfortunately, it is inherited. So I have family members that actually are deaf-mute and sign to communicate. So my environment was different in that aspect, you know—as a kid I thought—I don’t know what the right word or not, but—It was very, like, a dreamlike state of growing up, because most of the time—I don’t want to say this in a bad way, but my parents kind of ignored me, because they

were, you know, busy with their activity and their life, and so—most kids, you know, you tend to keep busy doing things that you're curious about, you know? So.

NT: And how was school for you, growing up, being hearing-impaired?

WH: Well, considering that I was missing half of what everyone was listening—or hearing, it—most people find it amazing that I even gone through school the way I did, because I didn't have the help that children like mine—my children, and my grandkids have today, with Lincoln Intermediate school, you know, helping people, and they're very aware—aware of the—the hearing problem. So yeah, it was quiet—I had a quiet world, if you would. And then one of the things I did do—I know this is not in your question, but as I was going along, I kind of didn't and didn't know that I was different, as far as my hearing, and I learned to read lips to compensate for what I was not hearing, you know, so.

NT: Okay. Do you have any siblings?

WH: Pardon?

NT: Do you have any siblings?

WH: Yes, I have two sisters. One's two years older than I am, and she's normal hearing and everything, and I have a 13-year-old sister, younger, and she's got the normal hearing and everything.

NT: And was growing up with them a good experience for you?

WH: I wouldn't say it's bad, but like I said, because of what I was missing, not realizing when people were conversing with me, I probably didn't respond, oftentimes, the way they would expect a normal hearing person would, you know? And then, with my 13-year-old—because there is a big age difference, I was more like her babysitter, you know, so we had a lot of nice memories together, you know, as she was growing up.

NT: Good, good. Did religion play a role in your childhood at all?

WH: No, not really. My parents were Episcopalian, and with their pursuit of happiness, you know, they went through different changes of religious denomination, and so I wound up to be a Brethren, so—no, not really, not up—not up to a certain point.

NT: Could you discuss with us a little bit of your occupational history? Any jobs that you have had in the past, or any organizations that you have worked with or are currently working with?

WH: Sure. I started out—fortunately, my dad was a maintenance supervisor for Head Ski Company in Timonium, Maryland, and he offered me—because of my teenage years—I was reckless and all—to mow their lawn, around the company. So out of the money that I was paid for this job, I bought myself what they call a Gravely tractor, and—it's one of those heavy-duty mowers, you know, grass mowers.

NT: Okay.

WH: And, actually, it does a lot more than that, but basically, that's what I did with it, you know. So I actually cut the lawn of the founder of Head Ski Company, Mr. [Howard] Head, and did that briefly until I worked there. My dad got me in for Head Ski, and we made aluminum skis at the time—we were one of the largest manufacturers of aluminum skis back in that time. Head Ski, now, you see the little symbol in tennis and other places, you know, so it's rather popular. That was my first two years of working. I went—because of the distance we were travelling, I moved—or [had] gone to Black and Decker in Hampstead, Maryland, and I worked there for 10 years. So I started at the packing department, then I went—I worked myself into the cool ... where you delivered stuff to the other departments, you know, and then I got to be doing—what they call a “utility man,” in the sense that I was able to replace anybody in our department and do their job when they're out, so I was very versatile in doing that. After Black and Decker—in the process, I got married, and my wife at the time—she worked for Social Service, so she, realizing my handicap, got me to the Office of Rehabilitation in Harrisburg, with—they sent me to the York Technical Institute to learn a trade and to help better my life. So I got a hearing aid, and I went to a speech therapist, so I really came out of a nutshell, if you will, at that period of life. You know, they—I mean, you might—I think most hearing persons, when they, you know, like—I didn't hear the sound of the soda fizz, or “snap, crackle, and pop” in the—in the cereal, and it was—or a bird, or a telephone. I missed out on that, and when I got my hearing aid, I could hear myself breathe for the first time. You know, it—people can't visualize or relate to that, you know, unless you've had that experience, you know. So that was really a great forward step for me. So after I went to the YTI [York Technical Institute], they asked me to stay there, because they liked my personality and how I related with people, and so I worked there for two years. And they were located at the time at Richland Avenue, so—they since moved, I think they're at, like, Mt. Zion Road and York. So from there, I went to a company called FES, which is Freezing Equipment Sales, and, at the time—but they have since been bought out, and it's called GEA [Refrigeration] now—it's—but they're still the refrigeration company, and I worked for there for 30 years. And that's when I retired—forcefully, so—because they went—in 2008, everybody was going through a hard time, you know, with economic—and stuff, so a bunch of us had to retire, which I did. So I retired for five years, and now I'm working down—currently working part-time as a custodian for the South York School District in York County.

NT: Thank you. How was your relationship with your wife? Could you describe that a little bit for me?

WH: Sure. Well, may as well go in the beginning, because in the beginning, when I met her, I was also having a relationship with a guy. But because of the timeframe of the era, being gay was considered an illness and a sickness. And I thought the way I was doing things, I would—I wanted to be straight, just—and normal like everybody else. You know, so my process—it's one of those—I had some girlfriends, and one of my girlfriends introduced me to Evelyn as we were in Sportsman's Hall, roller skating. [chuckles] And that's how we met. And I liked what I saw in her qualities, so I became more interested, and for eight months we went together, and I proposed to her after eight months. We got married—married for 28 years. And it—it was—it

would kind of—I would say it was an okay marriage, simply because, like I say, I was trying to be straight and live a normal life. Problem here was she was a Catholic, and she was also, before she met me—she was almost becoming a nun. So here we have a nun, and here we have a gay man, you know—so I mean, it was an interesting kind of thing—oh, you know, match. She was a real nice person in my life, and I give her a lot of credit for improving my quality, okay? And since I ended the marriage, we have actually become closer as friends, so—which is kind of with the help, I think, of my two daughters that helped her understand my situation—you know, so.

NT: Thank you. Could you discuss how your experiences coming out, not only to your wife, but to our friends and family, were?

WH: That was hard. But it was amusing because the—the trigger to all that was—I had, at the time—this was toward the end of our marriage—at the time I was seeing a guy. And my son, at the time, had a lot of gay friends. Well, it just so happened—one night, I wanted to spend with my friend, and I saw my son’s car there, so I said, “No, this is not a pretty picture.” So I figure, “This is stupid, living this lie.” I said, “I have to just stop it, this charade,” because that’s what it was. So my children were told first—I told them first. And it was hard. I mean, you know, you—it’s amazing what one word, how it change your life forever—the word being—being “gay,” because they saw me as a father figure, and, you know, they had all their expectations until I came out. And so I told them. As soon as I told them, I went down to my mom, told her. She was really—being the generation gap, I thought—I thought she handled it really well. And she just said, “Well, you know, as much as, you know, I don’t understand it at the time,” she said, “I still love you.” That really—oh, I mean, you know, you just break down and cry, you know, and—because, I mean, you know, and my dad was already passed away at the time, so—and I, when I did this, I was in my mid-50s. So it’s kind of different than coming out when you’re very young and still have life ahead of you, you know. Yeah, as far as my older sister, I was kind of disappointed, because she’d—for college-educated, and I always look up to her, and I admire her for what she has accomplished in her life, and that she has this degree and—oh, I think it’s something education, teaching kids, you know. Anyhow, I was kind of disappointed, in the sense that she said, “You know, then why are you even—“ You know, she said, “Well, why are you even married?” And then she said, “Well, don’t tell my kids about it.” I said, “Okay,” you know, just to accommodate her. Now, I haven’t—my younger sister, I mentioned—well, I haven’t said anything to her, because of her religion upbringing—you know, she’s a Mennonite. Not knocking it, but you have to understand how narrow-minded and/or close-minded they are in relation to anything out of the norm.

NT: And so—you said you have two daughters and one son?

WH: Yes.

NT: Okay, so three children in total?

WH: Yes.

NT: Okay.

WH: Mhm.

NT: What's your connection to the LGBTQ community in Pennsylvania?

WH: Well, actually, I got started with that when one of my coworkers, just out of the blue when I was leaving work—I have an equal sign on my bumper. And this engineer, you know, he approached me, and I rolled my window down, and he said, “Hey, I’m kind of curious, what’s the equal sign for?” And so, I kind of look at him, and I thought, and I said, “Well, here it goes.” You know, so I just put it out there—“Well, I’m gay, you know, and I’m just letting people subtly know, you know—I’m gay-friendly.” He said, “Oh, well, you know, I belong to PFLAG [Parents, Friends, and Family of Lesbians and Gays] up in Mechanicsburg,” and his son was to get married, and he said, “Well, you know, I have a son who’s gay. He’s out. Has a partner now.” And he said, “I like for you to join us and tell your story.” So I did, I went up to Mechanicsburg. They meet in a church there—Presbyterian church, I think, and—on Simon Street, and I told them my story, you know, and they—it was really nice to know that even though they’re parents of children who are gay and came out, they still accepted me, and I really felt comfortable that I wasn’t the quirk, you know, if you will. So that’s how, you know—so I’m—as I’ve gotten older I’m becoming more vocal with it.

NT: Good, thank you. Do you have any grandchildren?

WH: I have five.

NT: Five grandchildren! How is your relationship with each of them?

WH: Well, the one, the oldest, Kurt, he’s from my son-in-law’s first marriage.

NT: Okay.

WH: But he’s okay with it, you know. And I have four—the other ones are my biological ones, and they’re too young to understand the situation, even though my 13- and 11-year-old, or 12, you know, 10—whatever, I forget what age—but anyhow, you know, they—they’re just finding out, “Granddad’s gay.” You know? So yeah, they’re okay, I guess. I haven’t heard anything more from my daughter about it. She deals with it, you know, and I know my daughter is comfortable with it, my son-in-law is comfortable with it. You know, so.

NT: Do you have any military background?

WH: No.

NT: No.

WH: I’m considered what they call 4-F [not acceptable for military service] because of my hearing disability.

NT: Okay.

WH: And a neat little story, if I may.

NT: Yes, please.

WH: Is—the first time, I went down to Fort Holabird in Maryland, and—to get tested, because back then you had to make yourself aware that, you know, you were eligible to go into the service. So this was back in—like, in the early ‘60s, when the Vietnam War was going on. So the first time I went down to Holabird, I cheated on my hearing test [laughs] because they all—you gotta—which is really silly, because they got us all in a room. The guy on the other side of the room whispered numbers and we were supposed to, like, do the number. [holds up fingers showing numbers] So I couldn’t hear any of what he was saying, so I just figured, “I’ll do whatever they’re doing,” so I just watched their fingers and I... [holds up fingers showing numbers] So that was the first time we went down. So finally I got my letter to—I was drafted in the—the war. So, again, go down to Holabird, but this time, they put me in a—in a booth, where they test you electronically to see if you can hear. Well, I failed, but nobody told me about it, so I spend the whole day there, you know, just waiting around, waiting around, thinking I’m gonna be enlisted. So I finally get called up—called up to the desk by this Sergeant Lenay. And he said, “Sit down.” So I sat down. I thought, “Boy, I’m in trouble.” [laughs] So he said, “What are you doing here?” And that was just the way he responded—“Well, I thought I’m joining the Army.” He said, “No, you failed your hearing test. Didn’t anybody tell you?” I said, “No, all the doctors said to me when I walked out was, ‘I’ll see you later, son,’ so I took that to mean I passed.” So that’s the story of that. I spent my whole day, you know? [chuckles]

NT: Well, that would annoy me, too. Okay, are you currently in a relationship now?

WH: No.

NT: No?

WH: No. I had one, but I don’t want to—do you want me to explain on that, or not?

NT: If you’d like to.

WH: Yeah, after I came out in 1999, I had a relationship in 2004, 2006. He died of cancer on the pelvic bone and the esophagus. And I watched him three months, dying down in Baltimore, Maryland, so... But he was—he was an incredible person. And yeah, that’s the serious relationship I had with a guy. But I had other, briefly, but we have become friends on the other relationship.

NT: Thank you for sharing that.

WH: Sure.

NT: Does your identity as a gay man influence or affect any other aspect of your life, like political or social?

WH: You wanna repeat that again, please?

NT: Does your gay identity as a man influence or affect any other aspect of your life, as far as, like, political or social?

WH: Yes, definitely. [laughs] One of the things I learned to do with—I'm actually an introvert. I know you're gonna find that hard to believe, but I learned early on to become noticed and—or engaging into any other group, I had to put myself out there. So actually, I work part-time for Altland's Ranch down in Thomasville [Pennsylvania]. They offered me that position to work at the doors, to collect money and count, you know. And I took it, because I wanted to put myself out there, and I had—like I say, I joined PFLAG. I've since dropped out of it, because it had—I guess, for lack of better words, it—I don't find any usefulness out of it anymore to help my cause, you know, because I feel like—because they're youth-oriented, because of their kids. And at my age, I see the vast difference, where we're supposed to disappear and be invisible to the rest of gay culture. So yeah, my activity now is mainly gay-related and gay-friendly. I have very little social contact, other than my youngest daughter, who I have breakfast every Saturday morning with. I don't interact with my grandkids because I'm a lousy grand—granddad [laughs] because I'm actually living my gay life. You know, I mean, I don't know if you can understand that or not. But yeah, that's how it goes. So I can't interact with, like, my younger sister, because of her religious beliefs, because once they ever—the cat's out of the bag, I know that either she'll shun me, or—I really don't know what that would be. Yeah, I know, you know, but I—at the time, I don't want to go there, you know.

NT: No, I definitely appreciate the courage and bravery it takes to stay true to yourself in the face of adversity, so.

WH: Yeah, because one of these big things I've been, you know, very active—I've been going through the Harrisburg Center on Third Street, and they have what they call the Senior Citizen Initiative Program for luncheon. You know, during the 12 o'clock to 2 o'clock, every second Thursday of the month, and I've been putting myself out there, simply because there's really no activities or no way for older gay and lesbian people to get together, you know. And we're pretty lonely out there, you know, if you don't connect.

NT: Can you talk to me a little bit about if any of—any people that you knew, or if you have any friends that were affected by the HIV or AIDS epidemic?

WH: What a—yeah, I think all of our friends, whether they were straight or gay, were affected one way or the other, especially back in the '80s, you know. It was stunning the way it developed, and it was more stunning the way people react to it, you know. Because I remember where they had the quilt thing on the Washington, D.C. lawn, you know, back then, and it was really moving, you know, and even still, you know, we gotta be reminded that we got a long way to go, as far as safety and, you know, being smart about who we are, you know, so...

NT: So have you seen any changes since the '80s? Any positive changes since the '80s?

WH: Oh my God, yeah. Even—well, even when I was a kid, I was aware that I was different, when I was like 11, 12, 13 years old, but because—I don't want to say this in a—in a bad way about myself, but I was—because I was considered slow, a retard back then, but I was smart enough to realize I had to keep this subject matter to myself and just investigate, research, or whatever I did to gain more knowledge of why I behave the way I do. You know, because from that time period—we're talking in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, I mean, you know—until the drug, you know, partying came around, you know, in '60s and '70s—I mean, you know, it was pretty sedated—you know, you just didn't say anything about that back then. So I, as a matter of survival—like I say, I did research until I got married, and then I had to put everything on hold, because I wanted to live a normal life. But then, after a certain time, when I knew this wasn't really being myself, I kept, again, renewing my research to try to find out why I behave the way I behave. So yes, there's been a lot of improvement, you know, but I don't think—I think one of the roadblocks that we have now is people—ignorant, and they're closed-minded. Especially—unfortunately, and I hate to say this, but on religion—the religious right. You know, because I think oftentimes we get so ingrained in their belief system that—if anything questions it, and it becomes unstable, then there's no justification for your existence. And that's why I think it's so hard for people to understand where we're coming from—simply because—one of the main things I always compare with is—gay issue is so hard to understand because you can't see it. It's in the mind, and it's in the heart and the soul. It's not like—and I'm—the black and the white, back in the '50s, '60s, you know, or the women's rights, you know, because you can identify it, you can see this up front. It was something you could connect to real fast. But when somebody talks about, “Oh, well, I'm gay”—“Where is it?” You know, they can't see it, so you have to explain this and keep on talking and talking and talking, you know, so... That make sense?

NT: Mhm. Yeah, no, it definitely does. Were you involved in any, like, protests for LGBT rights, or...?

WH: Actually, yes and no. [both laugh] D.C., I had—when I joined the PFLAG in Mechanicsburg, and the guy—we went down to D.C. I think there was part of the marriage act back then, to try to get it rolling, you know, and—or to get it right, I forget what the real issue was, but yeah, it was—it was cool. It was one of the best days of my life, to be able to feel like, “Oh my god, look, they come in all different sizes and shapes and colors and, you know,” and it was just fantastic. It was phenomenal. You know, so yeah, it was neat.

NT: Are there any important events or turning points in your life that are affecting you currently today?

WH: Well, yeah—that I came out. If I—the ripple effect of that is I'm still dealing with family members that doesn't know, because it's “hush hush,” you know. And we really don't talk about it, because nobody really wants to understand it, you know, because it's about life. I mean, let's face it, life is about conformity, in the sense that if you don't fit in, they don't want you in your group, belief, friends, whatever. You know, it's like, at work, or—that make sense?

NT: Mhm.

WH: So...

NT: And at the senior group—I'm sorry, is—it's called the Senior Initiative?

WH: Yeah, the Senior Citizen Initiative Luncheon, every second Thursday at the Center, and—

NT: Has that been beneficial?

WH: Oh my gosh, yeah, because it allows me to express myself and the frustration I have for most of today's society ignoring our age bracket, because, like I say, I mean, let's face it, life is youth, and youth is for the living, you know. And as you get older, you understand that your value system and—changes, where, when you were young, it was more of an eye candy approach to who you like, who you didn't like, or, you know, got along with, whereas your values change as you get a little older and your need changes. But it's not there, the support's not there. And this is what I'm trying to get people—like, my big fear now is if I have to go to a nursing home, I'll be, you know... I know, I don't know, if I'll—rejected would be the right word or I know, you know, or harassed, just because I couldn't be myself. Because I know one of the quality-est things of life, being older, is I enjoy hugging. I enjoy touching people, because to me, you know, touching is so important to make you feel like you're connected, you know, so.

NT: Physical touch is very important to me too.

WH: Yeah.

NT: So I understand. I come from a Puerto Rican family where...

WH: Yeah, and they love to hug. Yeah, well, I have a Puerto Rican friend, and I love her dearly, you know, and, you know, to—you know, she's—I understand that.

NT: Do you feel that it's harder to maybe find a partner at this age in your life than it was before?

WH: Oh, definitely, yeah. Oh, definitely. Yeah, nobody wants an old fart. Let's face it, you know. No, I'm serious. Again, it's appearance. And if you can't keep up the appearance, you know, of being youthful or, you know, outgoing or active, you know, most younger guys won't have anything to do with you. Yes, there are some cliques in their culture that like older guys because of their maturity. Don't get me wrong, they're there, but they're hard to find. You know, so...

NT: Were your partners before at the same age as you, or were they younger, or older?

WH: No, actually, he was 17 years my junior. So yeah, but it—that was never a problem. We connected right off. We met at Stallions, there, up in Harrisburg, and he was also a married man, and he was on the fence about coming out, and this is one of the issues I would like to embellish on, simply because it's so swept under the covers—not talked about. There are so many married mens out there who are dying to live their life, and not according to their mindset or their mind's eye to their parents or whomever, you know. It is really a lot of unfortunate gay mens out there,

and women, I'm sure, too, that are in situations where they have to appear normal and are not. I mean, they're normal, in the sense, you know, that they are being themselves, but you know what I mean.

NT: So what resources do you think that gay married men and—and women would need, in order to progress and better be integrated into society?

WH: I think it's just a matter of, you know—like they do with the youth, that they have information all out there in the form of pamphlets, in the form of little ads in, you know, magazines, or whatever. I think it needs to be something. I haven't quite figured out how to say, like, "Look, this is a safe house. If you need to come because you're having marital issues, or you're unsure how to come out, come here. You have a friend, or—you know, you have a place to be safe." Because even today, especially for older people, it makes me sad to hear stories of their children shunning them because they came out, you know.

NT: Mhm. So you said that you had material from, like, a picture that you had in your car that you can...?

WH: Yeah, I have a family portrait. I'm very proud of it. And, you know, that—I'm very pleased that they still think of me in that term, because I value that connection. You know, because, in a—in a sense, it's my legacy, you know.

NT: Definitely. Yeah.

WH: Whether it was intentional or unintentional, it's just the way things work out, and the end result is I have three wonderful kids that support me and love me, even though they might not truly understand what I have—or go through to be at this point in life, you know, so.

NT: And you expressed that your ex-wife and you now have a better friendship, now that you aren't maritally involved.

WH: Definitely, definitely, yeah. I admire her. I give her a lot of credit for improving my life, because it's in one of those situations—you can't play an "if" game. For example, I was seeing this guy at the time. Just suppose him and I got serious, and I lived, you know, with him. Would he have gotten me hearing aid? Would he have gotten me a speech therapist to talk better? Because when I was younger, if you didn't know me, you really didn't understand me too much, because I wasn't pronunciation—pronouncing a lot of my words correctly, because I didn't know how. I didn't realize I was making that mistake. You know, it's like anything else in life. If you're not aware of it, you just don't know, you know, so.

NT: And when you were involved with your partners, the one that was 17 years your junior and any of the other ones, did you feel any fear or worry about contracting what was known as, like, the "gay cancer" at the time?

WH: Well, with—with Bill, the one who died on me, no. The only thing that amazes me about that incredible guy was—he wanted to hold my hand out in public. He wanted to kiss me out in

public. And this was—this was in the early 2000s, and I’m not used to this. You know, I’m saying, “Okay, is somebody gonna jump us and, you know, beat us up because we’re showing what other normal, straight people would be doing?” You know, so. [coughs] Excuse me. But no, I’m cautious, yes. When I’m out with my gay friends, we behave in certain ways that—we don’t go overboard with our behavior. But once we’re in a closed environment, where we’re amongst friends and we can be ourselves, yeah, it’s neat, you know.

NT: And how long were you with Bill?

WH: Two years.

NT: Two years?

WH: Yeah.

NT: Okay.

WH: Yeah, but like I say, it’s... [whistles] I’m gonna share this anyhow. [coughs] When he was dying, and we had some really, really deep conversations. And one of the things he—he—on—toward the end was when we got to talking—when I came out about my marriage and broke it up, he said he wished he had known me back then. Of course, it didn’t really click in at the time, but I said, “Well, what do you mean by that?” And he said, “Well, because I love you so much, I would want to have known you for a longer time.” And well, you know, what can you say? I mean, I just lost it then, you know, and—but yeah, it was neat.

NT: Thank you so much for—for sharing that. I—I haven’t been in any situation similar, but I—I can’t imagine how difficult that must have been, and—and still is. So thank you for being willing to talk about that.

WH: It was. I appreciate your empathy. What made it really hard was only very few people at work knew my situation. I couldn’t express my anger, my grief, and whatever roller coaster of emotion I was going through at the time to anybody—I mean, other than, like I said, my two daughters and a couple of close friends, you know. Yeah, it was really, really hard.

NT: And are—do you feel comfortable speaking at the Center about issues that are still concerning you, regarding previous relationships or anything discriminatory that has happened to you in the past?

WH: Since I’ve been going to this Senior Citizen Initiative Program, I met a gentleman named Joseph Burns, who used to be a gay activist back in his youth, and he has opened my eyes, mind-eyes, to a lot of issues, but I see him in a different light because he—one of the things I find so hard to understand, and I resent, is that they treat gay rights as a political issue, a lot of people do—when they argue about, oh, you know, whatever they want to argue about. Because gay issue is a human rights issue, and it’s bigger than ourselves, to be so little that we have to put other people down because they don’t agree with our political insight. And I find that so grossly ignorant. So I have verbally forced myself, again, to put myself out there, whether people agree

with that or not. I don't care. I know I can be wrong. And for my answer to the question that I'm looking for, anybody can be wrong. But don't put me down for my belief. Don't put me down because I don't think or conform the way you do. Please accept me for what I am, and try to understand me, and maybe we can, you know, work out better. So yeah, that—I'm more verbal, I notice, that—when I get older. [chuckles]

NT: No, but it's—it's—I think it's a wonderful thing to be more verbal and to be able to express that, you know, this, in your opinion, is not a political issue, which I would support as well.

WH: Yeah, and with not getting angry about it. That—and it really—and this is what I resent about the—the far right, as well as the far left, is that they're so close-minded. They don't want to see the other point of view, you know.

NT: So how would you—how would you implement the—the idea that the gay rights issue is a human rights issue, and not a political issue?

WH: Easier said than done, unfortunately. Again, because you can't see the issue, and it's conversational and it's personal—so it's just a matter of—keep pounding and pounding and say, “Hey, this is”—until some research comes out that says, “Yeah, you know, what they been saying about genetics is true, you know. We're not all born straight, you know, so.”

NT: Is there anything that we've missed, for the record, that you'd like to—that you'd like to express?

WH: [laughs] I probably could ramble on and ramble on, but no, I really appreciate you gals giving me the opportunity just to do this, because this is my proof that I actually exist. [laughs] Well, one, and I'm hoping down the road somewhere, my children will go onto the website, or Facebook, and go into the Dickinson College Library and look up, you know, me in there. So, in a way, you know, I just hope in future generations, they are more accepting of people being different. You know, because it's what makes this country so great. That's the one thing I would like to say. Especially with the problem we're having with the—this radical Islam that we're having now. It's what made this melting pot of America so great—was Italian, German, Polish—you name it, we blend it. Yes, we made mistake of conquering the Indian and stuff like that, but that's all a part of history, you know. And you learn to live together, and you learn to accept each other, and I wish that the world would just learn that lesson, because if you were able to transport yourself out to a space station and look back to Earth, this is only one Earth. And you blow it, and, you know, I mean—you gotta make do with what we have. That would be my main—main message.

NT: Are there any questions that you have for me? Please feel free to ask them if you do.

WH: [laughs] I probably will 10 minutes from now, after the thing's over, but no. [laughs] No, not off the back of my head.

NT: [laughs] Perfect. Do you know of any other people that you think we should contact for an interview such as this?

WH: There are so many married men. I wish you could do the—like a—the newsperson on the street. Go, for example, to Stallions, go to Brownstone, 701—whatever, and Altland’s Ranch. And, like I’ve been doing—I’ve been asking for people’s stories, especially married guys, guys been married for 20-something years, you know, and say, “What is it like for you to struggle in your, you know, your life like that?” I’d like for you to, you know—I know so many gay couples who’ve been together for so many long freakin’ years. It’s amazing, you know, and—like, I know a couple who’s been together 40 years. They’d be fantastic to, you know—to interview, just to see what it was like, you know, to—being connected for that long, you know. Would they do it over again? Or, you know, what would they do so different, you know? That’s the one question I always ask everybody: “What would you do—the one thing you would do so different to change your life?”

NT: What would be the one thing that you would do differently?

WH: Well, the one—you see, that’s an unfair question. [both laugh] Because, here’s the thing, you can’t play “if”—but if I could go back and—if I was 21 again—live my life knowing what I know—but see, here’s the point. I couldn’t live my life again without marrying again and without having my kids again, because I love my kids that much, that knowing that I would have missed that—so somehow, if I could go back, that memory part would be erased, just live my life the way I was supposed to live it, because when I came out, I didn’t realize the significance of expressing yourself—coming out. It was like a millstone off your back—or like a monkey off your back, you know? And so, yeah, the big difference would be I would have been gay a lot longer ago, you know. So.

NT: No, I do definitely appreciate you saying that, like, you wouldn’t change it because you love your children. I think that’s a beautiful thing, so thank you. Again, if there’s anything else that you’d like to say, you are more than welcome to say it.

WH: No.

NT: Okay, perfect. Well, thank you so much for participating in this interview. We really appreciate it.

WH: Well, thank you. I think it’s more of an honor for me than it is for you, so really...

NT: You’ve been wonderful, and I’ve learned so very much, and I know Michele [Metcalf] definitely has too. And something that you said really did hit home for me, when you said that you want your children and your grandchildren to have something of you—to look into the Dickinson—Dickinson College Library and see their father or grandfather’s name. And even if this wasn’t conducted, I don’t—I don’t think that they would forget—

WH: Right.

NT: —Or that they would need any memory, because you, I know, have affected us so much in this interview that I have no doubt that they're—they don't need any writing to feel how awesome you are.

WH: Well, thank you, I appreciate that.

NT: Of course. Thank you so much.

WH: Thank you.