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**Title:** LGBT Oral History: Nikki Knerr

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**Interviewee: Nikki Knerr**

Interviewer: Barry Loveland

Date: October 9, 2016

Place: House of Bernie Pupo, Harrisburg, PA

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**Abstract:**

Nikki Knerr was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1945 and attended York College and Pennsylvania State University where she studied mass communications. In 1967, Nikki opened her first graphic design business which ran for 25 years in Camp Hill, before she retired to Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. When the HIV/AIDS crisis emerged along with negative social stigma in the late 1980s, she organized the Unity Festival to raise funds and awareness for those infected, as well as for the greater LGBT community around Pennsylvania. In this interview, Nikki discusses the joyful moments and struggles of belonging to the gay community. She emphasizes the role gay bars such as D-Gem and Altland's Ranch played in uniting LGBT individuals, as well as the compassion and perseverance demonstrated by the thousands of volunteers that participated in the Unity Festivals. In the interview, Nikki touches upon some of the amusing highlights involving the organization of the festivals. She marvels at the modern progress of LGBT rights and opportunities to unite in settings of merriment, yet admits that ostracism and societal barriers still exist in other spheres of life.

**BL:** Okay. My name is Barry Loveland, and I'm here with Catherine McCormick, who is our videographer, and Emily Armando, who is our intern for the semester, and we're here on behalf of the LGBT Center of Central Pennsylvania's history project, and today is October 9, 2016, and we're here for an oral history interview with Nikki Knerr. This interview is taking place at the home of Bernie Pupo. Nikki, do we have your permission to record the interview today?

**NK:** Sure, thank you.

**BL:** Okay, great. Well, let's kinda start at the beginning. Where were you born, and when were you born?

**NK:** Oh, now you're getting smart. [laughs] Get a lot about the age, right? I was born in Harrisburg, 6/12/45. And I had a business in Camp Hill, which was a printing business – graphic design business for – for 25 years or so, and then I retired and moved to the wonderful place of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware.

**BL:** Okay, great. And, let's talk about your childhood growing up, if you could tell us about what that experience was like and what your family situation was with your parents, siblings, and so forth.

**NK:** It was lonely, you know. I knew s – I knew I was different than anybody else, you know, but it was lonely and I just got along with little boys, you know. They were nice kids, you know, there was never anything – any further than that but anyway, I always gravitated to the women but only as to discuss things – to never to go play with them, or go out, you know, anything like that, so it was really different. But anyway, my sister’s complete opposite of me, you know, the daredevil. She’s the protective one, she was to sit back and take care of everything. So my father really couldn’t understand what was going on here, you know. He has two different children, and the same parents. You know, he couldn’t understand it. But anyway, as time went on obviously we had to protect ourselves and our image and everything like that, and, like I said, 20 years it would’ve not happened. Now you can – you can come out and say who you are, what you are, thank you Ellen DeGeneres, you know. And that’s how that kinda grew. I would just more gravitate to groups of people that were just there for fun, not there as boyfriend-girlfriend or anything like that. So that’s how I kind of realized that there was something different here.

**BL:** When did you first kinda realize that you were gay, or lesbian, or however you thought about that at the time?

**NK:** Well, you know, it’s – after a while, I would use the answer to that question ‘cause I got it a lot of times, I says, “Since I was two,” you know, since I was two I realized something wasn’t quite right here. You know, or wasn’t normal. I didn’t see it happening outside the realm of this house. Yeah, so that’s – a young age, a very young age. Although I just – you know, you did all the things – you had to get a boyfriend, you know, you had to have a boyfriend so Mom and Dad would see. You had to get engaged, so Mom and Dad would be happy, you know. And if you – there’s a lot of them who married, I didn’t – I got smart after that engagement business. I thought, “This is not right, why am I living my life their way?” You know, I wasn’t happy. And so then, I did get a girlfriend and we, you know, did the whole nine yards, buy a house, you know, move in together, do the whole nine yards, and an uncle of mine who I lived with when I was going to college, found letters, you know, when I moved out, and he came to my house and he threatened to, you know, expose me. And boy, sure didn’t want to do that to my family, you know. Sure didn’t. And it made me so angry, and I think that’s when I had the first idea of resistance, and coming out, and – and anyway, so he was gonna do this, so I thought I better beat the path to my father right away, you know, ‘cause I didn’t want him to hear it from my uncle. And I called him up and I said, “Are you gonna be home tonight? I wanna talk to you about something,” and he says, “Sure.” So I go over there, and because I’m nervous, and there’s my mother, there’s my father sitting watching television and my dad says “Okay, what’s going on?” and I says, “Well no, I wanted to talk to you.” And he says, “Oh okay.” So he came in the hou – into the bedroom there and he said, “What’s up?” I says, “Well, I kinda gotta tell you something. You have two daughters, and one’s homosexual and one’s heterosexual, can you figure out which one’s which?” And he just kinda - he didn’t even look shocked. He - all he did was – he was a big man, you know, and shows emotion real well. He just walked over and put his arms around me. He says, “Yeah, so what?” I thought, “Oh my god, why did I wait so long to tell

him?” You know, it would have been so much easier than to deal with it year after year, you know, and this is my girlfriend, and bla bla bla, you know. And it was perfect, that point on.

**BL:** What age was that, when you told him?

**NK:** That was like, 21.

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** Yeah, 21. They never – you know, of course my mother if she did suspect it she would never talk about it, you know. It’s just so out of the realm for her to even imagine, but she was wonderful about it.

**BL:** And you – you told her that after you told your father?

**NK:** Well I told dad, I says, “Look, I – you know, mom’s like really – she’s just a little tiny thing and I don’t want to upset her world, you know.” I says, “If you feel like you want to tell her, you tell, her but I’m not gonna tell her. Let her be in her little cloud,” you know. And he did, he went in and he told her the whole thing, and she was the same way, you know.

**BL:** That’s great.

**NK:** So, and then my whole entire family knows, ‘cause everyone talks to everyone. And they were all very, very, very, sensitive about the issue, and very helpful.

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** Yeah, so...

**BL:** And how many brothers and sisters do you have?

**NK:** I have one sister.

**BL:** One sister, okay.

**NK:** But lots of aunts and uncles, cousins and... you know, ‘cause in those days, you had 10 babies, you know, you got married, you had 10 babies. ‘Cause you didn’t do anything like work, other than the laundry, you know.

**BL:** [laughs]

**NK:** But, yeah, so that’s that part.

**BL:** So, after you – what school – schools did you attend? The Harrisburg city schools, or...?

**NK:** No, no. Actually, I lived [laughs] out in Derry Street far out there in Lawnton area. And, so I went to the school district over there, Melrose School, Central Dauphin High School, York

Junior College, Penn State University, you know, so those were like, the stepping stones to life, you know, so I did all that. And I wanted to go – ‘cause I was an artist, I wanted to go to Pratt, you know, in New York. And my father, in no way was he gonna ever allow me to go even though I went and I signed up and I passed the test, and I was ready to go. I had my bags packed, and he says, “Don’t think you’re going – you’re not going,” ‘cause he knew that I would end up being a beatnik. [laughs] You know, that’s exactly what his excuse was. He knew it – he knew I’d be on the corners of – in New York, painting pictures and trying to sell them. You know, and that’s – so that kind of eliminated that thing. And then I didn’t go to Woodstock. I wanted to, he wouldn’t let me. I was in college, there was no way he was gonna let me go up there for a couple days, you know. So I miss that – that I regret. I missed Woodstock.

**BL:** So, did you – obviously you came out I guess in college, right, because you said by 21, you already had a girlfriend.

**NK:** Yes, so yeah...

**BL:** What age did you actually get your girlfriend?

**NK:** So yeah, I would’ve been 18 – something like that.

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** Yeah, that’s so long ago, why are asking me these questions? So long...

**BL:** [laughs] And did you meet her in college, or...?

**NK:** Actually in high school.

**BL:** Oh wow.

**NK:** But I didn’t like her, you know, I didn’t like her much and a friend of ours – also at the high school with us – and they – those two went to a Polyclinic Hospital to become nurses. You remember when Polyclinic Hospital had their training?

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** Well that’s where they went. My friend Rowny called me at college to say, “Why don’t you come up for the weekend, you know, we’re doing this, this, and this, and Mary Ellen’s gonna be there.” I says, “So?” You know, and it just so happens that I finally said “Okay, I’ll come up.” And we get to talk – see, she never talked. You know, she would just sit there very, very proper, and I think finally we got on that one-to-one where we were able to talk and to realize who’s doing what and what’s doing this, and – and we fell in love.

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** I was with her for 18 years.

**BL:** Wow. That's impressive.

**NK:** Yeah. Wish it would still be, to tell you the truth, 'cause you go through those stepping stones too and they're hard to cope with. And it's also hard for my family, because my family loved her. It was like, a daughter-in-law. You know, family loved her. Now we have marriage, it's all accepted. I missed that in my age.

**BL:** So, before your relationship with Mary Ellen and – you said you dated some boys and then you actually got engaged?

**NK:** Yes.

**BL:** So, talk a little bit about that experience.

**NK:** Yes – it was a fine guy, really a fine guy – very, very nice. I went to church with him one day and – I don't know, I didn't think to ask what religion are you. You know, it didn't matter to me if I was going wherever, it didn't matter it was just all God. Well he was a Quaker. I never knew a Quaker in my life. And this guy's a Quaker. I – you know, he was no different than this friend of mine, or that friend of mine, you know. And that's when I started opening my eyes, as really everybody's a little different but we all kinda work together, and we can get a project done. And anyway, I really, really liked him, but I didn't love him. You know, I mean I really liked him. Unfortunately, we don't talk anymore, you know, 'cause it was a shock for him too, you know.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** It was sad. But you know, I did it to appease the parents, and then I had to figure out how I how I'm going to get out of this. And the sad part about it is, we always went to my aunt's for Christmas Eve, and we exchanged presents and everything and here comes this great big box, you know, it's about this high [gestures height with hands], it's square, all wrapped up and everything and they give it to me and all my family's sitting around, you know, watching, and it's from Tom. And I thought, "We weren't gonna do gifts, you know." And I open it up, and there's another box. And then I open that, and there's a box, box, box, box, box, box [gestures with hands downwards] all the way down to a box this big [gestures with pointer finger and thumb]. Now I know what's in this box. And, like I said, everybody's watching me, and I thought, as I'm trying – very slowly opening it, and I think, "How am I gonna get myself out of this?" You know, how can you say, I didn't want to get married, you know, how do you say this? You don't, because they're all anticipating. And it was a gorgeous ring, you know. And – but I just – I worried, so I wasn't happy and going like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, I'm engaged!" I wasn't thrilled at all, let me tell you. [laughs]

**BL:** [laughs]

**NK:** And – but I – I stayed engaged until April. And then I finally figured out a way in which I could get out of it. ‘Cause there again, my whole family loved him, you know, so what are you gonna do? It was terrible. But I’m out of that now. 20 years ago, remember that. (laughs)

**BL:** So, after you went to college – Penn State – and you studied art, or what was your...?

**NK:** Mass communications.

**BL:** Oh okay, okay. But you – you’ve had some interest in art, I guess, your whole life? Was that the...

**NK:** Well, yeah, how it turned out then was, I would design brochures for companies, you know, and mostly small companies, ‘cause they couldn’t afford their – they couldn’t afford to go to an art agency and have them design a brochure, ‘cause just a thought costs \$5,000 dollars, you know. And, so I thought, “Well, I’ll just appeal to small business people.” Yeah, I had a nice rate where I make money, they make new customers. And that’s what I did, I built the business, and I kept hiring people, hiring people, and then – what was happening then was, I was designing brochures, designing corporate images – their logos and things like this, but then I would take it to a printer and have it printed for them. And I got to thinking, “This is crap.” You know, I have this room here, I could put, you know, a press there, and you know. [laughs] So I did that, and I built that business and then I’m made of two different entities in case this one didn’t go well – I could, you know, get rid of it. But it did do well, and we just kept growing and growing, and I was now their printer. So I was their designer and their printer. And you know, the printers weren’t thrilled, because it was bringing them a lot of business, you know, but I do what I do, I have 20 people to support, you know.

**BL:** And, did you start that business immediately out of college, or...?

**NK:** Yes.

**BL:** Yeah, wow.

**NK:** It was first in my father’s – mother’s house. Up in my bedroom, but I had this room, and dad built me these tables, and desks, and all this kind of stuff and I bought one [indecipherable] type computer, which was way back when, and I saw – I would go sell the job, I’d run home, I’m typing, typing, typing, you know, designing the job. Alright, the next morning, I take it in to get approved, I come back, finalize it, and take it to the printer. [Sighs exasperatedly] I was so tired. By the end of each day, I was so tired, because I’m running back and forth to all different printers, you know, and sometimes those turnarounds have to be like – you gotta turn it around the next day. So I thought, “Oh man, I can’t do this anymore, I gotta hire somebody.” Like, can you imagine? So, that just multiplied, multiplied, multiplied, you know.

**BL:** And, what about – what year was it that you actually started the business.

**NK:** The year would've been 1967.

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** 1967, yeah.

**BL:** That's – that's amazing.

**NK:** My sister of course was, "Ah! You're crazy, you're crazy! Why don't you just find a husband and get married?" [laughs] Well, there was a small problem. Yeah, that's what she – you know, she just was not for this whole project, at all, but has since come around to understand that this was the best thing, you know, for me, and appreciates me.

**BL:** So, once – at some point you moved out of your room with the business, and you moved into a location. When was – when was the first time you opened a location – business location?

**NK:** It had to be at like, 2 years, something like that. I should've done it a lot earlier than that, because I was just running out of room, and – but then I – what I did was that I moved over – one of the printers that I had been dealing with asked – he had a big office over in Walnut Street in Harrisburg – yes, I guess that's Harrisburg. And he had this room at the top and he says something about, "Why don't you just come over here and set up here?" Well he was looking at it because the convenience of it. He didn't have to go around and waste his time, he'd just bring it up the steps, give it to me and I design and then give it back. And I said, "Okay," but in my mind, I'm thinking, "He's giving me this room," you know, I didn't know I had to pay for it, you know, and it took me a little while to get used to that idea, 'cause I was nervous about wh – what if I didn't make the money – I couldn't pay the rent and I'll be thrown out, and got nervous, as a – as a kid, and then I'd look at myself as a kid, you know, I – you didn't know how you can negotiate, you know, or anything like that. But it turned out well, and then – but I knew that I was missing the boat for the businesses over in Camp Hill. And there was a time, and I don't know if it's still the way it is like it was – that's a different shore, and this is a different shore. These are two different kinds of peoples, you know. It's still going on?

**BL:** Mhm.

**NK:** That's so sad! That is so sad, and I would actually have people here that wouldn't deal with me because I was dealing in Camp Hill, you know. So finally, I – what I did was – I left this one open a little bit, you know, just to like, one other person, and then I opened up in Camp Hill, on Market Street...

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** And I was there the rest of the time. I think – I think so, it was 25 years. But I had good friends in both places. And – and that – and that's where I met these guys, 'cause you know, everything was going on over here and not in Camp Hill. And then you meet one group of people



and then another group of people and it just keeps growing and growing. There's a – have you been to Rehoboth Beach?

**BL:** Mhm. I was just there this week. [laughs]

**NK:** You were?

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** We could've done this in Rehoboth. Camp Rehoboth?

**BL:** Yes.

**NK:** You're familiar with Camp Rehoboth. Okay. A fine organization. And that's what I wanted Harrisburg to have. You know, that's when – that's when I saw that camaraderie, with the boys, girls, you know, black, white, purple – it didn't matt – it was so nice. And I – that's when I kinda wanted Unity to be – Camp Hill, Harrisburg, we all get together – York, 'cause York all of a sudden didn't want to be part of us either. They wanted their own entity. That's what Unity sort of did. It brought people together. And it was good. But it's still like that. Doggone it, why?

**BL:** Yeah. Before we talk, I want – I wanna get into the Unity stuff a little bit, but before we do that, I wanna talk a little bit about your – any recollections that you have about the early gay life in Harrisburg after you'd come out. Did you – were you aware of like, lesbian bars or gay bars in the area? Did you go to any of them, and just in general, what – what was your sort of connection to the community here early on?

**NK:** Yeah. Well, what had happened there was when I realized what was going on, I thought “Ugh, am I the only one in the world? I'm the only person,” but then I met Mary Ellen, and you know, she was kind of attracted to me and I'm attracted to her and that wasn't right, 'cause where are the other people? You know, and I didn't – and I couldn't look at a person and tell if they were gay or straight, you know, I couldn't do that. I can do it now, you know, but I'm around them. Well anyways, through the course of this, I met two women that sort of – yeah, you run into them at a movie or something and they look at you and you look at them, and you wonder who's who and what's what. Well, they confronted me, and then I had to confront my lover to understand what's going on here 'cause she was very fearful of being found out 'cause she worked at the hospital – the whole nine yards, you know. And so we had these little dinner parties and things like that and of course, then you meet a couple of their friends and it just kept growing and growing and growing. This was all Harrisburg-bound. You know, I didn't find anything in Camp Hill. And I looked, you know, I looked, I had heard of one place on Derry Street that was a gay bar – men, mostly – and I can't remember – the Clock Bar, or something like that.

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** Is there such a place – or was there such a place?

**CM:** I don't think so.

**BL:** Not on – well, the Clock Bar is on – was on Second Street.

**NK:** Oh, Second Street, okay.

**BL:** Yeah, but I think there – there is a Clock Bar, though, I think on Derry Street.

**NK:** That – oh, Derry.

**BL:** Yeah, that – I'm not sure...

**NK:** Wait a minute – that would be Derry, yeah, that would be Derry (inaudible).

**BL:** Yeah. But that – I don't know if that was gay. Maybe it was, I never knew that.

**NK:** Yeah, that's – well I knew only because my mother told me – you know, this was before she knew anything about me – you know, in conversation with my aunt or something she says about that gay bar down there, and I – Oooh, [laughs] a gay bar. You know, but you can't ask questions, you know, so you either park out front and watch who's walking in or what you do, you know. You don't know what to do. But it was through these – these people that I met Bernie, and of course you know Bernie, you know the whole world. You know – he knows everybody. And so that's how it's grown.

**BL:** Did you ever go to the D-Gem?

**NK:** Oh yes, I did.

**BL:** Did you? Yeah?

**NK:** Yes I did, every Friday and Saturday night, you betcha.

**BL:** [laughs]

**NK:** You betcha. That place was really wonderful.

**BL:** So what was that l – what – when was the first time you went there? Do you remember about the year that would've been?

**NK:** Oh boy, now you're really taxing my brain.

**BL:** [laughs]

**NK:** It would've been in the 80s – early 80s, yeah.

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** Yeah. Again, my girlfriend was very, very upset about even acknowledging that we were gay. You know, she just couldn't handle it. But anyway, we – over time, we finally brought her out and realized that it's okay, but – and she would like sneak in to the bar and sneak out of the bar. It was terrible. Poor thing. But it was – I was the same way, you understand, but I was just a quicker learner. You know, she just wanted her protection, which is fine now.

**BL:** So what was the D-Gem like? We don't have too many descriptions of that place in our interviews, so I'd like to get more – more from you, if you recall.

**NK:** Always packed. The place was always, always packed. And you had these little tables which you had to reserve. Yeah, because – I mean there was a lot of tables, but there – you needed more, the place was packed.

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** All the time. You had a nice dancefloor, everybody's dancing and having a good time – boys and girls. And the owners were two women and they had a lot of male friends, so their male friends would come and take up half the position of the bar. But then they started intermingling with each other and we started becoming friends with them, they became friends with us. They had parties, like picnics outside of the bar, out in the parking lot.

**BL:** Oh wow.

**NK:** Yeah, they really did a good job of bringing us all together. Yeah, they had – we all felt like this was our home, you know. It was the only place in town too, at the time. I mean for the mix.

**BL:** Well, yeah.

**NK:** Yeah, it was very nice. It's sad that it's not still here. Yeah, 'cause I don't know if there's a girl's bar here now.

**BL:** I don't think so. Not right now.

**NK:** Yeah, and we all say girl's bar but it's always mixed.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** Which is fine with me, I like it that way. 'Cause I think I have more male friends than I do female friends, it's weird.

**BL:** Was there a lesbian bar or a mixed bar like that before D-Gem? Or was that the first that you were aware of?

**NK:** That was the first that I was aware of.

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** Mhm. Did you find out if there was one before?

**BL:** We heard that there was one – that there was one before, maybe in the same location as the D-Gem.

**NK:** That’s possible.

**BL:** But I don’t recall now what the name – Shadows, maybe? Or something like that? No, that was a different bar. That was – I’m mixing that up with something else.

**NK:** No, the only bars that I knew of – you know, you learned about – for women, was in Philadelphia, Baltimore, you know.

**BL:** Okay. Did you ever go to any of those?

**NK:** Oh yes. I was at New Hope. New Hope had wonderful bars. But we never got that kind of a bar in this area – those kind of bars, ‘cause they were really bigger and better, really, although this was fine, this was home to me. This little D-Gem.

**BL:** Good. Well maybe you can talk a little bit about how – how the whole Unity Festival idea came about?

**NK:** Okay, as you know, I’m experiencing all this stuff as a newborn child, you know, and I’m meeting all of these friends and find out they’re not purple and don’t have green eyes, you know, they’re just normal people. And over time, you know, I kept being drawn into that – drawn into that, and meeting more and more people – mostly men. But it was turning out to be a wonderful relationship. But, you know, when AIDS or HIV hit, it was like, everything was – we were all ready to go and be locked up in jail because we were the cause, so they say. You know, that we were the cause, and I’m just like, “What is going on here?” And I had a friend that was in Idaho visiting the doctor and he wrote to me, he says “Something’s coming down real bad,” and I say, “What do you mean?” So he had told me what was coming out in the news and it’s most gays and they’re passing it on, and bla bla this and bla bla and I says, “You gotta be kidding – this can’t be.” And then I started looking at it more and all of a sudden I see my friends who have – I saw them yesterday, they looked great. I saw them today, they’re dead. You know, it was terrible. And it was in droves of people, not just one or two a week, it was in droves. And I just couldn’t believe it and nobody – nobody was doing anything about it. Nobody was offering help. Nursing care, everyone was, “Don’t touch me man, wh – nope, nope.” It was terrible. So – and I ran in with these guys, and I would talk about it often, but then all of a sudden I’m at my sister’s house, and my brother-in-law and I went out by the pool and he said, “What are you doing?” And he knew what was going on with me, so I said, “I don’t know, I’m really upset about this HIV business going on,” then he says, “Ah, yeah. I read about it.” He’s saying – he’s a doctor, he should tell me that this is going on, not me tell him. Anyway, but about a day or two later he calls me up and he says, “I wanna talk to you for a minute.” So I go up, and he says, “Where do

you think – who gets AIDS, who gets HIV?” and I say, “Well it’s the gays, you know.” He says, “Nikki, we have droves of women coming in from Carlisle, to the Carlisle Hospital. They’re not all prostitutes, they’re not drug dealers, there’s no needles – these are young girls, straight girls.” And I, “Are you kidding me?” You know, how could this be? Well then more and more articles were coming out and say, hey this is not just a gay problem here folks, you know, this is all over, everybody.

So then I was talking with the guys and I said, “We need to do something. We need to raise awareness, we need to get involvement from the straight organizations to push some money in and take care of people, -” You know, even if it’s for someone to come and give someone coffee or water – they can’t even move, they’re so sick. You know, we needed people. So then, I said, “What can we call it?” And I didn’t want to call it Pride Festival because, I was developing the brochures, you know, and my employees are all straight. And you know, so I was kind of worried about that – I’m trying to cover that as well. Anyway, so Bernie just says, “Why don’t we just call it Unity?” because he was – the point was, I was trying to unify everybody, you know, every sense of the imag – the Catholics, the Lutherans, the, you know, the Quakers, everybody. And perfect – it was a perfect name – Unity. Cool, that’s cool. Well, then we didn’t have any money. I says, “Alright, let’s do it at my house.” ‘Cause I has six acres, and a – in a nice area, and – you know, you have problems there too because you have a swimming pool, you know, you can’t have anybody drown in it, so you don’t let ‘em in it. So you had all these kinda obstacles I had to overcome, and I had a neighbor that was really nasty, and she saw this activity, and she calls the cops. So I go to the cops and explain what I’m doing, that I’m having this Unity Festival in support of HIV, you know, awareness. And they were perfect – they were perfect. They came and they sat at the top of this hill looking down and making sure everything was okay, and it was perfect. They told me I had to shut the music down at 11 o’clock. I understand that, we’re in an area – you know, there’s homes everywhere. Not a problem, you know. And then – also the problem was, where are we gonna park all these people? You know, I mean – yes, I had six acres, but I don’t know how many people are gonna come, you know. So what we did, was we talked to this – I forget what school it was – we talked to this school, and we asked if we could borrow their buses, you know. And we would bus them from the Rossmoyne business center to my house. And it was perfect, you know, so that all these cars wouldn’t be in the way of the neighbors and everything like that. And it was – it was just perfect. They came in – people came in, they pay their bill – they came in, I had music, I had vendors where you could buy T-shirts or whatever – whatever they’re selling, or if they were doing jewelry they – it just turned out so great. The first year there were 750 people!

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** You know, I thought I had it. I got – they get these porta-potties, and everything like that, you know, so everyone wasn’t gonna go walking in and out of my house. It was so much fun, and it just made me feel – my heart was like, that big [gestures with hands spread apart wide]. I see all of these people – everybody, and even parents with children. You know, it was just a –

just gorgeous – it was just a gorgeous thing. But now what do you do? You know, you got 750 people here, and they’re gonna wanna come back next year, and where am I gonna put ‘em? ‘Cause they’re gonna multiply, yeah, obviously it’s gonna multiply. And then I started looking around and of course I was doing work for Ski Roundtop, I was doing their brochures. And I thought, “Hmm. This is the Summertime, that means there’s no snow. This probably just sits here all summer doing nothing,” so I went to the owner, and they – and they rented it to me, I couldn’t believe it. I explained the whole situation, not a problem, you know. And then we had 5,000 people. Yeah, yeah, so we really did well then. And then it was getting like, it was my job. You know, I was paying more attention to this than I was my own business, you know, ‘cause it just kept growing and growing everywhere, and our horizons were expanding to different cities and states, you know, and I – it was – and I advertised in all the gay magazines, or newspapers, or anything that was gay-oriented I—we advertised in. I just kept bringing in more people. That’s how – we craved activity. You know, and you have a program and you’re gonna have people, because there was nothing for them. And the whole I – the whole concept of helping each other, and – it was – it was just incredible. A good feeling. And I had the greatest support among gays and lesbians for this whole thing. They offered to do any job for free. And – and they, you know, went around the campground making sure that everybody was doing alright, they need anything... It was all volunteers. Nobody got paid. You know, but oh, it was a wonderful time.

We were just thinking about this last night. We were all talking and laughing about some of the activities that happened, you know. We had this – we had this – I forget her name now too – she was from Baltimore. She was a drag queen, you know, but she was a huge drag queen, you know, she was huge. I didn’t know it. I’m talking to her on the phone and oh, she sounded great, and she was so happy, and we just chit-chatted for a while and I heard that she was very good. Well, I didn’t know much about drag queens, you know, but anyway, so I said, “Well, do you think you can come?” “Oh yes, have this for me, this for me,” I didn’t know that I had to have fruit – a special place for them to get dressed. I didn’t know that, so we built it, you know, just so that they’d have a little dressing room and stuff like this. All of a sudden, this humongous limo arrives at my house, and I could see my neighbors all looking, watching this thing come in – big white limo. And the biggest drag queen I’ve ever seen steps out of it and I, “Oh my god.” I’m thinking, “Is that stage gonna hold that woman?” You know, or that man? I’m like, hey – but she was so fantastic. Everyone loved her. So – and all that word spread out and you know – and they brought their people in. It just kept growing and growing. And it was like, oh my god. [laughs] And I was working at the – for the LPGA [Ladies Professional Golf Association] tour – golf tour, which was in Hershey, and I did their books and all that stuff – trinkets, and things like that. Anyway, so I had seen how they handled the masses, you know, and I just – it was good knowledge for me, because then we did the Unity Festivals like, easy. Really was easy. It wasn’t – there was no problem getting people to help. They lo – they wanted – they could hardly wait to go and work, and come over for a meeting. [laughs] You know, a meeting, and then for a while I was – you know, every week we’re having meetings, and then closer to the thing it was every

day we were having meetings. These people never, never did not come. They came all the time. It was a great experience.

**BL:** [laughs]

**NK:** Sorry you missed it.

**BL:** Yeah. [laughs] Yeah, I missed the first one. I did – I did go to the second one though.

**NK:** You did?

**BL:** Yes.

**NK:** Oh, thank you.

**BL:** Yeah, it was – it was amazing. Alright, so...

**NK:** Oh, thanks.

**BL:** Tell me a little bit more about like, what other entertainment you had at the first festival and then there was the – the subsequent...

**NK:** Okay. That – that was kind of easy to put together like I said – because we didn't have any venues for things like that, you know. We didn't have a place to go. We weren't allowed, you know. If we went into a place we couldn't – two girls dance, two guys dance – couldn't do it. You know, so providing that venue was easy, and knowing that I would have a response to it. So what I'd do, was I looked around at what we had here, and the men's chorus was in existence – early existence, you know, but they weren't getting any programs where they performed. You know, so I thought, "Gee, The Unity Festival, well that would be nice to have them perform." And then a lot of people would see them. And it went over so well with them. Then we had the Baltimore men's chorus come up and sing one day – or one time – and then we – and of course we had a couple of drag queens, this big one being the best. We had – like I'm trying to think of the girl who was a big hit with a guitar – Suede. Have you heard of Suede?

**BL:** Mhm.

**NK:** Okay. Yeah, she's still doing very well. But she was like, in the early stages of her career too, so she would come to Harrisburg and then perform at the Neptune. Okay, well then when I got to know her, I thought, "Oh, she'd be great." She had a girl following that was unbelievable. So, I got her to agree to it. Now, there's a situation where I'm a novice to this. I didn't know – or I had to find a piano for her. You know, I knew I had to provide a stage and all the electricity and that's it, you know. I didn't know I had to have a piano for her. I didn't know I had to have – she was the one who wanted fresh fruit and steamed shrimp and all this stuff for the – and a large dressing room. So I just gave her the bottom of my house and said, "Go, set up there." So she

came, brought a great amount of people from all over. And I'm trying to think now... Bobbi Carmitchell was – you remember her?

**BL:** Mhm.

**NK:** She's still...

**BL:** Oh yeah. We interviewed her, yes.

**NK:** Yeah, did you really?

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** Well, Bobbi was with another girl originally, and the other girl committed suicide. Do you know who I mean? I can't remember her name. She was a wonderful, wonderful singer. I had that group there. So we had several groups, mostly from New York – these people were from New York. They had actual groups. And – and we had a couple from Baltimore. So that's how it – and you tell this person, and they say, "Oh, yeah, oh well this, -" and it kept growing and growing and growing and oh my god, oh my god. So the first question I was saying, "Are you gonna do this for free?" You know, I have no money, are you doing this for free? This is our point. We're trying to raise money for HIV and bla bla and do you understand, but if you could charge me a lot of money, I can't raise any money. And I had everybody – everybody do it for free, except one. And she was never invited back for the next two years. Because, everybody was give – even if she'd take her suggested price and cut it in half, I would've been happy. But to actually give nothing back to the Unity – nothing back to the people? Oh – I'm playing with this [laughs] [gestures to microphone].

**CM:** It's still working.

**NK:** Okay, good. Good. Anyway, so that's how it grew – just one person telling another person and alright, well you've heard... And then they – they send someone up to see what it was like, what was going on, was it worth it – yeah it was. They were standing in line calling me after the first year. It was a riot.

**BL:** So tell me more about the entertainment in the subsequent years after – from your house to Ski Roundtop.

**NK:** It just kept getting bigger. The bands weren't three anymore. There were 17 people in a band, or it was something like that. They were always all gay. It was kind of a weird situation there, 'cause I wanted other people, you know. Some people like jazz – I'm not a jazz person. But some people like jazz, and I couldn't find any jazz groups, you know, it was weird. And you know, in Rehoboth we have this Jazz festival every year. It's humongous, completely sold out. You know, in the first two or three days it's completely sold out. Anyway, so had I been given more time – but you understand, I'm trying to run 20 people, you know, take care of my



customers and put this together – well okay, what do we need, we need a program, we need this, we need that. I have to make it aligned with my type of work, you know, ‘cause number one, we didn’t have to pay for it, right? I mean... And number two, we needed all this advertisement – posters, oodles and oodles of newspaper, things like that. And which also those things attracted potential artists – you know, vendors. So you have all these vendors – and a lot of them were straight in that case, ‘cause they go the whole gambit, you know, they have a vending machine, they sell funnel cakes and they go to every fair from here to there for a whole six months or something. So we – they came, and that was great ‘cause then I didn’t have to worry about food, spoiling – I didn’t have to worry about anything. And they had to worry about cleaning up their own little spot. So that worked out, and just one of the people that worked in my committee that knew a guy that knew a guy that knew a guy, and this is how this grew. So every time we’d have a meeting, “Okay, what’s the status of this, what’s the status of that,” they all had answers. You know, which I was so happy about. My own employees didn’t work that good, you know, and they’re getting paid, you know. [laughs] I know, I was just so excited about it, you know. Everybody – and that’s the – and that enthusiasm, you know, kind of spreads to other people, you know. You’re so excited about it and “Wow, this is cool,” and then next thing you know, “Oh man, did you hear, we’re getting this guy and this guy,” so the word spread, you know. Like, people talk, you know. So that’s good. That was my best form of entertainment – or of advertisement.

**BL:** Do you know about how much was raised over the course of the three years? Do you recall any of that?

**NK:** We were trying to figure that out last night, because Tom – one of my friends, who’s here – he took all the minutes. We can’t find the minutes but he’s still looking. He’s still looking, and so he finds them, he’s gonna give them to you.

**BL:** Oh, wonderful.

**NK:** But if you – if you just wanna... Okay, just think about \$20 dollars a person times 5,000 people.

**BL:** Mhm.

**NK:** That’s about – that’s the estimate I can give you, you know, and we spread it among – and you’re gonna ask me and I’m not gonna be able to tell you – we spread it among five gay organizations, one of them being the men’s chorus.

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** ‘Cause they needed money to get outfits and stuff like that and – and get to places to perform. So, we had that... I can’t remember the other ones. Bernie might.

**BL:** SCAAN? [South Central AIDS Assistance Network]

**NK:** I'm sorry?

**BL:** South Central AIDS Assistance.

**NK:** Yeah.

**BL:** That works? Yeah, yeah.

**NK:** Yes. Yes, yes, yes. So – and there was five different ones, and – I mean, when you start looking around and all of a sudden things were popping up, things were happening, you know, this awareness business was coming out of the closet. So, it just kept growing. That's what I was happy to see that it was going to continue, you know, because after the third year, that was it, we couldn't do it anymore. We could, but...

**BL:** You were probably exhausted at that point? [laughs]

**NK:** I'll tell you, it was a very exhausting year. Every year, it was a very exhausting year, because we worked on it all the time, 24/7, it was incredible. You have to, with something of that magnitude, you know, you gotta think of everything that might go wrong, so you're not ending up in jail, being sued for something, and – or hurting anybody. But you know, when we went to – moved to Roundtop, word started circulating that—This was a redneck area, and they found out it was going to be an AIDS/HIV-type thing, and we started getting hate mail. It was terrible. I mean, and there's – and we had to – I figured it was from that area, so I – what I did is I just went to the state police and I explained it. Took my papers, explained what was going on, and we're getting this hate mail. And I'm – I'm fearful, this is in the forest. You know, these guys can be in the mountains there with guns, and they're shooting all the people, you know, what am I gonna do? And not a problem. The state police, honest to God, if you were not working that night, volunteered their time to come and circulate around just to make sure that everything was okay.

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** Can you believe that? I mean, they volunteered their time.

**BL:** That's amazing.

**NK:** I couldn't believe it. It was great. We had a f – great people.

**BL:** Did you – you mentioned that you had a – a neighbor that might give you problems. Did – did you face any repercussions from that neighbor from the experience of having the festival?

**NK:** Well, after I heard that she was the one who was complaining, it was – 'cause she sees all this pounding and building stages and things like that, and I realized it was her, and I said – and they told me it was her, and I said "Oh," [grumbles]. So I go to the police and I explain the whole thing to them, what was going down, and because they sat their police car in front of her house

on top of the hill, she had no complaints, you understand. She good. But they're sitting in their backyard and listening to the music, you know what I mean, for free! [laughs]

**BL:** [laughs]

**NK:** So there was not a complaint at all, but there's an interesting story with that. She was over there, the neighbor had it down here [gestures with hands, one finger pointing upwards, and the other to the side], and there's always like, acres between us, we're not like, sitting side by side. Anyway, there's a neighbor down here and I can't remember the guy's name. It was a – he was an orthopedic surgeon, and he was doing work – he worked for the hospital, but he also was doing work where you could go to Africa and he'd raise money, he'd come back here, raise money, go to Africa, and build these little clinics.

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** You know, and then he gets his buddies from all over the United States, who were – gave up a week of their time, and they'd go to Africa and they'd do operations, you know, for free. It was incredible. He was the nicest guy – the nicest guy. Well, he had this, and I had sent a letter to all these people saying this is what I was doing so they all knew what was going on, thank you Jesus. You know, and all of a sudden, one of the guys came – he was – he was standing way out in front of my driveway – my driveway was a football field long, you know, so it was a distance – he's standing out there directing people in – or vendors, or whatever the case may be, and this young lady, in her 20s, walks up to him and gives him a \$100 dollar bill, and says, "Give this to Nikki," you know, "This is wonderful what you're all doing, bla bla this," and she leaves. And here it was this doctor – it was his daughter.

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** You know, she was home from Africa, 'cause she and her husband were now joining her father in going around and caring for the Africans. A month later, she's in Africa, her father's here, and she and the husband came across this water where there's elephants in there and the trainers were washing them down and everything. I don't know what happened, if it was the color she had on or what, but the elephant came flying out of that water, went over to her, picked her up with his trunk and just kept slamming her down and killed her.

**CM:** Oh, no.

**NK:** And you know, I couldn't believe it. That poor man—her husband, and her father and mother. They haven't been right since, you know, because that was such... The husband couldn't do anything. This was a monster elephant, you know. And then he wraps himself around this young lady and just kept – he killed her. I couldn't believe it. I still – I'll never forget that story, you know. So they had this humongous, humongous funeral, and where are you gonna park all these cars? And so, I just went out and said, "Hey, here's this land, just park, you know, just do

this. Don't worry about it, just do it." And – I mean we're talking about hundreds and hundreds of cars here. It was terrible. Can you imagine that? Her – and her father then quit working here and I had heard that he moved to Africa and he had just continued building everything for them, and bring – still bringing the surgeons over to work with him, so he did a fine job. And, Unity.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** You know.

**BL:** Let's see. Do you have any other like, fond memories of the festival that you can recall or maybe amusing stories or whatever that might...? [laughs]

**NK:** Oh.

**BL:** Other than the drag queen. [laughs]

**NK:** Yeah. Oh, I can't even remember her name too. She's probably still in existence. Funny stories. I have some stories that aren't so funny, but we'll not talk about those.

**BL:** Well, you can if you want to. [laughs]

**NK:** Oh, really? Well, you can edit this out, you know, if you don't want to talk about it. [laughs]

**CM:** Do they edit these?

**BL:** [laughs] We tend to keep everything on the original tape, so, if you'd prefer it not to be on tape then probably we should talk off camera. [laughs]

**NL:** Well, it is – it's part of our existence, though, so I should tell you that. Why do you think we quit doing it?

**BL:** I don't know, that's a question I was going to ask you. [laughs]

**NK:** I mean, I would've gone on forever – actually, I would have given up my business to run this...

**BL:** Wow.

**NK:** ...in different areas, not just here. And like I said, there was oodles of land. You could have oodles of people. It would just get better and better and better, but after the last festival then everybody comes back – all those committee people, and we work for hours, cleaning up paper cups, you know. I mean hours, trash, trash. And it was great. So, I went into the office and I said I had money with me that I was gonna put a down payment on for next year and everything, and I said I would like to sign up for next year and rent this land, and the guy says no. So – what? I was so shocked, because he did make money off of us too, you know. He had a couple of

vending machines out there who were vending booze, and he was making money. He plus was getting membership for Ski Roundtop, you know, it was incredible. He said no. “Why?” “Well, because this is a family-oriented business.” “Okay, we have children here.” “Yeah? Well, one of our guards found two men up in the top of the hill having sex.” Yeah, my mouth – I could’ve stepped on my lip. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe it. And – so he brings this up, and then he says, “You can’t come here anymore.” You know, he completely denied the fact that we’re making this awareness, you know. I mean, so – we have one fault, and it doesn’t – we have the city of Harrisburg, is everybody perfect? You know, I mean I was not thrilled that this happened, but let’s get – you know, it happens. And – but then I couldn’t fight city hall, you know what I mean. Can’t fight ‘em, they didn’t want us. I was like, exhausted, where are we gonna go next, and have to go and find a place, and negotiate, and do all that, you know. It would take a year to do it. So I just said no. And then there was this little group that had gotten together and we gave them money, and I forget how much it was – whatever was left over, like, came in after we had closed the books, you know, we gave to them, and said, “Start up Pride,” you know, and that’s how it ended. It’s sad though, isn’t it. I was so upset.

**BL:** Mhm.

**NK:** And I wish they would’ve kept the word “unity”. They could’ve called it “unity pride,” or something, you know. Just because the whole concept of unity is bringing everybody together, and it worked. It really, truly worked. Oh and I – the reason I could tell you that is because I went to Altand’s Ranch, which is in York. Have you ever been there, or heard about it, or anything?

**BL:** Mhm.

**NK:** Okay. That was a big dancefloor, you know, lots of people. But it was mostly men, and maybe three or four women out of a thousand men, you know, but as time went on, all of a sudden – this was after the Unity Festival – all of a sudden there’s half girls half guys and everybody’s having a good time. Dancing with each other, you know, talking with each other. It was great, just great to see that kind of thing happen. I’m happy about it. You know, and then these kids that worked with us, they should be happy about it too ‘cause they did a fine job. Can’t think of anything, you know, that... Bernie – did you interview Bernie? Bernie would’ve probably know all kinds of things that happened, ‘cause you understand, I’m running from the gate to the top, to the gate to the top, and he’s actually handling what else is going on, and we had a booth – camper set up, and that’s where – it was like your home port, and the money’s all being handled there, you know, and guards. It was just like a wonderful system we had. And – but I didn’t get a chance to get around to see the people, ‘cause you have to – and we have – we have pictures for you too.

**BL:** Oh, great.

**NK:** And you'll see, like there's – the mountain – you could see Roundtop and all these people are just sitting on the – it was great, because our stage is here [gestures with hands downward], mountain's up there [points upward] and I didn't have to put any bleachers in, you know, they just sat on the ground, brought their coolers. It was great. It was so great. But, it was also a very, very dry summer, okay. So my idea was, at the very end when the men's chorus sang the last song, then we'd all light a candle, you know, and hold it up, [mimics holding a candle in a fist] which would've been just beautiful, you know. But it was so dry, I couldn't take the chance, you know, I just couldn't take the chance, somebody who set the forest on fire. Oh, can you imagine that? I would've shot myself, I think. [laughs] But, yeah.

**BL:** Well good. Let's see, let's get back to – and in terms of your – any other connections you had with the LGBT community other than the Unity Festival? Were you involved in any organizations or other activities that you participated in, or...?

**NK:** No really, not really. Well first of all, there wasn't a whole lot going on, you know. And the biggest thing was the men's chorus and the Unity Festival. That was like, the biggest attraction we had here in Harrisburg. The other organizations came after us. Is that the organization that started Pride Festival then, after we went?

**BL:** Yeah, it was – initially I think it was picked up by the LGBT – or, the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard of Harrisburg.

**NK:** Right.

**BL:** Yeah, we kind of formed it under that for a few years and then it became its own entity for a few years, organized its own, you know, group or whatever, so.

**NK:** Yeah.

**BL:** But yeah, it... I was one of the people who actually – that picked up and took over, so...

**NK:** Is that right?

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** I see you've been around for a while, eh? [laughs]

**BL:** [laughs]

**NK:** Well you've done a fine job. I hear it's all up and down the Front Street.

**BL:** Front Street, yeah.

**NK:** I have never seen it. I've never come up far...

**BL:** Oh, really? Oh, wow.

**NK:** I'll come up this coming year. You got it in July?

**BL:** July – yeah, the end of July just like the Unity Festival was. We kept the same date, and...

**NK:** Did you really?

**BL:** Yeah. Always – always the last weekend.

**NK:** Yeah, and it's good, 'cause now people know.

**BL:** Yeah, it's...

**NK:** And those people aren't coming anymore but they're telling the younger ones so you're getting the younger crowd. [laughs] Yeah, I heard that it was a big success on the Front Street, which was great.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** It was great. So you – did you have any trouble like, getting the residents in that area to accept what was going on?

**BL:** No, it's been pretty well accepted, and yeah, so.

**NK:** Great. Super. Yep.

**BL:** And it's – well, you know that's – that's really in part to your legacy, I mean that's really – points to your – your involvement and your legacy in creating what that really was, so.

**NK:** Yeah.

**BL:** So it was a good model for us to continue, so.

**NK:** Yeah – we asked for one thing, I forget who handled that on this side of the shore but there – you have all these businesses here and everybody's got their heads, you know, covered, and they don't wanna hear about, see about, or anything. But we started knocking on doors and asking if they would donate money. You know, because we started with nothing, I mean, not one penny. You know, and so I carried the bills as much as I could, and then I would just explain to whatever – whoever's working with it, "This is a front-type thing, and we don't have the money right now, you're gonna have to wait, and trust me I'll cover it," if it doesn't go, I got – I would call back to the headquarter center and say, "Where are now? Where are we now?" because I was so worried. I knew I had this humongous bill ahead of me, and by noon we had it covered. Oh, wow! So anything we made from noon on was money for the group. Oh god, I was a nervous wreck. That part – I was nervous. I mean, I would've covered it if it took me 50 years to pay 'em back but it was rough.

**BL:** Usually we ask if you were – if you ever served in the military. I assume you didn't, so...

**NK:** No.

**BL:** Yeah, okay.

**NK:** And you wanna know, I wanted to.

**BL:** Did you really.

**NK:** I did. Truly did, and – ‘cause I had an uncle that was in the military and he became a general and you know, so every time I’d see him, he’d always look so handsome in his uniform, you know, and all these things on his chest, and I say, “Man, I need to look like that. That’s cool,” and my father, “No way.” When then after I started learning about it, “Nope. If they find out you’re gay, they’re gonna kill you.” Seriously. And – so I didn’t – I’ve always regretted that I didn’t do it. Now especially, ‘cause the retirement money is fantastic. [laughs] But – and then I also – women have joined now and they have – they’re driving and they’re flying these planes, they’re doing everything.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** Just – I was a little too young for this. Now if I waited – now, to do Unity Festival that same age, then I could go and join the service and do my good deed for the company – for the country. I do – I missed a lot of those things. I mean, these girls are astronauts now. All – everything is open for ‘em and there’s still a glass ceiling, but they can get close to it. And maybe, we’ll even go through it soon.

**BL:** Did you get involved in any sports activities or anything like that, or were you – like any, you know, leagues or something like that...?

**NK:** You mean in the gay community?

**BL:** Yeah, or in general – I mean, some people play softball or things like that – volleyball, or...

**NK:** Yeah, I’m kind of thinking about that. First of all, I didn’t really have a whole lot of time, you know. When I was in college, yes, I played basketball.

**BL:** Oh, did you?

**NK:** Yeah. And visited sororities and things like that. All those things you do when you’re a young kid, you know, without a care in your mind, you know, just as long as dad pays that bill. So, I didn’t care at all if friends of mine have formed softball teams and things like that, and I just didn’t never have the time, you know. That was it. That was... I was either going out, or creating something to make us all go out, or buying houses, or building a house, or running a business. It’s like, oh my God, my life went by so fast. Yeah, I’d like to do that over, you know. I really would.



**BL:** Did you have any hobbies or anything like that, that you pursued during your time?

**NK:** Yeah. Mainly... Okay, I sold my business – first of all, I sold my business, and then I was thinking of just retiring at 55. So I sold it, but then they wanted me to come and work for ‘em for two years – first they took most of my staff, and then they wanted ‘em to come work for ‘em for two years and open up the New York City market for them, because they were not in New York. I was, and you know, I love New York when you’re a vacationer. I don’t like New York when you have to sell something in New York, ‘cause it’s dog eat dog. You know, it’s rough, it’s a rough, rough time, and the other thing that was so surprising to me was, they all went home at five o’clock. I’m stuck. I’m either gonna die of cirrhosis of the liver in Barstow (??) or loneliness in a hotel room. You know, and I did it for seven years and I finally said, “Can’t do it.” But... What was the question?

**BL:** Now I’ve forgotten. [laughs]

**CM:** I think it was about retirement? Or...

**BL:** Oh, oh, hobbies. You know, any hobbies that you pursued.

**NK:** Oh, hobbies. Yes, yes. Okay, so I decided to quit, alright. And – I mean, I was always okay. Financially, I was fine, you know, and – but I just wanted to get out of it – New York. And I didn’t wanna start back up another business or anything like that. So I went to Florida, ‘cause I heard about this stained glass guy, and he teaches you everything how to stain glass, and – and I went down there and I took the course, and I can’t remember what that was about. So I come back, and I’m making all this stained glass, you know, beautiful windows this big [gestures widely with hand], doors, you know. I never made little things –trinket things. I had – mine had to be big. So I did it, and then everyone liked it and everything. It was great. So I decided to sell it. Guess what – everybody loves it, but number one – nobody can afford it, or they won’t pay the money for it, you know. So you’re stuck with all this glass, you know. And so then I decided, “Well, I’ll teach people.” So then I moved down to Rehoboth Beach and I had this company – I started this company – it was called Creative Glassworks, and the neighborhood people started being my students, you know, they were loving it, and I was loving it. It’s a form of art that’s so different and it’s – you can do anything. And you buy a lot of money for Band-Aids, you know. [laughs] So anyway, it was just a wonderful program, but where was I gonna go with it? You know, these people were making all these stained glass for their family, but if you’re gonna – think you’re gonna sell it, forget it, you know. Which is – my father was right, I should never have gone to Pratt. ‘Cause I would’ve been painting pictures in the corner and not sell one dang gone thing. He was right. [laughs] Took me a while to realize he was right, though. But yeah, so stained glass I got into. I – I’ve not been doing it for several years now. I’m enjoying my retirement with my memories.

**BL:** Did you have any partners after Mary Ellen?

**NK:** Yes.

**BL:** Okay. Tell me a little bit about your other relationships.

**NK:** Yeah, you do stupid things. You really do stupid things. Here I'm with this person for 18 years, and we had a great life, you know, built a house, built a swimming pool. The place I – I had the swimming pool – I had this five acres of land and I had all these trees, okay, but I wanted a swimming pool, so I had to take the trees out. Well, I'm not gonna pay for anybody to take the trees out. I'm gonna take the trees out. So, I had some friends from Philadelphia come up and we took the trees out. But we had this huge, humongous pile of debris, right? And I said, "Oh my god, burn this." So I don't know where my brain was, but it sure wasn't in my head. I'm putting gasoline all over this thing and all over this thing [mimics pouring] and my friends are standing like, behind me, then my house is behind them. And all a sudden, I lit a match, and I didn't even get close to it, you know. I lit a match and this whole thing goes up in flames, pushes me back, I fall down and I had my eyes closed, and I just said, "Dorth, dorth, am I burnt?" [laughs] And she says, "No." And I says, "Do I still have hair?" And she said – these two questions – and says, "Yeah, you're fine." And I says, "Is Mary Ellen looking out the door?" And she, "Yes." I knew I was in deep doo-doo then, let me tell you. But fortunately, we did not start a fire to the forest, you know. We were able to contain it, but it was one big rude awakening. But I got my trees down. [laughs] We had great – and I had great parties, you know. I didn't have just like, little parties where 20 people come, or something like that. My parties were like 200 people, 300 people. We had pigs. We were roasting 'em and here we'd do all kinds of crazy things. 'Cause we had a swimming pool, everybody comes for a swimming pool. And then everybody brings another friend, so I have all these guys who are well-known in this area, and I had a sliding board, so there was like seven guys on top of the sliding board and they all come down. All of a sudden this one guy comes down and he goes off the sliding board onto the cement, boom. And then he goes in the sliding board and I saw this. Man, I flew down there jumped in, pulled him up. He has a broken collar bone, and I didn't know this man. And I'm thinking, "Oh, no." You know, sue – someone's gonna sue me, oh no. But he was a fine guy. But all summer, he had this cast like this [raises arm high] and he had a VW and he never had the top up. He says that's all you can get around Harrisburg to go to the bars. Oh my god, when you see him – I was so embarrassed. I was so embarrassed. I – Oh no – but it became a big joke and he's been a fine fella ever since. You know, he never sued me. So there's a kind of things we would do. The camaraderie again, you know, this is what – it just kept building and then the people wanted to do other things, and we did it.

**BL:** So you had a lot of parties at your place.

**NK:** Oh yeah.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** And of course they had to be themed parties. So like, there's a Western party and everybody gets dressed up Western. We had Halloween parties, of course, everybody does. And the queens get real happy about that, you know. You know, they can get dressed up. It was just a riot. I have a – I had a friend – I have a friend that – he was so – so handy, so crafty. You know, he could sew up anything and do this and do that, and he made – one year he made a dress – a gown out of 5,000 coffee filters. I am not kidding you, it was huge. 5,000 coffee – this man sewed in 5,000 on this dress. And it was this big long dress, you know. And then somehow – somehow he got lights at the bottom of this dress, so. [laughs] I mean, he would do things like this. He would win all the prizes for the Halloween – do they still have prizes for Halloween prizes here at the bars?

**BL:** Some probably do.

**NK:** Because that's what it was. And Altland's Ranch was the great one for Halloween. Everybody was there, you know. And – and that had grown to be a much bigger and better place, but I think they closed now, Altland's Ranch.

**BL:** Yeah, just recently.

**NK:** Yeah, yeah. That's a shame, 'cause that's a lot of history there.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** Yeah.

**BL:** Yeah, when they closed, they were the longest-running bar in the area.

**NK:** Yes.

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** Yes. I remember one time we went down, and I was driving, and I had a bunch of queens in my car and they're all dressed up in their gowns and paraphernalia, wigs up to here, [raises hands high above head] and we go down, we spent the night, and now we're coming home, okay. And we shouldn't've been driving, you know. This was before all the DUI [Driving Under the Influence] business and everything. But we came home, and all of a sudden the guys have to go to the bathroom. Well there's nothing between here and there, you know, so they get out, and they're going to go on the side of the road and pee, okay. But they had to crawl over the railing that's there, and this one guy crawls over and all of a sudden I hear all this noise. Well, he crawled over and he slipped on ice and he goes rolling, rolling down, 'cause you know, these things go way down to the ditch. [laughs] You know, he's rolling and he's screaming, and we're all out there looking for him – it's dark, we can't see him, you know. Oh my god, I'll never forget it. And we finally got him up and got him taken care of and everything but he was all dirty. And – so we come across this donut shop and he goes in there – this all-night donut shop

where they feed, you know, donuts and coffee and just truckers. So he went in there, you know, he went in there to go to the bathroom and to wash up and so did the other guy, and the other guy was so funny. He was – he was like this. [Mimics eating a donut] He was eating his donut like this and this coffee, and he was watching these guys – they’re truckers, that are over there, you know. If they were to put two and two together which I think they did – it’s a wonder they didn’t kill these guys, you know what I mean. It was terrible. And of course, by this time there’s this beard guy – the guy had a beard growing, you know. ‘Cause he’s been out all night. Oh my god, I’ll never forget that time. And even me, I’m thinking, “Oh, I’m getting out of here fast,” you know, you’ve got to hurry up. But, yeah we’d do things like, these crazy things and then we’d laugh about them years later. Great memories.

**BL:** Did you – did you face any kind of discrimination or harassment in your life with – for being gay? Did you have any incidents that you can recall from?

**NK:** You know, that’s – that is a good question. I was in my first year of college, and I had this – I had these two friends that I used to play basketball with at Penn – at Central Dauphin. So I’d come home on the weekends, you know, and be with my parents. And then one of my friends who looked really like a man, okay, worked across the street at the gas station, you know. You never knew it was a woman. You never knew it. And her name was Joanne. And then the other friend, her name was Julie. These girls were really good friends of mine, you know. And I knew they were a little rough-looking or things like that, but it was okay, I liked them. So she would come over, every time she would see my car, and she was like, “I have to tell you something,” and I said, “What?” and she says – show you outside – and she says, “I’m gonna have a sex change.” I went, [jaw drops] you know. Again, we have to go back 20 years, so you have to think about – now you hear about it, then you didn’t. And you sure didn’t acknowledge it, that’s for sure.

**BL:** Right.

**NK:** And she told me this, and then she says, “Julia’s too.” And I said, “Now I’ve got two of ’em in my life.” I was like, “Oh my god.” So then, some people found out they were my friends, and they started saying, “Are you getting a sex change? Are you getting a sex change?” It just got bigger and bigger and bigger and it wasn’t a pretty sight. And then it was – the sad part about it is these girls really had it rough. Really had it – and I’d be like their protector, you know. We’d get together and we’d go out and do something, and then right away things would happen, things were said, and I’d become their protector and they would just kinda ignore it, well ‘cause me – I’m out, I’m not gonna ignore it. But I got myself in trouble with that, you know, because they get ugly. I mean, you really get – they’re ready to kill. It’s different now, thank God. And in another 20 years it’ll be like nothing.

**BL:** Going back to college for a minute, where you aware of any kind of LGBT type groups or organizations on campus and stuff?

**NK:** Yes, mhm, yes.

**BL:** Did you get involved in them – in that at all?

**NK:** Only that I knew they were there.

**BL:** Okay. Yeah, and that was at Penn State?

**NK:** Yes.

**BL:** Yeah. ‘Cause there were – I guess there was a group – the main campus, right?

**NK:** That’s right.

**BL:** And yeah so, there was a group I know early on called HOPS [Homophiles of Penn State], yeah? So you were aware of that group being there.

**NK:** Yeah.

**BL:** Did you know any people who were involved with it, or you were?

**NK:** Not – I mean acquaintances, I might say, you know, I knew. We talked once in a while, you know, or ran into each other, and we’d like, acknowledge each other type thing. But I wasn’t really involved. I’m just trying to get through school. [laughs]

**BL:** Did you go out to any of the bars at State College?

**NK:** Not in State College, no.

**BL:** Not in State College, yeah.

**NK:** In Philadelphia and Baltimore, I would do.

**BL:** Okay, you’d go there for... Yeah.

**NK:** Yeah. Or here, if I was here.

**BL:** Mhm, mhm.

**NK:** Yeah.

**BL:** Okay.

**NK:** Again, you know, it was a – again, it was not out.

**BL:** Right.

**NK:** It is so different now. I wish I lived – I wish I lived like that when I was younger, you know. ‘Course I’d probably be dead, you know, from too much booze, too much partying, you know, that type of thing. [laughs]

**BL:** Were there any particular important events or turning points in your life that you can recall?

**NK:** Hmm. Turning points. Well, anytime you have a breakup, you know, straight people kind of – it didn’t bother – it’s like a, “Oh no, you can’t possibly be hurting, you know, just ‘cause you split from that girl,” you know. But me, if I’m married to this man, and we split up, the whole world knows about it, you know, and it’s okay everybody’s coming to comfort. But we didn’t get comforted, you know. When it was a breakup, it was a breakup. I mean it was heart-wrenching. And so I went through that a couple times, and then I vowed, “That’s it. I’m not doing this again,” you know, just ‘cause it’s a – you really break your heart. And now people understand a little bit more, especially since the marriage thing, it’s getting tougher to break up and expensive. You know, so it’s different now.

**BL:** I think – I think you – when I asked you before about other relationships, I think you kind of ended that story with the big explosion on the driveway. [laughs]

**NK:** Oh yeah.

**BL:** Did – Do you wanna talk a little bit more about subsequent relationships that you had?

**NK:** Yeah ‘cause that was, remember when I said I – you’re stupid, sometimes you’re stupid.

**BL:** Yeah, right.

**NK:** So here I am in the perfect relationship and that became pretty well-known in the West Shore, because of the business, and then I got involved with the Chamber of Commerce of West Shore, and then I became president of the West Shore, and then you know, my – my horizon here was enveloping and getting larger and larger. And you run into a lot of people. So I ran into – I would always go to Steak and Ale, which was over there, or Casa Grille, which was no longer. And of course all the business people went there, and we all saw the same business people. We’re all sitting at the same bar. We’re all buying our lunch or we’re taking a client out, and I keep seeing this girl, right. Keep seeing her. And so then finally one of the chairmen in the chamber said to me, “Do you know her?” I said, “No,” and she says, “Well, she goes with this guy,” who I did know and he was an architect. And finally, we got to talking. She called me – she was in business also – she called me at work and said, “Hey, can you meet at (inaudible) after work tonight? I wanna ask you something,” or, “I wanna tell you something.” So I says, “Yeah sure, no problem.” You know, she just seemed like a nice girl. So I go there, knowing that she’s with this guy, okay. And we’re in – we ordered our drink, and I said, “Well, what’s up?” And I say that, I pick this glass up, and she says, “I think I’m gay.” Well I almost drank that glass, you know, I mean I – What? And she just said it – blurted it out, you know. We didn’t

blurt things out at the time, you know. We were very quiet about us, you know. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. Long story short, I break up with this girl, I get with this girl, and it lasts 10 years, and then she moved to California. Then that was it, you know. But it was just such a – again, a heartbreak. It was a heartbreak for this girl that I broke up with – with her family, my family, 'cause my mom loved her as a daughter-in-law, and now I'm marrying this new person? It took a little while, that they finally liked her and now, all a sudden she's leaving. So that's – relationship-wise, that was the length of time and the two people. Okay, but now we have – you have dates, you have friends, you have – but not, you know.

**BL:** Nothing that long, no. Yeah.

**NK:** No. Course we were trying to build our life like Mom and Dad, you know, and we're really not getting the respect like mom and dad did. I think now because of the marriage situation there's a lot more respect for you two to be together and it's okay. And if you just split up, we know your heart's breaking. Now they can communicate with us.

**BL:** So tell me a little bit about retirement.

**NK:** I love it. Oh, I'll tell you, I'll tell you about it. There's – this is my 17<sup>th</sup> year, and of course when I bought the place, it was in the summer, so all my friends are coming down from Harrisburg, oh it's great. Every weekend I had a house full of people and we were partying, and partying, and going out. That was young, you know. And everything's great, and then all of a sudden, September came, and then next thing you know, no one's there. And I got really lonely. I mean, I'm going from working hours and hours and hours in New York and then I'm down here in Rehoboth and all my friends are in Harrisburg. This was the same position that I felt when I was leaving New York. All my friends are in Harrisburg, you know, and they're going out to dinner together, they're having little parties – little cocktail parties, little dinners, and I'm in Harri – I'm in New York at a bar, you know. It was just so lonely, so oh no, what am I gonna do. So I buy a boat, you know, I buy it – I never drove a boat in my life. I had this big boat, and I, "This is great. It can hold 14 people." I was so happy, you know. Well, I ran into a couple things, you know. When you come in to put it back into the dock, you have to slow down, you know, it doesn't stop on a dime, you know, I'm serious, you – so I beat that boat to death, you know, let me tell you. And I – I kept trying, practicing. While all my friends are in Harrisburg I'm practicing. Well, I have to practice, and then I have to get the guy to fix it up. 'Cause I just bent this side and this side, you know, it was terrible. Anyway so – and that was going great for a couple of years, you know, we're all going that way. Finally it did come and I finally learned how to drive it. They come down, and the story before the end of this is we – down in Rehoboth, we had this old – this old ship that comes down and these tall ships, you know. And it belongs to Delaware, and it goes from Boston to Delaware, Boston to Delaware. So it's here in the summer. It's a gorgeous ship so I said, "Oh, oh I'll take you up, I'll take you right to the ship," you know. So we go there – it's also where the ferries are in Lewes, so I'm – I come around, you know, I notice there wasn't any people here on their boats, but you know that's great, 'cause then I can

get closer to this boat. So I get in there, and we're all looking around and looking around and all of a sudden, I heard this man holler, but I – he wasn't talking to me, I had friends here, they weren't talking – and finally this girl said to me, "Nikki, that guy's talking to you," and he's saying, "Vacate the premises immediately. Lady, you are in restricted land." And here – the boat's right here. [Points an arm length away] We could touch the damn thing, you know, but that's the same time when I finally realized that I'm in an area with a big sign 'Restricted Area', you know. So when I realized what's going on, I try to back up, but as I'm backing up here comes the ferry, so the undertow from that ferry, and the undertow from this boat put me down. I'm down, like this. [Places hands in front, pointed downwards] And he said, Pontoon boat will never sink. Bullcrap. Bullcrap, they do. And then the people go off on them too when it happens, you know, and their camera equipment, and everything else. And it took a long while for it when it finally came up. And I had my mother with me, and I bungeed her to the – in this chair – in this plastic chair. I bungeed her to where I was driving and she was such a sweet woman. She was 85 years old and she's out there. I mean, can you imagine. Anyway, this happened, and it was like everybody's crazy, we're trying to put people back in the boat, and Mom turns around and she says, "Nikki. Don't do that again." "I'll try not to, Mom. Trust me. I'll try not to." I was pure white. My hands were like, [clenches fists tightly] hanging on the – 'cause I really thought we were gonna get down all the way. I never did that again. [Receives cup of water] Thank you, you hear my voice? I'm losing my voice. Anyway, so that's what I did – oh, what happened in the story then, all of a sudden everyone was riding with me before going on the boat. They all bought boats. You know, everyone had their own boat. I didn't think they trusted me anymore. [laughs] Hmm, they could've just told me, you know. I would've let them drive the boat. I never was really good at it. But anyway, they all bought. So now – now what do I do? Who wants to go fishing alone? There's no fish in that dang old bay anyway. But it has been 20 years so they all got rid of their boats too. [laughs]

**BL:** Do any questions occur to either of you to ask?

**CM:** One of the things – because I'm not as familiar with the Unity Festival is what years are we talking about? You said there were three years.

**NK:** It was 80s – in the 80s. When did – you could probably figure that out.

**BL:** Yeah, I think it was maybe '88, '89, and '90, or something like that?

**NK:** That – we were thinking '88, yeah.

**CM:** Okay. Yeah, 'cause I was just trying to get a sense of...

**BL:** Yeah.

**NK:** Imagine that. Back in the 80s.

**BL:** [laughs]



**NK:** That's hard to believe. I feel like Mark Twain's sitting here, having this interview, you know. [laughs]

**CM:** I can't think of anything else...

**BL:** Anything else?

**CM:** ...that occurred to me.

**BL:** Anything that you think we've missed? That you wanted to talk about?

**NK:** No, other than – anytime you talk about this group of people, just keep – you just have to keep bringing other people in, you know, of all the walks of life. You just need to do that. To get that whole unity idea, get the people to work together and have fun. There's pictures.

**BL:** Yeah I was gonna ask you if you had any materials that you would be willing to donate to the history project.

**NK:** Yeah, we have the shirts...

**BP [Bernie Pupo]:** Yeah, Tom has the shirts.

**NK:** There are the shirts and there's the pictures.

**BL:** Oh, great. That's wonderful.

**NK:** And he's still looking for the minutes. 'Cause I think it would be nice to have the minutes just to see...

**BL:** It really would, 'cause...

**NK:** Well, we did have a – we ran into one... Do you remember the guy that caused us problems – the gay guy that caused us problems about who were we giving the money to?

**BP:** Who was causing the problems?

**NK:** Do you remember that guy? I can't remember – no, no, no. No, no, no, no. I forget what his name – he was gonna turn us in, did we have a Small Games of Chance license, and this and that. And in fact, you got mad at him at that one meeting. But I can't remember what his name was anymore.

**BP:** Sounds familiar but I can't remember...

**NK:** That was the only resistance – was from one gay guy. Period. And if you wanna know so much about the money, then why did you get involved in this the very beginning? Don't come to me three years later and tell me, "Well I don't want anybody stealing the money." I remember the first one – I don't know if you knew this – the first one... I had this guy, he was in charge of

all the money. Okay, well he stayed at my house overnight – you know, we'd be at Ski Roundtop, he'd stay there. And we'd go back there that night and I said, "Do something with the money, don't tell anybody. Including me, don't tell anybody." And I didn't know what he did with the money, but I found out years later that he buried it behind my house. He buried it. I thought he took it out and put it in the freezer. He buried it. Steve Lysakowski.

**BP:** Oh, that's right.

**NK:** Yeah. He buried it behind my house and then put brush on top of it so no one would know it was – I was so happy, but you know I would've shot him if he were to die and I didn't know where he buried it, you know. [laughs] You know, can you imagine, 'cause this is – we're talking thousands of dollars here, you know, and it's a weekend, you can't get into the bank. Oh my god. I was a nervous wreck. [laughs] Yeah, so that's kind of a cool story. He was a cool guy. We don't see him much anymore. He lives up North somewhere. You know, so we've lost a few people.

**BL:** Well thank you so much, Nikki. It's been – it's been a great interview and we appreciate you sharing your stories with us.

**NK:** Yeah well, you're gonna have like a – an area to see things that you've been gathering?

**BL:** Yeah, we're – we're trying to do a number of things... Yeah, you can cut that – [cut off]