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Title: LGBT Oral History: Bernie Pupo

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Interviewee: Bernie Pupo

Interviewer: Nancy Datres

Date of Interview: July 24, 2013

Location of Interview: Harrisburg, PA

Transcriber: Chalise Saunders

Abstract:

Bernie Pupo was born in Kulpmont, Pennsylvania in 1945 and attended Mount Carmel Catholic High School. After working in a factory after high school, Bernie moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where he worked as a window decorator for Pomeroy's department store for three years. During this time, he also joined SCAAN, the South Central Aids Assistance Network, which is now known as the AIDS Alliance. In this interview, Bernie speaks about his most memorable experience as a Boy Scouts leader, as well as his experience working in and visiting gay clubs in cities such as Harrisburg, Reading, Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and D.C. During this interview, he also speaks about how he experienced very little homophobia in both his family and overall social life, despite living in a small town during the 60s and growing up as a practicing Catholic. Bernie, still Catholic, now works as a hair dresser and owns his own salon.

ND: My name is Nancy Datres, and it is Wednesday, July 24th. I'm here at the salon shop of Bernie Pupo, who we are interviewing today. Bernie, would you please state your name?

BP: Right, Bernie Pupo.

ND: And what is your date of birth?

BP: February 12th, 1945.

ND: And where were you born?

BP: I was born in a coal region town called Kulpmont [Pennsylvania].

ND: Can you spell that?

BP: K-U-L-P-M-O-N-T.

ND: Is that northern Pennsylvania?

BP: No, it's more central, it's between Shamokin [Pennsylvania] and Mount Carmel [Pennsylvania].

ND: Oh, okay.

BP: Everyone knows where Shamokin is because of the—the weather.

ND: Right, okay. What are your parents' names?

BP: Catherine (sp?) and Fred.

ND: And do you have any siblings?

BP: I have one sister, Patricia.

ND: And does she live in the Harrisburg area?

BP: No, she lives in Virginia.

ND: Okay, and what did your parents do for an occupation?

BP: My father worked in the mines for while, and then he worked for the Philadelphia Electric company in later years. My mother worked in a factory.

ND: Okay, and how long have you been living here in Harrisburg [Pennsylvania]?

BP: Since '68.

ND: And where did you go to school?

BP: High school?

ND: Yes.

BP: Mount Carmel Catholic High School.

ND: And did go any schooling beyond that like beautician—?

BP: I went to a year of prep school in Washington, DC.

ND: Okay, and so all together, how many years of schooling have you had?

BP: Would be 13.

ND: 13, okay. Are you a member of a church?

BP: Yup, St. Patrick's Cathedral.

ND: Is that here in Harrisburg?

BP: Yeah.

ND: And are you or were you ever married?

BP: No.

ND: Okay, do you have any children?

BP: No.

ND: Your current occupation is obviously is a salon owner—

BP: A hair stylist.

ND: —a hair stylist. Have you always done this as an occupation or have you had any other occupation?

BP: Well, I worked in a factory when I first got out of high school. I was a window decorator for Pomeroy's department store downtown for about three years. And then I managed and worked at a gay bar downtown for another three years before I got into styling hair.

ND: And do you mind if I ask the name of that gay bar? For historical reasons.

BP: It was the 400 Club.

ND: Does it still exist?

BP: No.

ND: Where was it located?

BP: 400 and North 2nd Street

ND: Hmph.

BP: It was the original Clock bar.

ND: The original what?

BP: Clock Bar.

ND: What does that mean, Clock Bar?

BP: That was the name of it—it was the Clock Bar. They had a huge clock behind the bar, and so it was called the Clock Bar. I think it was one of the first gay bars in the Harrisburg area.

ND: Really? Okay. Did you serve in the military at all?

BP: No.

ND: And what memberships do you have in any key community organizations— [phone rings and Bernie leaves to answer] [speaks to cameraperson] You can pause it. Push the red for standby.

[Tape pauses as Bernie goes to answer the phone and resumes with Bernie sitting back down]

ND: All right, Bernie. I was asking, do or did you have memberships in any community organizations? Fraternal societies? Professional organizations?

BP: I was a member of SCAAN, which was South Central AIDS Assistance Network before it became AIDS Alliance. I was part of that in the very beginning when they started it.

ND: And what time frame would that have been?

BP: Probably the early '80s, yeah. That's when it got started. I belong to my neighborhood group. I'm on the board for that. It's a support group in the neighborhood.

ND: Is that like a crime watch or...?

BP: Well, part of it is crime watch, part of it's social, part of it's just to help out any neighbors who need—who have problems with things in the city that they need to have taken care of.

ND: Okay, any others?

BP: No, just trying to think what else... just my church.

ND: Okay.

BP: No, that's probably about it.

ND: Okay, next, I'm going to go into actually the gay issue and first of all, whether or not you identify as gay or bisexual or...?

BP: Oh, definitely gay.

ND: Okay, when did you first realize you were gay?

BP: Somewhere about two days before I moved to Harrisburg. [laughs]

ND: [chuckles] Okay, so that, you said was 1968?

BP: [nods] Yes.

ND: So, you would have been about—in your early twenties?

BP: I was 23.

ND: 23. And, when was your contact with the Central Pennsylvania gay community and what was the nature of that contact?

BP: I—I guess I knew there were gay bars in Harrisburg, and so shortly after I moved here, I started going to them.

ND: And how, given that you were from an area that probably did not have [chuckles] much known about gayness—

BP: No, no, no.

ND: How did you learn about the bars in Harrisburg?

BP: I just... I guess people that I met at work and talked to had mentioned things, and I just did exploring on my own.

ND: Okay. What was it like for you as—realizing that you were a gay man?

BP: I don't know... I don't know, maybe it was a little scary at first, but I think somewhere in the back of my mind, I always knew, I just wasn't accepting or acting on it. So, I don't know that it was really anything that difficult for me. Fortunately, I met a lot of people, gay and straight, when I first moved here and didn't have any problems with anybody discriminating against me that I can remember.

ND: Okay, let me ask you—I'm going to go through like different areas where and ask you what being gay and coming out—what impact did it have. For example, the first one is: what impact did it have, if any, on your work life? I think you said you were originally working in a factory in your home town. Did you— anyone there know you were gay?

BP: No, not that I know of.

ND: Okay...

BP: Except the guy who picked me up two days before I moved to Harrisburg. [laughs]

ND: [laughs] And did that go anywhere?

BP: No. [shakes his head]

ND: What—has it affected any of your work life here in Harrisburg then? When you moved here and did the various jobs, was there any place where you worked where you felt you couldn't be yourself or—

BP: No, I don't think so. I mean, being a window designer and getting into doing hair and working at a gay bar, I didn't really have any of that to really be concerned about.

ND: Okay, how about your family? What impact did it have on your parents and/or your sister?

BP: Never discussed it with my father, although he obviously knew, because I had a neighbor who came down to visit—not me, he just came to visit to Harrisburg, and I was working at the 400 Club... and he—I don't know how he found the place, but came in to say hello, and I said, "How did you know I was working here?" and he said, "Your father told me."

ND: Really?

BP: Yes, so I mean, I had no idea how my father knew all that. We never discussed it. My mother, I think, had an inclination at some point, but she just never wanted to talk about it. So we never did talk about it. My sister was quite aware and her husband and discussed it with my aunts, so a lot of my family knew very early on, but nobody ever hassled me about it.

ND: And they never, you said as far as your parents, sat down with you either one on one and talked to you about it—

BP: No.

ND: —they just knew and apparently accepted it. They didn't disown you.

BP: No, I think they were the first ones to do Don't Ask, Don't Tell. [chuckles]

ND: [laughing] Okay. How about your social life? What impact did coming out have on your social life?

BP: I don't know... I don't know how to answer that. I mean, I've always had both gay and straight friends who were accepting... I don't know that that really had any other impact other than, you know, being accepted by the people that I traveled around with.

ND: Okay. How about political life? Did it in any way affect that?

BP: In my what?

ND: In your political—what views—did it affect your political alliances at all?

BP: No, I—no, well, maybe now that—that things are now a little bit more open, and I guess I'm more expressive about what I feel and, you know, what I care about. I always came from a very Democratic family and, so I guess we were always a little bit more liberal than some of the other people I grew up with.

ND: Now how about the impact it had on your spiritual life—your religious—I think you said you're a member of St. Patrick's Catholic—

BP: Well, obviously, my lifestyle is not accepted by the Catholic Church, and I chose to remain Catholic and deal with it the way I feel is proper. I don't go around discussing it with a lot of people, but there are people from my church who are quite aware of my lifestyle, and they don't have any problem with it. You know, I just... they don't bring it up to me, and I don't bring it up to them. I have quite a few friends who are Catholic and gay, and we just choose to stay that way. So, it really hasn't—I don't believe in all of the principles that are a part of the Catholic church, but then if I joined another church, I might belong to another church that still has the same restrictions, and I just feel like I don't have to share my life with everybody in church. I can still be what I want to be and do what I want to do and, you know, not have to worry about it.

ND: So, it pretty much—it sounds pretty much like it's a fair statement to say that most of your experiences, be it with your work, family, and political and church had been fairly positive.

BP: Mhmm. [nods]

ND: What changes now have you witnessed in respect to the gay community of central Pennsylvania since you moved here in 1968?

BP: Oh my, that's a long time ago.

ND: [laughs] It is, that's why this is an oral history project.

BP: Well, I think gay life on a whole is a lot more accepted than it was—I don't know if I was more introverted about it than I needed to be at the time or if it's that there's so much more acceptance that I don't feel like I'm pressured or I have anything to, you know, be afraid of or ashamed of so...

ND: Back in the—let's say back in—since you said you moved in here in 1968—was there any time in like the 70s or the 80s where you felt a little discomfort like walking down the street or anything of that nature?

BP: Because of being gay? No, I can't say that that was a reason. I mean, I don't know that I was flamboyant about it... but I'm certainly not the butchiest thing on the earth, but I don't feel like I'm that obvious, and I don't feel any reason to be obvious, you know.

ND: Okay.

BP: So no, I don't ever remember feeling that concern.

ND: Okay. How much were you aware of local LGBT civil rights efforts in this area, and for example, the push to pass municipal ordinances, be it Harrisburg, Lancaster, or any other civil rights efforts in the gay community? Did you participate in any of those? Were you aware of them or?

BP: In LGBT? I don't know that—I've never participated in anything knowing that that was part of the people who organized it. [exhales] I guess most of my—I don't want to say protests, I don't that—I have done some protests, but that was back in my hippie days.

ND: [chuckles] Such as? And where—where for example?

BP: I went to some marches on Washington [D.C.]... gone to a—gone to a lot of gay marches in New York.

ND: And what time period would that have been? In the 70s?

BP: That would have been probably the late 70s, early 80s.

ND: And anywhere else you went besides New York?

BP: No, uh uh.

ND: Washington [D.C.]?

BP: Just D.C and New York to my recollection.

ND: Have you gone to anything like that recently? Within the last ten years, let's say.

BP: Mm mm. [shakes head “no”]

ND: All right. Did you find that you needed to go out of Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] sometimes for different bars and to socialize with gay people like in Baltimore [Maryland] or other cities?

BP: I did a lot of that, but I don't think it was because of having anonymity. [struggles with the word, laughing]

[ND and BP both try to get the correct pronunciation of anonymity.]

BP: Anonymity. Thank you. I don't think it was for that reason; it was just something that my friends and I did. We always had destinations to go. We would—spent time going to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]... we spent different times going to Baltimore [Maryland]... at one point, we went to Reading [Pennsylvania] a lot. And it was just—not because we didn't like it here, it's just that we like to travel and go and meet with people. And I think that was the biggest reason rather than, you know, not—not worrying about anyone seeing me walking into a gay bar or anything like that.

ND: Can you—I'm thinking back on the times that you've had, you know, going to bars here in Harrisburg [Pennsylvania] or Reading [Pennsylvania] or Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] or Baltimore [Maryland]... does any special memories come back or incidences that were funny or... humorous? Or you know, that really stood out for the night—

BP: Hmm. [tilts head back and ponders]

ND: Like did you see someone across the room and get star struck or anything like that happened that's really memorable to you, personally? At any of these?

BP: Well, in—I think in the beginning when I started to go to gay bars, a lot of bars and not just in Harrisburg, I mean other places that we went to were pretty sleazy. I mean, there were a lot of things going on there that, if I would have told anybody when I went home, they wouldn't believe me.

ND: Really?

BP: Oh, God yes. That was the early 70s and love was free, and people took advantage of all that, and it wasn't looked down on. And [threw hands up] people just got away with it... having sex right in the bars, and... I remember the first time I ever went to The Mine Shaft (?) which was a bar in New York, some of the things that were going on in that place was just extraordinary and I just remember...

ND: Are there any that you feel comfortable tal—telling us about or?

BP: Well, we just walked into a room and all these guys that were just standing in a big circle, [gestures with hands] and we just walked over to see what the circle was all about, and there was some guy laying in a tub, and everybody was urinating on him.

ND: [chuckles]

BP: [makes a small shrugging motion with hands and smiles] I mean, it was like, we went to another room and there was slings with people sitting in them and another hallway where there was little groups of people all over the hallway having sex... and [makes a small shrugging motion with hands] it was just totally accepted at that point, because you were in that bar. I don't think there was a whole lot of people who would have understood that or believed me if I told them that that's what was happening.

ND: So, you didn't see anything quite that—of that nature here in the Harrisburg local bars, right?

BP: On occasion, I have to say I did. [chuckles]

ND: [chuckles] Okay

BP: And it was usually after the bar had closed and people were there after hours.

ND: All right. Are you currently involved or belong to any gay groups or the L—for example, the LGBT Center on 3rd street near Midtown Scholar.

BP: No, I don't formally belong to any groups.

ND: Okay, what challenges do you think the gay community still has with respect to the civil rights and moving forward? Even in spite of the major United States Supreme Court that occurred a few weeks ago and striking down a provision of DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act]. What challenges do you think the gay community still faces?

BP: Well, I think we still have a long way to go for most people to get equal rights and—and I'm not saying that in the marriage standpoint—I mean, just equal rights as a couple, whether they're married or not. And that's probably to me—even though they say that people are gonna start getting more equal rights, I don't think that on a whole, people have really accepted that, and I think that's still a long road off that we have to deal with.

ND: Alright, what have been the most important events of your life?

BP: [gestures to himself] Of my life?

ND: Of your life.

BP: Well, I've always said this because, at one time, I was at a dinner party and someone brought this question up, and they went around the table and said, "What were the five most important things that have ever happened in your life?" And, at first I thought, I don't know if I have any five things that happened... and after thinking about that question for a while, I came up with one thing and—and before I moved to Harrisburg, I was very involved in scouting, the Boy Scouts, and at one point—and it was about a year before I moved here, I took 15 boys to Filmont Scout Ranch in Cimarron, New Mexico, and we spent 21 days together and toured through Chicago [Illinois] and Denver [Colorado] and New Mexico. And... it was probably one of the most impressive things that ever happened in my life. The whole experience was magnificent, but the last day that we were there, there was always 3,000 boys in this camp—base camp, and usually there was about a thousand who were either coming in or leaving every day, and they would have a big campfire and to be sitting on the side of the hill and watching 3,000 boys sing songs and tell jokes together just made me very emotional, and it was always one of the most important things I felt that ever happened to me. About five years ago, I was able to contact almost all the boys and have a reunion with them 40 years later.

ND: Wow.

BP: And it was another incredible thing to see them all and just get feedback from them. Four of the boys are dead. They had passed away who were very young, in their 30s, and... the one... boy who had passed away—I call them boys, they're all men—I spoke to his wife, and I invited her to the reunion. She said she couldn't come, and she talked about how they opened a restaurant together, and she said, "You were his inspiration for opening the restaurant..."

ND: Wow.

BP: And I said, “How would I be inspiration, I haven’t seen him for 40 years?” She said, “Well, when I told him to open the restaurant, he said ‘You know what, if Bernie could cook the meals he cooked on an open fire, I can cook in a restaurant.’”

ND: Aw, I bet that made you feel good.

BP: And that was why—and that, again, was very emotional to me.

ND: Wow.

BP: So, what would the next thing be? Two years ago, I went to Italy with my cousin, and she and I were always very close as kids. And we toured for a week and a half and then we went down to southern Italy to Ischia in Calabria and visited with my family and that again was a very emotional thing to see where I came from and who my family is that still live there and... again it was it—it was number two on my list. And I can’t come up three, four, and five, so I’m still waiting for those to happen. [smiles]

ND: That’s alright. That’s very good though, and yeah, very good. Actually, do you have anything else you want to tell us, that we didn’t ask that maybe you thought maybe we would have asked?

BP: No.

ND: Anything you want to share with us?

BP: No, other than the fact I feel like I’ve had a wonderful life. I don’t know if it has anything to do with my being gay. I feel like I’m a very fortunate person. I’m not filthy rich, but I’m comfortable. I have an absolutely wonderful abundance of friends... both straight and gay... and, I have a wonderful family who I enjoy doing things with all the time and I don’t know, I just always feel like I’ve been a blessed person that I’ve had a lot of opportunities in my career and in my personal life, and I’m just happy.

ND: Well, that’s wonderful. Let me ask you one other question to kinda wrap up. Knowing that this is a project that’s gonna be archived and people will hopefully be, you know, interested in doing research and young people twenty years from now and maybe young people who are just realizing their own sexual orientation, and they might come across your interview on the project. What would you want to say to them, looking again that you would want—what words would you want to express to them, someone—young person twenty years from now who’s maybe just coming to grips with their own sexual identity?

BP: Well, I think I don’t know that the sexual part of it has a lot to do with it. I just think that young people need to be more accepting of themselves. They need to... be nicer to each other. I’m a big fan of “pay it forward.” I always feel that whatever you do—and I was brought up this way—do unto others as you want them to do unto you, and if you want somebody to treat you well, then you have to treat other people well. And I firmly believe that that comes back to you, you know, and comes back double. You do something good for somebody, then somebody—two

other people are gonna do the same to you, or they should [gestures with hands] pass it on to somebody else, and you just have to accept yourself and be happy with yourself. [shakes head and shrugs] I think that's just the most important thing... the sexual part is just a fringe benefit, you know?

ND: Okay, well all right, thank you very much.

BP: Thank you.